



The Underground Academy: The Complete Series

R.J. Vickers

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This series is dedicated to Lindy and Kayla, who never lost faith.

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The Natural Order

The Underground Academy: Book 1

Chapter 1: Cass Detention Center

As the disciplinary officer locked the gates of Cass Detention Center, dread settled over Tristan. The officer's shoes clicked on the tiles of the endless hallways, fluorescent lights blaring overhead, while Tristan hurried after, pressing his hair over the scars that had turned the left side of his face to mince.

Each step took him farther from the freedom he had glimpsed so fleetingly. His three-year sentence stretched longer than ever—he was fifteen now; by the time he left, his peers would have earned their drivers' licenses, graduated from high school, and headed off to glamorous colleges around the country.

"I'm sure you can find your way from here," the disciplinary officer said, cutting through Tristan's thoughts.

Tristan nodded and trudged off toward his cell.

Just before he reached the door, five hulking delinquents sauntered down the hall, blocking his escape in both directions.

Tristan's stomach dropped.

It was Cob and his gang, the same bullies who had mercilessly harassed Tristan for his first month at Juvie.

"How come you get special privileges, huh?" Cob demanded.

"Can I pass?" Tristan asked dully. He knew where this was going.

Cob's lip curled. When Tristan tried to retreat a step, Cob lunged at him and grabbed him by the collar of his jumpsuit.

Tristan scabbled at Cob's arm, but he was no match for the bully, who loomed a head taller than him.

Cob yanked Tristan toward him so fiercely Tristan gasped for breath. "You've got influence with some higher-up. I need you to use it to get this mailed from outside." He thrust a padded envelope, fashioned from what looked like taped-together paper from one of his classes, into Tristan's hands.

When Cob released him, Tristan's airway felt permanently crushed; he massaged his throat, struggling to draw breath.

"I won't do your dirty work," he wheezed. "What are you trying to do, order drugs or something?"

He shouldn't have said it. But after standing before his brother's grave and reliving the awful night that had landed him in Juvie, he was feeling reckless. Ready for a fight.

Cob laughed nastily. "Ooh, so he does have a spine. This'll be interesting."

His gang chuckled.

"What do we need to do to persuade you? We could frame you for stealing the lunch lady's jewelry, but that wouldn't be much fun. What if we set a whole box of rats loose in your room?"

"Leave me alone," Tristan snapped. "I'm not getting in trouble for you. Besides, I don't think I'll be allowed out again."

"I don't believe you." Cob made a grab for Tristan's arm, but Tristan jumped out of the way just in time.

"Help!" Tristan yelled, hoping someone was around to hear. It would get him in major trouble with Cob's gang later, but he should be transferred soon anyway. He just had to survive long enough to get out of this hellhole.

Cob's gang closed in around him.

When Tristan opened his mouth to shout again, Cob's largest crony tackled him to the ground.

Tristan landed heavily on his hip. Pain shot through his leg, but he swallowed his yelp.

“Wuss,” Cob spat. “You’re just asking for trouble. C’mon—let’s teach this privileged little asshole what happens when people mess with me.”

With practiced speed, two of Cob’s cronies pinned Tristan to the wall by his arms, while the other three started punching every inch of him.

Fear and rage clouded Tristan’s vision. He strained to pull his arms free, but to no avail. Several times he managed to kick his assailants in the knees, but they hardly seemed to notice.

“Go on, you can do better than that,” Cob taunted. He landed a punch in Tristan’s stomach, winding him.

As Tristan doubled over, Cob’s cronies released him, and he crumpled to the floor. His ribs were on fire—he curled around his chest, making a strange choking noise that didn’t seem to belong to him.

No one was coming to his rescue.

Now Cob’s gang was kicking him, each blow lancing through him like a hammer strike.

Fury mounted as Tristan took the beating, his body coiling tighter with every kick. If he were stronger, he would kill Cob. He wanted to break his nose, to smash his skull. To make the bullies suffer as much as he had at their hands.

Rage blinded him, numbing the pain.

He couldn’t take it any longer.

With a roar, Tristan surged to his feet.

Cob’s gang was momentarily thrown back, but they closed in on him once more.

“Punch me,” Cob taunted. “I dare you.” He looked delighted by Tristan’s show of temper.

Tristan raised his arms to block another blow as it came his way.

“I thought so. You’re nothing but a crybaby.”

Though he had no chance against Cob—though he had more reason than ever to keep his head down and stay out of trouble—Tristan could hold back no longer.

He threw himself at Cob.

The older boy was as solid as a wall, but something strange happened. Tristan felt an odd rush, as dizzying as vertigo, and the next thing he knew, Cob went flying.

He hit the wall with a crack and slumped, unconscious, to the tiles. A line of blood trickled from one nostril.

Horror lodged itself in Tristan’s throat; he staggered back a step until his back collided with the wall.

What had he done?

Hurried footsteps clicked down the hall, and a pair of guards burst onto the scene.

“Who did this?” the first guard bellowed, pushing one of Cob’s cronies out of the way.

As one, Cob’s gang pointed at Tristan.

“I’m sorry,” Tristan said in a rush. “I didn’t mean to do anything. They were beating me up, and I—”

Seizing Tristan by the upper arm, the first guard marched him away from Cob’s unconscious form. The second knelt beside Cob and said, “Someone fetch a nurse.”

Neither guard seemed to notice the bruises that were blooming on Tristan’s neck.

Near the entrance to the detention center, Tristan was dragged into a sterile office where a disciplinary officer sat riffling through paperwork.

“What now?” he asked sharply. “Isn’t that the kid who was just granted visitation privileges?”

The guard shrugged. “There was an unconscious kid, and a few witnesses said this one did it. Looked like there was a fight.”

“Thank you.”

Once the guard was gone, the disciplinary officer laced his fingers together and studied Tristan with a grim expression. “You do realize this is a serious offence, don’t you? This sort of behavior can result in a longer sentence.”

“They started it,” Tristan said desperately. It was an unspoken rule that you did not rat out the bullies, but even if he said nothing, they would make his life hell after this. “They were beating me up, and I just tried to defend myself.”

He did not mention the inexplicable feeling that had come over him, the rush of power that had somehow given him the strength to defeat Cob.

“Even if that were true, you escalated the fight,” the disciplinary officer said. “You—”

A knock at the door cut him off. He left the room to speak with whoever stood outside, and when he returned, he beckoned Tristan to follow him.

“A woman has come to see you. She’s from the rehabilitation facility you were invited to transfer to.” The officer’s mouth settled into a hard line as he regarded Tristan. “I expect her to withdraw her invitation once she learns about your behavior today. If that happens, you will need to attend a hearing. Your sentence will be extended if the boy you injured sustains any lasting damage.”

Tristan felt cold. The officer’s words seemed to come from far away.

If he couldn’t persuade the experimental rehab center to take him, he would be facing at least three more nightmarish years at Juvie. Cob would make him pay for what he did.

Tristan wasn’t sure he could survive much longer here. He might lose his mind.

He had to persuade this woman to take him away.

Chapter 2: The Academy

Tristan's heart pounded in his throat as he followed the guard to the visitation room. He knew he looked like the worst sort of criminal, with the new bruises on his neck and the gruesome scars on his face—he would make a terrible first impression.

The woman who had come to speak with Tristan looked remarkably out of place at the detention center. She was young and pretty, her brown hair pulled into a bun, her eyes kind behind her narrow glasses.

“Tristan Fairholm, is that right?” Standing, she shook his hand.

Tristan nodded warily, one eye on the guard standing behind the young woman. He took a seat opposite her and smoothed a hand over his dark hair, making sure it covered the scars that disfigured the left side of his face.

“My name is Darla Merridy. I am pleased that you accepted a place at our academy, but I wanted to go over a few things before we leave.”

Tristan's stomach tightened. This was where she would drop the news that his place had been revoked due to his behavior.

“We received your records before we invited you to join us, but I wanted to talk through what happened—to hear your perspective.”

Darla Merridy glanced at a stack of paper on the table before her. When Tristan tried to read it upside down, she tilted it away from him.

“You were arrested on charges of accidental manslaughter, vehicle theft, driving without a license, and arson. Is that correct?”

Tristan nodded.

“However, the charge of arson was later dropped, as there was no proof of what caused the fire in your father's home. You claimed in court that you borrowed your neighbor's car to flee an earthquake that occurred at the same time as the fire in your home. Could you please describe what happened the night of the crash?”

Did she really expect Tristan to do this? He had spent the past six months trying to block the memories of that night from his mind; to recall it now, especially after seeing his brother's grave just hours ago, would wreck him.

When Darla Merridy remained silent, expectant, Tristan took a deep breath. He had to do this. He needed to leave Juvie.

“I was—at home with my brother one night,” he began haltingly. As he spoke, the scene rose again before him—his father's house, the new puzzle he'd bought for Marcus, the moment it started. “We felt the house shaking, and we realized it was an earthquake. We tried calling my parents, but they were both away. Then the house caught on fire, and we called 911, but the guy thought it was a prank. We ran outside, and the whole street was moving. I thought the trees might fall over and crush us if we stayed there.”

Tristan took a ragged breath. His eyes were stinging; he wasn't sure if he would be able to go through with this.

“The neighbor's car was sitting in the driveway, and the key was in the ignition. No one was around, and we couldn't get help, so we were going to drive to my mom's house. But it was night, and I didn't have my license, and I—I—”

Tristan's throat closed up as the memories flooded him. From behind the wall he'd built these past months, it all rushed back—the screams and flashing lights; Marcus's head slumped over the

dashboard, his dark, curly hair wet with blood; the police officers cutting Tristan free and dragging him away from the wreck. That cold, terrible voice—“He’s dead.”

His eyes were burning, and he hunched over to hide from Darla Merridy’s piercing gaze. “W-why do you need to know about that?”

But her voice was gentle. “Because I needed to make sure you felt remorse for your brother’s death. Our academy does not accept irredeemable criminals, and after hearing about your incident today, I was wary. However, I believe you never intended to cause harm.”

Tristan didn’t know what to say.

“Now, I will fill you in on the specifics on our way to the airport, but I wanted to—”

“The airport? We’re flying somewhere?”

“Yes, of course. We have recruited students from around the country, and it would take far too long to drive to the—the facility.” Darla glanced at the guard behind her, who stared straight ahead as though unable to hear their conversation. “I trust that you have not changed your mind? You are still willing to attend our academy?”

“Yeah, of course,” Tristan said quickly. Why did Darla keep referring to it as an “academy?” The disciplinary officer had described it as an experimental rehabilitation center.

“I’m glad to hear that.” Darla smiled warmly. “Our academy will open up new opportunities for you, opportunities most criminals would never have. You will move forward without being defined by your criminal record, surrounded by other students who are eager to re-start their lives.”

It sounded like a load of motivational crap, but Tristan wasn’t about to argue. Surely it couldn’t be worse than Cass Detention Center.

“We have a few forms to sign, and then we’ll be on our way.”

Much sooner than he expected, Tristan and Darla were walking through the barbed wire-topped gates of Cass Detention Center for what Tristan hoped would be the last time. No officer escorted them, and instead of a police vehicle, they climbed into an ordinary taxi.

“Um...aren’t you worried I might hurt you if we go off without a guard?” Tristan asked, though he was not sorry to escape the constant supervision.

“I can look after myself,” Darla said with a smile. “Besides, apart from today’s incident, you don’t have a history of violence.”

* * *

They drove in silence to the airport. Tristan had expected Darla to fill him in on the mysterious program he would be transferring to, but she merely tapped her fingers against the window, watching the landscape flash by. He said nothing—he didn’t want to give her any excuse to change her mind about him.

When they arrived at Jamestown Airport, Tristan asked, “What about my parents? Do they know where I’m going?”

Darla climbed from the front seat and held the door for Tristan. “They have been filled in with the details of your transfer. I’m sorry—your mother wanted to see you before you left, but she was traveling when I got in touch.”

Traveling? Tristan’s parents never traveled. They didn’t have the money for it. Did this mean his mother had a new boyfriend, or had she finally managed to land a corporate job that sent her to important conferences around the country?

He didn’t know, because his parents had not visited him once since his arrest. They hadn’t even called. He couldn’t blame them, he supposed—he was still a long way from forgiving himself for Marcus’s death—but he had felt so isolated, so unwanted, throughout his long stay at Juvie.

Still trying to puzzle out this unexpected news, Tristan clambered from the taxi and followed

Darla.

Though the sun had vanished, Darla bypassed the doors into the brightly-lit terminal, instead leading Tristan around a dark corner and onto the tarmac. A small, unmarked plane stood in a pool of light; from the open door, a ladder descended to the tarmac.

“Does your facility own that plane?” Tristan asked, impressed.

Darla laughed. “Of course. Our location is remote enough that we couldn’t do without it.”

For the first time since Darla had told him he still had a place at her facility, his relief was tempered by misgivings. What if he was about to become an unwilling participant in some illegal scientific study?

He paused at the foot of the ladder. “What is it we’re going to be doing at this ‘academy,’ exactly?”

“I’m so sorry. The headmaster of the Underground Academy will explain everything as soon as you arrive. I know you must be very curious, but I’m not the right person to tell you. However,” she added quickly, as Tristan began to object, “I will fill you and your fellow students in briefly on the plane. I couldn’t speak freely with others around. You will see why.”

The Underground Academy was an odd name for a rehab center, but Tristan had no chance to probe further, because Darla hurried him up the ladder.

At the top, Tristan raked his hair more firmly over his scars. He realized suddenly that he was still wearing his jumpsuit, and hoped he was not the only one.

After the darkness outside, Tristan blinked and squinted at the bright light flooding the plane cabin. Most of the seats were already full, and their occupants stared at Tristan with a mixture of curiosity and hostility. Only two others still wore their prison garb.

“This is Tristan Fairholm.” Darla put a hand on his shoulder and nudged him forward. “Make him feel at home.”

Head down, trying not to meet the eyes of his fellow inmates, Tristan stumbled down the aisle. The only seats remaining were next to a muscled boy who reminded him painfully of Cob, and beside a sharp-faced girl with long, black hair, at the very back of the plane.

When Tristan sat beside the girl, she turned to study him with a frown; she had dark eyes and a scattering of freckles across her nose.

“Mind if I sit here?” Tristan asked in a choked voice. No conversation with a fellow criminal at Cass Detention Center had gone well, but this time Tristan was determined to find allies. If he was stuck here for another three years, he would do anything possible to avoid the treatment he had received at his bullies’ hands.

This girl did not seem too hostile, though. “Sure. I’m Leila Swanson, by the way.” Leila continued to scrutinize him, finally asking, “What happened to you?”

Tristan pressed his hair firmly down. “Nothing.”

Thankfully Darla spoke just then, drawing Leila’s intense gaze to the front of the plane.

“Now that everyone is here, I wanted to answer a few of your questions,” she said. “Your headmaster will tell you everything, but before you worry any longer, I want to emphasize that we are *not* going to another detention facility of any sort. You have not been recruited for rehabilitation, but because you have a special aptitude for using a certain power most people cannot touch.”

Tristan thought immediately of the odd feeling of strength that had surged through him when he fought Cob. Beside him, Leila was frowning.

“Some of you may know exactly what I am talking about, while others will take months of study to access this power. At the Underground Academy, you will learn to harvest power and use it. Once there, your criminal records will no longer matter, so I suggest you take this opportunity to think very carefully about your behavior.” She shot a sharp look at a boy whose messy black hair fell in waves around his neck. “Make yourselves comfortable. We have a long flight ahead.”

In the silence that followed this abrupt change of subject, Darla disappeared into the cockpit.

Seconds later, shouts and muttering broke out from the students.

“What the hell was that about?” a boy near the front yelled. “Come back and explain yourself properly, woman!”

“She’s insane,” a red-haired girl said haughtily.

Tristan said nothing. Merridy’s vague explanation of this “power” sounded a lot like magic.... Yesterday he would have laughed along with the others and thought her mentally unbalanced, but after this morning...

“What did she tell you when she picked you up?” Leila asked. “Did she say the same thing about an experimental rehab program?”

Tristan nodded.

“Why did you agree to go, then? It seems a bit fishy, signing up for a program where you aren’t given any details about how long you need to stay or what’s expected, doesn’t it?”

“Why did *you* agree to it?” Tristan countered. He didn’t want to explain how Cass Detention Center had made him feel—like he was slowly suffocating. If he had been forced to stay the full three years, he might have lost his mind.

Leila grimaced. “I made mistakes. Stole from the wrong people. They were discussing whether I’d get my sentence extended if I didn’t stop, so I figured if I transferred to a new facility, I’d get a clean slate. Maybe there would be some loophole that would let me get out early.” She glanced toward the cockpit where Darla had disappeared. “What she was saying, though—” Leila lowered her voice. “I don’t know what sort of place we’re heading to.”

“Maybe it’s an asylum,” Tristan said darkly. “What do you think she meant by ‘power’? Do you think she’s telling the truth?”

“Of course not. It’s probably some crap about changing our lives—‘you have the power to start over if you just try hard enough.’”

Tristan’s stomach tightened, but he forced a laugh. “Yeah. That sounds about right.” Maybe he was going insane after all.

* * *

Tristan felt sick as the small plane bumped its way north—not because of the turbulence, but because he was afraid his hold on reality was crumbling.

He had obsessed over the night of the crash so many times it had taken on the feel of a dream, made up of the dry, clinical words that had been used to describe the fire and the car crash at his trials, mixed with terror far stronger than any visual details he could recall.

Could he be certain there really had been an earthquake that sent him fleeing that night, borrowing his neighbor’s unlocked car and driving without a license in his desperation to reach safety? Or had he somehow imagined it, and convinced Marcus to believe his delusion?

Yet Leila did not seem mentally unbalanced. Nor did the other passengers, some of whom were deep in conversation, while others stared out the window, apparently unwilling to talk to their seatmates. In the row ahead of where he and Leila sat, a boy with messy brown hair laughed uproariously—*he* was not afraid of whatever waited for them.

Tristan decided he would reserve his judgment until they reached their destination. Once he saw the facility that would become their new home, he would be able to tell from the high fences or armed guards or barred cells how secure the place was. He had never been in a mental hospital, but he assumed there would be some giveaways that could not be hidden—bedrooms locked from the outside or obvious means of restraint.

Wary of speaking to Leila any longer, for fear she might probe into his past, Tristan slumped back in his chair and let his eyes drift closed. As he let his guard down, the bruises from his beating earlier that day began to throb with renewed vengeance.

* * *

He must have managed to fall asleep despite the turbulence and the pain, because he was startled awake what felt like hours later as the plane jolted violently. He had been dreaming of the earthquake, and it took a long time for his breathing to calm down.

The late-afternoon sun shone directly through the left-hand window, blinding him, and Leila was scrutinizing him with sympathy. Realizing his scars were showing, Tristan pressed his hair firmly over the left side of his face once again.

“You all right?” Leila asked softly.

“Just fantastic,” Tristan said, his voice heavy with sarcasm.

When Leila opened her mouth, Tristan turned away from her. He didn’t want her asking what happened to his face again.

Before long, the plane began to descend, a thick layer of fog swallowing the sun. Many of the dozing kids stirred, and the boy with the messy brown hair turned and grinned at Tristan over the back of his seat. The boy sitting beside him had his forehead pressed against the window; he was still in his jumpsuit, and his black hair had been dyed an odd, pale yellow on top.

After trying unsuccessfully to engage his seatmate in conversation, the messy-haired boy turned back to Tristan and Leila once more. Leila scowled at him.

“You’re Tristan, right? Why’d Darla take so long to get you? We figured you were extra dangerous or something.”

Tristan snorted. “Well, I’m not.” Though he wasn’t sure any of his fellow recruits were murderers.

“I’m Rusty Lennox, by the way. That’s Eli.” He nodded at the boy to his right, who did not acknowledge him.

Before Rusty could say anything further, Darla emerged from the cockpit to say, “We’ll be landing in about thirty minutes. Make sure your seatbelts are fastened properly. Oh, and Eli, Ryan, and Tristan, your street clothes are up here.”

Eli finally reacted at this news. Climbing over Rusty’s legs before Rusty had a chance to let him out, he grabbed all three pairs of clothes and chucked one at a huge, intimidating boy near the front of the plane.

“Catch,” Eli called, tossing a bundle at Tristan’s head.

Tristan fumbled with his clothes, embarrassed that Leila had to see his skinny chest and bruised arms. He had lost a lot of muscle in Juvie, thanks to the flavorless cafeteria meals and long periods of time confined indoors.

“Oh my god,” Leila whispered when Tristan pulled the jumpsuit off his arms. “What happened?”

Tristan turned away quickly, face hot. “I got in a fight,” he mumbled, not wanting to admit how badly he had been beaten up.

Clumsy in his haste, Tristan eventually managed to struggle into the new clothes, kicking his garish jumpsuit under the seat. The clean fabric felt stiff and grainy after the sagging orange uniform.

“Makes you feel like a person again, doesn’t it?” Rusty said with a lopsided smile.

Tristan just nodded. Meanwhile, Eli stomped on his bedraggled jumpsuit before resuming his seat.

Rusty leaned over Eli and rubbed at the condensation on the window. “I’m excited to see what this place is like. I wish it wasn’t so foggy!”

“Don’t get excited yet,” Leila said. “This could be much worse than Juvie.”

“I doubt it,” Rusty said. “I have a good feeling about this. Anyway, it’s an adventure, isn’t it?”

“Right,” Tristan said dubiously.

Just then, he noticed dark shapes whipping by the wing, their forms indistinguishable in the mist.

It wasn't until the plane jolted and then roared to a halt that Tristan recognized the shapes for enormous bushy pines.

They were in a forest.

He made up his mind then—if this Underground Academy looked like a high-security lock-up, he would make a run for it. There would be plenty of places to hide in the woods, and even if he got lost and never made it out alive, that would be better than the future that awaited him at an asylum.

At the front of the plane, Darla got to her feet to address them once again as a chorus of seatbelts clicked open. “Please be sure to—to—”

She had to cover a yawn with one hand; the momentary weakness made her look younger than ever.

“Please bring all of your belongings with you. We will not be returning to the plane—the school is still a ways from here. And from now on, you should address me as ‘Professor Merridy’ or ‘Miss Merridy.’”

Tristan leaned over Leila to peer outside; he could see nothing but heavy gray fog and the ghostly outlines of trees.

“There’s nothing to see,” Leila said. “I can barely make out the runway.”

As Tristan descended the ladder from the plane, a chill breeze raked through him. Shivering, he joined Leila and the other dozen or so students milling around on the runway.

The last person to appear through the hatch was a white-haired, round-faced man who had to be the pilot. When he turned to face the students, he was beaming.

“So nice to meet you at last,” he said cheerfully. He would have made a convincing Santa Claus if he grew a beard and put on a few pounds. “My name is Gerard Quinsley, and I’m part of the academy’s faculty. That is, if we ever manage to get there.”

Chuckling, he sidled over to Merridy.

“Well, that was a boring flight, eh? I always hate flying over clouds. But the headmaster seemed to think it was for the best if—”

“Gerard!” Merridy said sharply. “Enough.”

Winking at the students, Quinsley led the way down the airstrip.

“Do you think we’re gonna walk to the school?” Rusty asked, his grin revealing a front tooth cracked in half so it ended in a point.

“Why are you so *happy*?” Leila sounded irritated. “We’re in the middle of nowhere, heading somewhere that might be worse than what we came from—maybe we’ve even been abducted. They might be planning to sell our organs.”

“That wouldn’t be very nice.” Rusty made a face.

Tristan snorted. “That’s an understatement.”

For some reason, a beautiful red-haired girl turned and glared at Rusty.

“Who is that?”

Rusty glanced at the girl, who turned away when she caught Rusty’s eye. “That’s Cassidy McKenna. She’s not very friendly.”

“Most of them aren’t,” Leila said in exasperation. “What were you doing before Tristan got here, playing musical chairs?”

Rusty didn’t answer.

They had reached the end of the runway, which was nothing but a narrow strip of concrete in the middle of the woods, and Quinsley turned down a narrow dirt trail. The mist pressed even closer here in the trees, cold and wet; Tristan tucked his chin into the collar of his shirt, shivering.

“What d’you think this school’s gonna be like?” Rusty asked. “How come they want a bunch of kids like us?”

Leila shook her head. “No idea.”

Tristan let the others draw ahead so he could slip away without being seen if the facility was as bad as he feared. Quinsley was bringing up the rear, but with the line of students spread out, Tristan could only make out his shadowy form through the fog. From up ahead, he heard Leila asking the kid with the oddly dyed hair, “You’re the one with all the knives, aren’t you? I can’t believe Darla—I mean, Professor Merridy—found them all.”

“She got every last one.”

Soon they reached the smooth stony beach of a lake, its surface shrouded so heavily in mist that it appeared ethereal. This overgrown, mysterious forest was so far removed from the sterile halls of Juvie that Tristan couldn’t believe he had left Cass Detention Center only hours ago. Now that he had cast off his jumpsuit, he could almost convince himself the months of suffering had been nothing but a bad dream.

For a moment Tristan thought a warm boat might be waiting to ferry them across the lake; his hopes were dashed when the white-haired Quinsley began shepherding them along the shore. Their progress raised a clamor as they slipped and stumbled over the damp stones. As the mist closed in around them, Tristan lost sight of everyone but Leila, who was nothing more than a ghostlike outline ahead.

The darkness grew deeper as they walked. The slap-slap of waves was hypnotizing and disembodied in the fog.

Distracted by the rippling lake, Tristan caught his foot on a piece of driftwood and stumbled to his knees.

A hand extended to help him up, and when he looked up to see who it was, his skin erupted in goosebumps. It was a ghost.

Then the girl smiled, and Tristan blinked. For a split second, he had thought it was his dead brother who stood before him.

He took her hand tentatively. “Thanks.”

She was no ghost, just an albino with pale, wraithlike skin and white hair. Her luminous blue eyes were striking as the only color in her face. He couldn’t believe he hadn’t noticed her on the plane.

“What’s your name?”

“Amber.” Her cheeks reddened, and she tugged her hand from his grasp.

From behind, Tristan heard the crunch of footsteps accompanied by Quinsley humming under his breath. He started picking his way forward again, though he had long since lost sight of whoever he was supposed to be following.

Soon they reached the opposite side of the lake, where the forest on their right gave way to a meadow that sloped up a steep hill. From here, Tristan glimpsed the other students once again, nothing more than dark outlines in the fog. He and Amber followed a tumbling stream upward, neither speaking.

The hill grew steeper still, and Tristan was soon breathing hard from the climb. The stream dropped away in a series of waterfalls, and he had to pick his route carefully to avoid precarious rocks.

Up ahead, the ground appeared to level off, though another mountain could be waiting in the fog for all he knew.

“Tristan?”

A disembodied voice rang out from far ahead.

“Tristan, where are you?”

This time he recognized it as Leila. *Dammit*. He wouldn’t have a chance to slip away before they reached the facility.

He and Amber trudged up to join the group where they stood huddled at the top of the hill.

Merridy’s forehead was creased with worry. “What took you so long? I was starting to worry.”

“I tripped,” Tristan mumbled. “Sorry.”

Merridy gave him a disbelieving sniff. “Hurry along, we don’t want to miss dinner. And you—” she shot a cold look over her shoulder at Quinsley, who had just appeared at the top of the hill— “don’t let anyone else wander off.”

Tristan fell into line behind Leila and Rusty, nerves fluttering in his stomach.

This was it—he had no way out, no matter what the facility turned out to be. Not that he could have found his way back to civilization alone, but at least death would be swift out in the woods. Now he was stuck here for at least the next three years. If this was an asylum or an illegal research project or worse, he had no way to escape.

Then he stopped short.

Something towered ahead in the fog, but it was neither a barbed-wire fence nor a security guard’s office.

It was a rotting wooden arch carved with strange animals.

What *was* this place?

Chapter 3: The Lair

Beyond the arch, the mist lifted slightly to reveal the hulking shapes of wooden structures circling a meadow. As they drew closer, Tristan recognized the closest as a Native American longhouse, the boards rotting in places and one corner sloping in.

“We’re not living in those, are we?” Eli asked in a disgruntled undertone. “They don’t look at all waterproof. Or insulated.”

Quinsley chuckled. “No, of course not. Just wait—you’re in for a treat.”

As Miss Merridy opened the door to the longhouse with a groan of boards and shower of dust, Tristan peered over her shoulder. He could see nothing but shadows within.

Miss Merridy strode into the darkness without hesitation, while Tristan and his fellow students jostled one another in an attempt to let someone else lead the way. Eventually the boy with wavy, shoulder-length black hair whom Merridy had reprimanded on the plane ended up in front. With a glance over his shoulder and a shrug, he sauntered into the shadows. The haughty red-haired girl followed, and then everyone pushed through the doors in a tight knot. Tristan ended up wedged between Leila and Rusty, feeling his way forward one step at a time.

Then the boy in front gave a yelp. “What the hell? There are stairs in here!”

“I didn’t realize it was called the ‘Underground Academy’ because it’s literally underground,” Leila whispered in Tristan’s ear.

He laughed shortly, his stomach still tight with worry.

As the cluster of students began to descend, Tristan edged to the side until he could put a hand on the wall for balance. It was nothing but packed earth, which crumbled under his fingertips.

Ten steps down, everything changed.

First, his foot landed on something that felt slick and solid, not like the sagging boards near the top of the stairway. Then the wall beneath his fingers changed to smooth, cold stone.

Another step down, and light exploded around him.

Tristan stumbled back and nearly fell over the stair behind, blinded by the sudden brilliance.

Squinting and blinking rapidly, Tristan tried to regain his bearings. It felt as though he had passed through some invisible barrier and emerged in a different world.

The stairs continued down through a tunnel of white polished marble, finally opening onto a vast floor.

In a daze, Tristan continued to the foot of the stairs, hardly registering the amazed voices around him.

They were in a vast oval chamber—almost a ballroom—with an alcove at one end where chairs sat around several round tables. A pattern like a compass rose radiated out from the center of the floor, the segments cut from red, black, and murky green stone; overhead, the blinding light came from a series of chandeliers.

At the foot of the stairs, Tristan stopped, unsure what to do next. Behind him, the rest of the students jostled forward until everyone stood on the ground floor.

“Welcome.” A man’s cold voice rang out from the opposite side of the ballroom. “This is the Underground Academy—or, as we like to call it, the Lair.”

The man who had spoken was standing at the edge of the raised platform in the alcove. He was dressed all in black, and his eyes were sunken, giving his face a skeletal appearance.

“Come on, no need to be nervous,” Quinsley said from behind them.

Tristan jumped; he was not the only one. Still in a tight cluster, the students shuffled across the

ballroom to the alcove. Other professors—or perhaps scientists—had been sitting around a large table near the back, but they rose as the students approached. Tristan had expected to join other students, but there were only twenty unoccupied chairs on the platform, just enough for the new arrivals.

His misgivings increased.

“Very good to meet you,” said a rotund man who smiled indulgently at Tristan and his fellows.

“This is Professor Brikkens,” Quinsley said, nodding to the heavyset man, who waved. “And your headmaster is Professor Drakewell.”

The tall, hollow-eyed man did not smile at his introduction; instead he shot a sharp look at Quinsley, who fell silent.

“Please be seated,” Professor Drakewell said. “You have already met Professor Merridy, your environmental studies teacher, and Gerard Quinsley, our school chef.”

Miss Merridy smiled tightly. Stress lines had appeared on her forehead—was it because Tristan and Amber had nearly gotten lost, or was there something about the school that frightened her?

“I’m not just the chef,” Quinsley said good-humoredly. “I’m also the pilot, handyman, and shepherd-of-students. Today I believe Professor Gracewright prepared our feast?”

A small woman with long, wispy grey hair smiled. “I did my best, but it will never live up to your cooking.”

Drakewell did not look amused. “Professor Gracewright will take your botany classes.” He waved a hand in the direction of the tiny, grey-haired woman. “That leaves Professor Alldusk, who will teach chemistry—” he indicated a pale, black-haired man— “Professor Grindlethorn, who teaches medicine—” he gestured at a stocky, hooked-nosed man— “and Professor Delair, who teaches elementals.” The last was a bald man with rectangular glasses.

A flutter of movement and whispers passed through the students at this announcement. Belatedly, Tristan remembered Professor Drakewell had asked them to sit down—he dropped into the nearest seat, while the other students hastily followed suit. He was joined by Leila, Rusty, Eli, and a black-haired, brown-skinned boy he had not spoken to before.

“I’m glad you arrived safely,” said Professor Alldusk. He was around Miss Merridy’s age, with black hair down to his shoulders and a kind smile. With his black trench-coat and heavy black boots, he looked a bit like a vampire—albeit a friendly one.

Professor Drakewell cleared his throat. “I need your undivided attention.”

Though he spoke quietly, every student turned to look at him. Silence fell over the room.

“I assume Professor Merridy has given you a brief introduction to our academy. However, I wish to fill you in completely, so there is no confusion.”

Tristan gripped the edge of his seat.

“The Underground Academy is a school of magic. You have been hand-picked because you show more potential than the average person. However, it will take months of hard study before you learn to see auras and manipulate the power waiting around us.”

Tristan took a shaky breath.

He had been right. Merridy had meant *magic* when she spoke of power.

Years of desperate belief in Marcus’s treatments, only to see them fail time and time again, had taught him to be skeptical of anything that could not be proven. Yet he wanted it to be true.

He wanted to belong somewhere other than Juvie, wanted a future where his criminal record did not define him.

He tried to push down his hope, because if this turned out to be a cruel joke or a lie designed to lull them into complacency, he might crack. Desperation had lurked through all his long months in Juvie, threatening to drive him to fight, to make a run for it, to hurt himself. Only by walling away any emotion, any thought of Marcus, had he survived.

The muscled boy with buzz-cut hair broke the silence. “That’s BS.” His eyes were cold, full of

hate. “Why would you want a bunch of criminals to learn *magic*? You’d be giving us better weapons to use against our enemies. I don’t buy it.”

“That’s a good point,” Leila said, her voice flat. “If you’re telling the truth, surely there must be better people out there who have just as much potential as us. Why do you need criminals?”

“You are best qualified for the Underground Academy,” Professor Drakewell said coldly. “Be grateful you were given another chance at life outside the detention center.”

Though he had not answered Leila’s question, Drakewell’s tone was final.

“While here, you must prove yourselves. If any of you have not learned to harvest and use orbs by the end of the year, you will return to the detention center you came from to serve the remainder of your sentence. Likewise if you cause trouble.” Drakewell’s eyes narrowed. “You may have made mistakes in the past, but we do *not* accept criminals here. If we see any indication of criminal behavior, you will be expelled with no questions asked. Understood?”

The boy with the buzz-cut muttered something under his breath to the handsome black-haired boy who sat beside him.

No one else spoke.

“Two more rules while you remain here. First, obey any orders given by myself or your other professors. Any disobedience will result in hours of labor given as punishment. And second, do not stray off the marble floors. Trespassing will be punished severely.”

Tristan was not alone in glancing at the polished stone underfoot.

“You may bring our dinner now, Professor Gracewright.”

When the tiny, wispy-haired woman leapt to her feet and bustled through a door opening off the alcove, Quinsley hastened after her.

The headmaster took a seat at the teachers’ table, and as he did, quiet voices rose among the students.

Tristan played with his fork, not sure what to believe.

So far, he had seen no proof that the professors were telling the truth. He remembered hearing about a science experiment where participants were asked to administer an electric shock to a man who answered questions wrong. They did it, even when they thought it was wrong, because they believed in the authority of the scientist running the experiment.

Was this a similar situation? Would Tristan and his fellow students be pressed into doing terrible things in the name of learning “magic”?

But Tristan was here, and he had nowhere else to go. Whether he believed the professors or not, this was his life now.

“What do you think?” Leila whispered.

“If it’s real, I’m going to make sure I learn magic,” Tristan said grimly. “I can’t face Juvie again.”

Chapter 4: Professor Brikkens' Show

Dinner was better than anything Tristan had eaten in years. His father was no cook, and the food at Juvie had barely been edible. Despite his misgivings, he could not help but enjoy the feast.

Professor Gracewright and Quinsley brought out platter after platter, heaped with spiced chicken, mashed potatoes and gravy, ravioli stuffed with ricotta and mushrooms, and sourdough rolls.

"This is so fancy!" Rusty examined his intricately patterned silver fork before stabbing at the ravioli. "They're definitely not treating us like criminals, are they?"

"No," Leila mused, tearing a roll in half. Steam gushed out, spiraling toward the brilliantly lit ceiling. "And this whole room looks like it belongs in a palace. It's hard to believe we're underground."

Tristan, Leila, Rusty, Eli, and the boy Tristan heard Eli refer to as Trey were silent for several minutes as they ate ravenously.

When Rusty finally pushed back his plate—Leila was loading up on third helpings of everything, though she was slowing down—he said, "So, what did you go to Juvie for, Tristan?"

Tristan froze, his fork halfway to his mouth. Why did Rusty have to bring that up now?

"I crashed a car," he said gruffly. "I don't want to talk about it."

Unbidden, the memory flashed before him once again, and the same panic rose within him, as fresh as the day it happened.

"That's not a very nice thing to ask," Leila said sternly. "Did you go around asking kids at the detention center what they'd done to wind up there?"

Rusty gave her a rueful smile. "I tried. But they made me stop."

Tristan could imagine how Rusty's fellow inmates had accomplished this—his own bruises still stung.

"I just can't believe there's so many kids who get in trouble with the law," Rusty said. "I wanted to know what they'd done, 'cause maybe it wasn't their fault they were arrested."

"You're one to talk," Leila said. "If you like sharing painful personal stories, why don't you tell us why you were in Juvie?"

Rusty shrugged. "I don't really know what happened. I passed out drunk at a party, and when I woke up, everyone else was gone. An old barn was on fire, and police cars were starting to show up. I got arrested for arson and underage drinking."

"It's true, what Rusty said." Trey spoke softly, looking at his plate. "The US has the world's highest rate of incarceration. People get locked up for minor offenses like drug use all the time."

"There you go," Rusty said, grinning triumphantly at Leila. "I bet half the kids in Juvie were just caught with weed or something stupid."

Leila's retort was interrupted by the arrival of a towering chocolate cake with ganache dripping artfully down the sides.

As he helped himself to a slice, Tristan avoided the eyes of his dinner companions.

Was he the only murderer at the Underground Academy?

If his fellow students were guilty of only minor crimes, what would they do if they learned he had killed his brother?

* * *

By the time the last of the dessert was cleared away, it had grown late, and Tristan could hardly keep

his eyes open. He could think only of the bed that hopefully awaited him somewhere in the bowels of the Lair.

At the teachers' table, Quinsley pushed his chair back with a screech and rose. "I suppose I'd better show you kids where you're sleeping."

More chairs scraped back as the students joined him. At the table closest to Tristan's, a pretty blond girl had fallen asleep with her head on her arms; when another girl shook her awake, fear flashed across her face before resolving into worry.

Though Tristan did not even know her name, he felt a strange surge of protectiveness. She did not look as though she belonged in Juvie.

After passing through the tall ballroom doors, Quinsley led the students down a marble hallway to a set of stairs leading deeper into the earth. The walls were lit with glowing orbs that cast a bright shine onto the marble—through his sleepy, contented haze, Tristan realized he could not see lightbulbs within.

"You know what?" Leila whispered in his ear, making Tristan jump. "If this is a fairytale palace, it's the creepy kind, where everyone who comes through the doors is cursed."

"That would explain that weird thing we passed through on the stairs," Tristan said, still staring at the lights. He wondered if they were somehow enchanted—if so, he welcomed the thought of irrefutable proof that he had not lost his sanity.

As they continued further down, Tristan lost track of how many stairs he descended. At one point, Leila grabbed his wrist and pointed to a dark tunnel leading away from the well-lit marble hall. "That's the doorway leading to hell," she whispered with a grin.

Shaking his head in amusement, Tristan squinted down the tunnel. The passage swallowed the light, its roughly cut, rounded top contrasting with the smooth, squared-off marble hallway they followed.

A moment later, Quinsley stopped in front of a door on the right side of the hall. "This is where you'll be sleeping." He pushed open the door. "The bathroom is a bit farther along this hall."

As the students filed into the room, Quinsley looked around before shaking his head. "Well, this doesn't look like it was very well planned."

There were eight bunk beds pushed up against the walls of the square room, with an empty space in the middle. Along the wall closest to the door, desks, wardrobes, and drawers were grouped haphazardly.

Quinsley shrugged. "Girls on the right and boys on the left, I guess. You can blow on the lamps to turn them off."

He turned and left, closing the doors behind him.

For a moment, everyone stood motionless, staring at one another.

The handsome dark-haired boy was first to move—he headed for the closest bunk on the right and climbed to the top. He was joined by the short-haired boy who reminded Tristan of one of his bullies; the pretty blond girl who had fallen asleep at dinner; red-haired Cassidy; and several others he did not recognize.

Casting a mistrustful look at the handsome dark-haired boy, Leila made a beeline for the opposite side of the room. Tristan followed her, and they were joined by Rusty, Eli, Trey, and two girls he had not met.

Amber hovered in the doorway, biting her lip, while the others chose their beds; at last Tristan beckoned her over to the left side of the room. She cast him a small, relieved smile as she hurried to the empty bunk at the back.

Tristan wondered briefly why such a vast underground palace did not have space for a separate boy' and girls' bedroom—though it might be better this way, he decided, appraising the hulking, mean-looking boys who had gathered on the right side of the bunkroom.

He was too tired to give the matter any further thought. Kicking off his shoes, Tristan climbed the ladder to his top bunk. A pair of navy-blue pajamas lay folded neatly atop the pillow, but he threw them to the end of the bed and curled up, fully clothed, beneath the quilt.

Overwhelmed with exhaustion, he slept dreamlessly.

* * *

When Tristan drifted back into consciousness, he rubbed his eyes, wondering why his room was so dark. Usually the fluorescent lights from the hallway streamed through at all hours of the day.

As he stretched, his feet collided with the rail of the bunk bed, and it all came back—Miss Merridy, the flight to a misty forest, and the strange underground school. He opened his eyes to the marble ceiling, which was dimly lit by a couple glowing orbs on the wall.

“Morning, sleepyhead,” Leila said cheerfully as Tristan swung his legs over the side of the bunk.

He groaned.

“Those are your new clothes.” She gestured at a pile near his feet.

With a yawn, Tristan picked up the clothes, which matched what Leila wore—dark jeans, a light blue shirt, and a black jacket—and made his way for the bathroom.

Rusty was in the boys’ bathroom drying his hair with a scrappy towel when Tristan kicked open the door. His sloppy brown curls stuck out in every direction.

“Hey, Tristan! These showers are awesome—they’ve got—”

He broke off, his grin fading.

Tristan cursed. Rusty had seen his scars.

Raking his hair over the left side of his face, Tristan stomped over to the nearest toilet stall.

“What happened to you?” Rusty asked nervously.

“Nothing, okay?” Tristan slammed the stall door.

“I won’t say anything,” Rusty called. “Don’t be mad at me.”

“Just shut up.”

It was a while before Tristan convinced himself to search for the other students. When he reached the ballroom, he avoided Rusty’s eyes and instead joined Leila, who sat alone. He was dismayed when Rusty abandoned Eli and Trey and dropped into an empty seat at Tristan’s table a moment later.

“What’s up with you?” Leila asked, raising an eyebrow at Rusty.

He grinned. “I want to hear more about this fairytale palace. What’s our curse going to be?”

Leila snorted.

Just then, Quinsley came around with breakfast. “Morning,” he said when he reached their table. Twirling his spatula, he dropped pancakes onto Tristan’s and Leila’s plates. “I’m glad you kids didn’t kill each other last night.”

“Very funny,” Leila said. “Hey, would you mind if I helped out in the kitchen sometimes?”

Quinsley laughed. “You’ve just arrived! Wait until your classes start—you might not have any free time.” Leaning closer, he lowered his voice. “Between you and me, I do get overworked. I’d love the help.”

As he ate, Tristan scanned the room, and his eyes fell upon a chalkboard with their lesson schedule written in elegant, rounded script.

He nudged Leila; when she spotted the schedule, her eyes widened. Tristan read the schedule through several times, excitement building as he wondered what the classes would entail.

8 o’clock – 9 o’clock ~ Magic with Professor Brikkens

9 o’clock – 10 o’clock ~ Medicine with Professor Grindlethorn

10 o’clock – 11 o’clock ~ Elementals with Professor Delair

11 o'clock – 12 o'clock ~ Lunch break

12 o'clock – 1 o'clock ~ Botany with Professor Gracwright

1 o'clock – 2 o'clock ~ Chemistry with Professor Alldusk

2 o'clock – 3 o'clock ~ Environmental Studies with Professor Merridy

“Those are some unusual subjects,” Leila said wryly. “I expected something to do with magic, but why environmental studies? And why chemistry, and no math or history or English?”

Rusty had finally noticed what Tristan and Leila were looking at. “Hey, at least we’ve got a long lunch break! That’s like a whole class period by itself.”

“Maybe Professor Brikkens will finally show us what this whole magic business is all about,” Tristan said, trying to sound nonchalant. All his hopes were pinned on this first class—he was desperate for concrete proof that magic existed, that he was not losing his grasp on reality. “I mean, are we using wands? Can we shoot daggers out of our hands?”

Leila laughed.

“Maybe we’ll get wizards’ staffs,” Rusty said with a grin. “That would be awesome.”

* * *

Tristan and Leila were the last to finish eating. When Quinsley cleared their plates, the heavysset teacher—Professor Brikkens—lumbered to his feet. Today he wore a pair of tiny, round glasses that were nearly buried in the extra flesh in his face. His bald patch was rimmed by short gray hair that stuck straight out.

“A very good morning to you, my dear children.” Brikkens smiled like a satisfied cat.

Tristan and Leila shared a smirk—they were hardly children.

“You will join me for the first hour. Professor Drakewell decided to allow you a bit of a lie-in this morning, but normally my class starts at eight.” Brikkens’ double chin wobbled as he spoke. “Well, if you will follow me this-a-way, I will show you my classroom.”

Brikkens’ classroom was on the same level as the ballroom, just past the stairway that led into the bowels of the school. As he waited for the students to file in, Brikkens bounced on the balls of his feet.

Tristan’s first thought was that the sunlight looked odd and pale on the walls. Then he remembered they were underground—looking up, he realized the tall, domed ceiling was ringed by a circle of lights that gave off the same white radiance as the sun.

The room itself was round, with relief patterns carved into the white marble walls, creating the impression that the floor was encircled by pillars. Instead of desks, a single round table dominated the center of the room, surrounded by sixteen chairs. The room was so large the table barely took up half the floor.

As they took their seats, Rusty tilted his head back and gaped at the domed ceiling. “This place is awesome!”

Tristan grinned briefly. “You also thought walking through that miserable fog was fun.”

Once Brikkens had settled himself fussily into his tall armchair, he rapped his knuckles on the table. “This class is designed to provide both a practical and theoretical introduction to magic. If—”

A loud thump interrupted Brikkens. The stocky, muscular boy with a buzz-cut had slammed his elbows onto the table.

“What is your name, young man?” Brikkens did not seem perturbed at the interruption.

“Damian Doyle.”

Even without his scowl, everything about Damian reminded Tristan of his bullies, from his mean

little eyes to the way he flexed his muscles in anger. Tristan's legs tensed; though he knew he had nothing to fear in the classroom, he could not help but prepare to run if Damian turned on him.

"Anyway, *Professor*, no one's told us what we're doing here, or even where *here* is. If we're supposed to be learning magic, whatever that means, I want some goddamn proof!"

A few others nodded warily.

"Oh, dear," Brikkens said. He pushed his tiny glasses further into his face. "It's really not my place to discuss the overall purpose of the Underground Academy. Professor Drakewell will fill you in at the proper time. In the meantime, you are here to learn as much about magic and its related fields as possible."

Tristan folded his arms, wondering what Brikkens did not want to tell them.

"Come on, then, prove it!" taunted the handsome, dark-haired boy sitting beside Damian.

"And you are...?"

"Zeke Elwood." He leaned back in his chair, folding his hands behind his head.

"Ah. Well, my dear Mr. Elwood, it is not as easy as that." Brikkens began patting at his immense maroon vest as though searching for something in one of its countless pockets.

"Magic," he continued in a ponderous tone, "has nothing to do with waving a wand and saying the correct words. The art is much more complicated and discriminating than that. Commanding magical power—that is, the energy harnessed from destruction—requires great mental skill."

"Yeah, and a special room with trapdoors," Zeke said. He had closed his eyes.

"No, my friend." With a satisfied smile, he withdrew his hand from a pocket, fingers fisted around something small. "There is no trickery involved. Magic, you see, is all about balance. Balance and order, both mental and physical."

Tristan wondered if they were supposed to be copying this down, though they had not been given any school supplies.

At last Brikkens opened his hand to reveal what he had found. "Here we are."

Tristan had to sit forward on his chair to see what rested in his palm—it was a small orb about the size of a marble, unremarkable apart from the fact that it appeared to be molded from solid gold.

"Any guesses as to what this might be?"

"Something magical, no doubt," Zeke drawled.

"Ah, yes. Very good, Mr. Elwood." Brikkens smoothed his vest over his stomach. "Now, where was I?"

A tall girl next to Cassidy McKenna leaned forward eagerly. "You were talking about balance, Professor."

Cassidy pinched her. "Shut up, Stacy."

The tall girl winced.

Oblivious to this, Brikkens said, "Wonderful. Magic is called such because it is derived from auras, rather than any measurable forms of energy, and therefore does not follow the distinct laws of science. Magic, in its purest form, is the creation of something from nothing. That is where balance comes into play—you see, the source of magic is found in its equal but opposite force: the reduction of something to nothing." He nodded. "Indeed. Magic is powered by destruction."

"What's that thing in your hand?" asked a girl Tristan thought was called Cailyn Tyler. Her frizzy blond hair bobbed as she stood to get a closer look.

"So glad you asked, my dear, so glad you asked." Brikkens lowered his palm, the golden orb glowing warmly in the light that streamed from the ceiling. "This is pure magic. When something is destroyed, it releases a vapor of undiluted magic. If you collect that vapor, it congeals to form an orb such as this."

"And what's that supposed to do?" Damian asked derisively.

"Anything at all. Only a small amount of magic is stored in this orb, so it only works for small-

scale spells. What would you like to see, my dear boy?”

“Grow a tree,” Eli suggested dully.

Brikkens’ face fell. “I cannot do that. Not here, at least.”

“Wonderful,” Eli said coldly. “You’re not even a decent fraud.”

“No, no, growing a tree is not an impossible task.” Again Brikkens smoothed his ugly vest. “However, magic cannot disobey certain basic laws of nature. To grow a tree, I must first have a seed.”

“What *can* you do, then?” Leila demanded.

Brikkens dug through his pockets again and drew out an ordinary penny.

When he set it on the table with great ceremony and waved his hands over it, Tristan’s heart sank. Did Brikkens think they were naïve enough to fall for a cheap coin trick?

Maybe this was an experiment to measure the gullibility of desperate people. The first test had been their willingness to attend a school they knew almost nothing about—anyone sane should have rejected such a dubious offer. Rusty was likely to fall for this next trick; his eyes shone with anticipation.

“This should work nicely,” Brikkens said, still flourishing his hands over the penny.

Lifting the gold marble above the penny, he blew on it. Then he flipped his palm over and let the marble fall.

For a split second the marble just dropped, exactly as it should; before it hit the table, though, it slowed and began to blur strangely.

Tristan sat up straighter in his chair. As he watched in surprise, the marble dissolved and floated apart to form a dense little cloud of gold smoke. The smoke drifted lazily down to settle on the penny like a cloak, where it hovered for a moment before disappearing.

Nothing happened.

The room remained silent, waiting.

Then, slowly, the penny began to wobble like jelly. Tristan thought he could see Lincoln’s face expanding slightly before the picture turned to liquid—the penny gushed lazily across the table like melting wax.

A second later, nothing remained of the penny but a copper-and-zinc blob.

“It’s going to ruin the table,” a girl Tristan thought was named Hayley said into the silence. For some reason she sounded indignant.

Tristan didn’t know what he had just seen. There had been no sleight of hand, he was almost certain, because Brikkens had not moved during the demonstration.

In that case, what had happened? He frowned at the molten blob that had moments ago been a penny, trying to puzzle out a rational explanation. None came to mind.

“Wow.” Rusty’s voice was hushed. “How did you do that?”

“That, my dear boy, was magic.” With one fingernail, Brikkens worried at the glob of metal until it peeled away from the wood. Then he passed the melted penny around the circle of students.

When Cassidy handed the penny to Zeke, he finally uncrossed his hands from behind his head and leaned forward for a closer look. Casually he drew a knife from his belt and plunged its tip into the hardened puddle of metal. The blade struck with a dull thud—the melted penny was real.

“Well, it’s not a complete farce,” Zeke said, tucking his knife away.

Rusty frowned. “I thought Merridy took everyone’s weapons,” he said to no one in particular.

“Yeah, and there’s no way at all to find a new knife.” Zeke flipped the penny to Damian.

As the penny finished circling the classroom, Brikkens reached into his pocket again and produced a whole handful of marbles, which he set on the table with a metallic clatter. “I should clarify—with these orbs, I will only be able to influence processes that already happen in nature. Thus, I cannot transform a human into a bird, but I could help a person gain several inches in height.” His eyebrows knitted together. “However, I would not recommend trying any spells on humans. These

can be extraordinarily dangerous.”

Then he began taking suggestions from the students for further magic to perform.

Cailyn was the first to shyly suggest he turn the ceiling purple; after that, everyone began calling out ideas.

During the next half-hour, Brikkens grew himself a remarkable black moustache, turned Zeke’s shirt a shocking shade of pink, froze a rubber band from Hayley’s hair so it shattered when he threw it on the table, and created a dense cloud of vapor over the table which began to spin in a miniature funnel. Damian and Zeke threw out several cruder suggestions, which he pretended not to hear.

By the end, Tristan’s head ached. He wanted to believe—wanted it more than anything—yet his rational mind rebelled. He did not want to fall prey to a cruel experiment, though if this school really was an academy of magic, it could mean a future he had never dreamed of during those long, soul-destroying months at Juvie.

Finally Brikkens released them to their next lesson. Everyone sat motionless at first, stunned, while the cloud continued to spin lazily over the table. Then Brikkens turned several more marbles to gold vapor, reversing the effects of his spells; Zeke’s face fell when his shirt went from blinding pink back to its normal blue.

Rusty was the first to move, though he was so dazed he fell out of his chair when he tried to stand. He hit the tiles with a thud, breaking the startled silence, and the students began shuffling their things together.

Rusty sat on the ground for a moment, cursing and rubbing his elbow.

“Do you think it’s real?” Tristan asked Leila as they shuffled through the door.

“I really don’t know.” She twirled her braid around one finger. “There’s definitely something wrong with this place.”

Tristan nodded fervently.

Chapter 5: An Affinity for Magic

None of the other lessons came close to surpassing Brikkens' magic show.

Professor Grindlethorn—the short, hook-nosed teacher—took their next lesson. Grindlethorn had a brown beard cropped close to his face and serious, beady eyes that missed nothing. His classroom was narrow and dark, and he began the lesson by handing out an enormous textbook titled *A Practical Guide to Magical Healing*.

“Has anyone taken a lifeguarding class, or any other first aid course?” he asked in his deep, gravelly voice.

Mournful-looking Hayley and curly-haired Cailyn both raised their hands.

Grindlethorn grunted. “Very good. You should not forget what you learned in your first aid training. Magical healing is meant to complement standard medical treatments, not replace them.”

He spent the rest of the short lesson showing them around a tidy hospital set up in the room beside his classroom, explaining which of the supplies—bandages, medical tape, and benign herbal remedies—were for general use, and which of the many locked cabinets were only to be opened by the academy staff.

For homework, he assigned them to read the first three chapters of the textbook and come prepared with a list of questions regarding anything that confused them or appeared to contradict what they had learned in school.

As his fellow students stood to leave, Tristan glanced at the first page of the textbook, hoping its contents might give him a concrete reason to believe in magic.

Introduction—An Overview of Magical Healing Methods

Using a combination of magical plants and congealed power, the practiced healer can speed recovery processes, cure ailments typically requiring surgery, and treat all manner of symptoms, from fevers to joint pain.

“Are you coming?” Leila asked from the doorway.

Tristan snapped the textbook closed and hurried after her.

“You’re eager to start studying,” she said with a smirk. “Are you always this dedicated in your schoolwork?”

Tristan flushed. “No, I—” He hesitated; Leila was still skeptical about what the professors were teaching, and he did not want to admit how desperate he was to find proof that magic was real.

Leila punched him lightly in the shoulder. “I’m only teasing. If that book is actually going to teach us magic, I’ll gladly do any homework Professor Grindlethorn assigns. Something about adding magic makes homework a lot more exciting.”

“Yeah.” Though he had never been a dedicated student—he had always scraped by, but hated homework and tests—Tristan found he was looking forward to learning as much as possible about magic. Even if it required reading ponderous textbooks and writing formulaic essays.

Their next lesson was on the lowest level of the school, a flight of stairs below the bunkroom. The narrow passageway and classroom were much dimmer and less airy than the rest of the school, though they were carved from the same white stone.

A dark tunnel gaped directly across from the classroom door, and Tristan hugged his arms over his chest as he walked by—the tunnel seemed to exhale a stream of clammy, musty air. After what

they had seen this morning, anything could be lurking down there. Goblins, demons, dragons, dwarves...

Professor Delair's cheery greeting wrenched Tristan from his thoughts. Bald apart from a long white moustache, Delair looked hale and strong, despite his apparent age.

As he handed around copies of a purple textbook entitled *Discrete Elementals*, he said, "We will be studying the fundamentals of earth, air, fire, and water—the foundation of all magical processes."

Tristan sat forward in anticipation. Maybe Delair would explain properly, would present the case for magic in a way that could not be disputed. Tristan itched to open his textbook, but he did not want to earn a reputation as a nerd on his first day of classes—especially since he wasn't smart enough to uphold that title.

However, Delair said no more about his subject. "This class won't meet every day, but if you fail to appear on the day of a lesson, you will earn no less than one hour of punishment."

Tristan remembered the headmaster mentioning this at their welcome feast.

"And if we don't work it off?" This was from Zeke.

Delair's moustache twitched. "We thought of that. You have until each Friday at midnight to work off your weekly punishments. If you fail to do so, you will be banned from meals until you complete the hours."

At that, Delair stood. "Homework—read the introduction of the textbook. There will be a quiz next time we meet."

Oblivious to the groans from several students, he turned and trotted from the room, disappearing down the dark tunnel across the hall.

"I was hoping for more magic," Rusty said as they retraced their path to the ballroom for lunch.

"I'm glad it's over," Leila said. "I still can't decide if this is a mental asylum. Our professors are acting as though we'll just accept magic without question—I want proof, or at least a better explanation than what Professor Brikkens gave!"

"But aren't you excited? I didn't think it was gonna be like this. Aren't you glad we're not in Juvie?"

"I'll be glad once I know we can believe what our professors tell us," Leila said darkly.

Several teachers were already in the ballroom when the students arrived. Brikkens was tucking into an overflowing plate; to his left, Grindlethorn sipped coffee, his beady eyes surveying the students.

As the last students arrived, Merridy said, "Please take one book bag each." She gestured to a basket piled with black messenger bags. "Your belongings have been brought up from the bunkroom. You may sort through them and each choose one item to keep."

For the first time, Tristan noticed a series of small piles along the ballroom wall. He did not recognize his immediately, because the clothes he had worn the previous day had not belonged to him.

The other students hurried to collect their meager piles of belongings, some with muttered curses, while Tristan opened his messenger bag and found a silver watch at the bottom.

"I don't have anything," Tristan told Merridy.

Rusty joined Tristan at their table moments later, clutching a small woodcarving. "This is all I'm keeping."

"Can I see that?" Tristan asked.

Rusty opened his fist and showed him what looked like a fairy girl kneeling in prayer. As Rusty ran his fingers along the tips of her tiny wings, his eyes grew sad. "A friend made it for me." After a moment, he blinked and stuffed the carving into his pocket. "Well, this'll be different." Tristan couldn't tell if his enthusiasm was faked.

When Leila joined them, she handed a book bag to Rusty. "You forgot this."

"Thanks," Rusty said.

Tristan tucked his two new textbooks into his own bag. “What did you keep?”

“Oh, just a book.” Leila patted her already-bulging bag.

As Quinsley came around with grilled cheese and tomato soup, Tristan watched the other students out of the corner of his eye, wondering what pieces of their former lives they had carried through into Juvie.

Evangeline, the pretty girl who had fallen asleep at their welcome feast, kept a fat sketchbook; Eli tucked a pack of well-worn playing cards into his pocket; haughty, red-haired Cassidy McKenna held onto what looked like a makeup kit. Tristan tried to imagine what secrets these seemingly insignificant objects held, what crimes had ripped their owners from an ordinary life and tossed them into the unforgiving world of fenced-in detention centers and security guards and court hearings.

If Tristan could have reclaimed anything from his former life, it would be the last puzzle he had finished with Marcus. The thought conjured up the cardboard-and-ink smell of the game store where he chose out the puzzle, running his fingers over the boxes as he searched for the perfect one; the aroma of hot apple cider he had shared with Marcus while they huddled over the pieces, Marcus wrapped in a blanket, recovering from his most recent hospital visit.

His throat tightening, Tristan grabbed his grilled cheese sandwich and took a huge bite.

“I thought you didn’t have anything valuable other than your knives,” Rusty was saying to Leila.

Leila snorted. “Slitting people’s throats isn’t the only thing I enjoy doing.”

Tristan hoped she was joking, but her expression made it hard to tell.

* * *

Professor Gracewright’s botany class immediately followed lunch. She led the students up the grand staircase to the clearing above the school; halfway up, they passed again through the insubstantial barrier. The sudden darkness and drop in temperature was just as unerring as it had been in reverse.

Outside, damp mist still shrouded the clearing. Tristan could barely see the outlines of the trees beyond the longhouses.

“This is my classroom.” Gracewright gestured around the clearing, her sunhat wobbling dangerously. “Our classes will deal with everything around us. However, for days like this, we have a greenhouse and an indoor garden to shelter in.”

The greenhouse materialized as they drew near; from afar, its glass walls had looked like wood panels. It had to be an illusion of some sort.

Instead of leading the class to the greenhouse, Gracewright turned left and pushed open the door to one of the longhouses. When she vanished the moment she stepped through the doorway, Tristan realized it was guarded by another of the strange barriers.

He held his breath as he stepped over the dark threshold.

Past the barrier, brilliant white light flooded the room, as though he had stepped through a portal into a sunny field. The light came from lamps on the wood ceiling—they were still inside, despite the soft grass covering the dirt floor and the flowers, vines, and small trees that lined the walls.

Four large purple blankets covered a portion of the grass—following Gracewright’s example, the students settled onto these and looked around.

“There are three types of plants we will study in my class,” Gracewright explained. “First, the ordinary plants that are useful in healing remedies; second, plants with an unusually strong aura which can be harvested for raw power; and third, enchanted plants that can be used on their own for magic purposes. We will begin the semester with the first variety.”

They began right away, naming as many of the bushes, trees, vines, and flowers in the room as they could before Gracewright supplied the remainder.

At the end of the lesson, Gracewright handed out two new textbooks, which Tristan added to his

now-bulging book bag. The first appeared to be a standard textbook entitled *Encyclopedia of Botany*, while the other was called *Beyond the Basics: Magical and Medicinal Herbs*.

When Gracewright dismissed the class, she handed each student a drawstring bag filled with clippings to identify before the next day's lesson.

Their next lesson was taught by the vampire-like Professor Alldusk, who greeted the students in a tall, echoing chamber two stories below the ballroom. Here the walls were hewn from icy gray stone, at odds with the marble floor. Four long tables were arranged in a square, partially enclosing what looked like a fire pit in the center of the room. As there were no seats, the students clustered around the tall tables with some confusion.

"Good afternoon," Alldusk said once the muttering had subsided. "My name is Brinley Alldusk, and as you might remember, I'll be teaching chemistry."

When he smiled, Tristan was almost surprised he lacked fangs.

"First of all, I want to make it clear that 'chemistry' is a bit of a misnomer for this class."

Tristan's chest tightened in anticipation—would Alldusk give him a reason to believe, at long last?

"More magic, I bet," Leila grumbled to Tristan.

Alldusk heard, and his smile widened. "You've got that right." His features softened, and he suddenly looked very friendly. "Leila, is it?"

Turning back to the rest of the class, he said, "I believe Professor Brikkens showed you the gold orbs?"

Rusty nodded eagerly.

"Good. This class will involve the creation of those orbs; in other words, we will be collecting magic and condensing it into a functional form."

As Alldusk strode to the center of the room, Tristan leaned forward. The gold marbles had fascinated him from the start.

"In order to capture this free-floating magic, we must destroy something and collect the vapors released in conjunction with the destruction."

"Professor?" Hayley Christiansen said. "I don't think I understand..."

"The fire pit," Leila whispered, nodding toward the ground. "We're going to burn things."

She was right.

While he explained, Alldusk bent and unfastened a rusty grate that had covered the fire pit. The hollow was filled with glowing coals, which Alldusk scooped into a metal bowl.

"Unlike your other teachers," Alldusk said, "I believe you deserve to know exactly how the collection of magic is made possible."

He brought the metal bowl over and set it on the table before Eli.

"To release the magic vapor, we burn various materials, and the vapor is given off along with the smoke."

Reaching beneath the table, Alldusk produced a leather pouch and an empty glass jar.

"The volume of magic emitted depends on what is being destroyed. This is where chemistry comes into play." Holding up the pouch, he tipped a small pile of brown powder into his palm. "Certain combinations of plants and minerals create more magic than others when incinerated, and a greater magnitude of destruction produces more magic. Watch carefully—the vapor is subtle, and most of you won't be able to see it yet."

At this, Alldusk dropped the powder onto the coals. The powder sparked as it hit the embers; Tristan squinted at the air directly above the bowl, waiting for something to happen. After a moment, he thought he saw a wisp of pale gold vapor drifting up from the bowl.

Once the gold cloud had floated away from the trail of smoke, Alldusk scooped it into the waiting jar and screwed on the top.

All was silent, aside from the faint crackling of embers. Then—

“You didn’t catch all of it,” Amber said faintly.

Tristan turned and stared at her. He wasn’t the only one; many of the students wore confused frowns, as though they had never seen her before.

Leila shifted impatiently on his left. “What are we supposed to see?” She was still peering at the jar. “You didn’t even catch the smoke.”

Rusty and several others nodded, while Eli continued to stare at Amber, toying with his oddly dyed hair.

“You mean you can’t see that gold stuff?” Tristan asked, surprised. Now that it was in the jar, the vapor was growing brighter and more substantial than before.

Alldusk smiled. “As I said, it is rare for a student to spot the vapor immediately. Raise your hands if you can see it.”

Tristan put his hand up slowly, and was amazed when Amber was the only other student to raise her hand. Meeting her eyes, he shrugged.

Though her mouth did not move, her eyes seemed to smile back at him.

“Excellent,” Alldusk said. “Both of you appear to have an affinity for magic. And well spotted, Miss...”

Amber did not supply her name, so Alldusk cleared his throat and continued.

“You’re quite right that some of the vapor slipped away. Unfortunately, we don’t have a more efficient way of collecting the vapors. We could use larger jars, of course, but they are impractical, especially since many of us will never gain the ability to see the outer reaches of the magic vapor.”

“What are you talking about?” Rusty asked. “What happened?”

Alldusk moved over to the next table and held the jar up for Rusty to have a closer look. “It should begin appearing to the rest of you as it grows thicker,” he said. “Watch carefully.”

The gold was deeper in color now—more concentrated, Tristan realized—and swirled toward the bottom of the jar in a lazy spiral.

While Alldusk made his way around the room to give the others a closer look, Rusty continued to frown at the jar, eyes screwed up in concentration. When the jar came back around, Eli jumped and drew back.

“I see it!” Eyebrows arching, he gave the jar a look of wary scrutiny. “There’s something spinning in there.”

Across the room, Cassidy leaned against the desk in a bored pose, though her eyes kept flicking back to the jar. Meanwhile, Zeke followed the circling vapor with the lazy unconcern of a cat tracking a distant string. Damian and most of the other students continued to frown in confusion.

When the gold was so dense it almost looked solid, glowing brighter than ever, Rusty let out his breath.

“Oh, *there* it is.” He rocked back on his heels. “There’s definitely something in there.”

“What is it?” Leila hissed in Tristan’s ear. “Why can’t I see anything?”

“Look near the bottom,” Tristan said quietly. “Right in the middle—if you squint at it, can you see anything moving?”

Leila shook her head.

Holding the jar by its lid, Alldusk crossed to their desk and held it in front of Leila.

“There’s a bright gold streak there,” Tristan said. Leaning over Leila’s shoulder, he put his finger on the jar. “Right...there.”

Leila breathed a sigh of relief. “There it is! Thank goodness.”

“Not to worry,” Alldusk said. “No one knows why some people have an easier time spotting the vapor than others; when I was learning, it took weeks before I was able to see anything. Good work, everyone.”

He set the jar on a dark wood shelf, where it joined a similar line of jars.

“For those of you who are able to see the orb beginning to form, the vapor will continue spinning for many more hours. By our next lesson, a golden ball of pure magic will sit at the base of the jar.

“For homework, practice *observing*. Everything has an aura, and learning to recognize these requires the same mode of concentration necessary to see the vapor given off by destruction. You will be unable to progress in my class or remain at the Underground Academy if you cannot eventually see both auras and magic vapor.”

Gathering his books, Tristan made to follow Leila from the room, but Alldusk said, “Tristan. Would you and the young lady stay a moment?” He nodded to Amber.

When Tristan touched Amber’s shoulder to catch her attention, she gave him a startled look.

“This is Amber, Professor.”

Alldusk smiled. “Good to meet you, Amber.” He waited until the last of the students had cleared the room before saying, “I will be speaking to the headmaster about you two. Professor Drakewell was interested to learn who had a special talent with magic.”

Alldusk looked from Tristan to Amber, his expression becoming grave.

“There is a special...job at this school that one of you may be asked to fill someday. Professor Drakewell will discuss this with you when he sees fit.”

At this they were dismissed.

Tristan fell into step beside Amber as they made their way to the next class. “Can you see auras around everything?” he asked.

She glanced at him. “Yours is pale green, like new aspen leaves.”

Though he did not know what to say to this, Tristan smiled, excitement humming through his veins.

There was no possible way he could explain away that gold mist, the way it escaped the fire and congealed to become a solid orb, and at last it began to make sense—from destruction came power.

At last he believed.

And if he truly had an affinity for magic, he wanted to make the most of this new world, this miraculous escape from a future that had terrified him. He didn’t care if the others thought he was a dork—he was determined to succeed. He would prove to his professors that the Underground Academy had made the right choice in recruiting him.

He would never return to Juvie.

Chapter 6: Zeke's Reward

After their chemistry lesson, only Professor Merridy's Environmental Studies class remained. Tristan tried to pay attention to her convoluted explanation about plate tectonics and weather patterns, but his mind was still on Alldusk's lesson.

So he had an affinity for magic...would his powers have continued to surface even without training, leading to more unexplained surges of energy like the one that had defeated Cob at long last?

Would he have grown dangerous, unable to control his powers?

And had the professors somehow been able to select students with a high propensity for magic? Amber could already see auras. Surely her recruitment had been no accident—

Tristan was startled from his daze by a *crack*—Leila had hit Zeke with the textbook Merridy had just handed out.

"Ow!" Zeke howled. "Damn it, Leila, I'll—"

"Enough!" Merridy snapped.

Tristan blinked at Leila. It appeared that Zeke had been digging surreptitiously through Leila's bag; when she had noticed, she had slammed her textbook onto his head.

"Leila, please, this is not a detention center." Merridy's eyes narrowed behind her glasses. "Zeke, are you quite all right?"

Zeke got to his feet, massaging his head. "I'll survive," he said sourly, aiming a kick at Leila's ankle.

"An hour of punishment, Leila," Merridy said. "Class dismissed."

"Why do the assholes always get off easy?" Leila muttered, cramming her copy of *Earth Science and Environmental Studies* into her bag.

* * *

That afternoon, Tristan faced his homework with more excitement than he had felt since second grade, when homework had still been a novel concept that made him feel infinitely more grown up.

He wished Alldusk had assigned them a textbook; he would love to read more about why exactly burning things gave off that magic vapor, and how it congealed into a solid marble-sized nugget of power.

Instead he clambered to his top bunk and cracked open his copy of *A Practical Guide to Magical Healing* once more.

Around him, Leila and Cailyn were riffling through their new textbooks as well; Eli had persuaded Rusty and Trey to join him in a game of cards, though Trey kept glancing guiltily over one shoulder at his pile of textbooks; Zeke lounged in his bed, tossing a hacky sack from hand to hand; Hayley was sweeping the marble floor with a broom she had found who knew where; Evangeline appeared to be sketching something, though she kept the notebook tilted up, away from the prying eyes of her classmates; Damian was using his pen to gouge something into the side of his bunk; and Amber had disappeared entirely.

After dinner—which was another feast to rival the previous night—those who had not made a start on their homework finally turned to their textbooks. Eli did this with much grumbling; finally Damian shouted, "Will you idiots shut up?"

Leila slammed her textbook closed. "This is hopeless. I can't concentrate. You'd think they would have somewhere better for us to write notes than on our beds."

Hayley gestured to the haphazard collection of desks, wardrobes, and drawers lining the wall on either side of the door. “If we rearranged those, we could actually use them.”

Following a heated debate, Leila and Damian came to the decision that the room should be divided in half by the assorted furniture. Damian and anyone who wanted to join him would take the right side, while Tristan, Leila, and the others claimed the left.

While Cassidy and Zeke stood to the side, making scathing comments instead of helping, the other students worked together to create a makeshift wall. Tristan was relieved to establish distance between himself and Damian—the students who had gravitated toward him all looked mean and intimidating. Damian, Zeke, and Cassidy were joined by a tall girl Tristan thought was called Stacy Walden, along with two boys he didn’t know.

After standing near the door for a long time, biting her lip and shifting from foot to foot, Evangeline chose a bunk on Tristan’s side of the room.

Claiming one of the newly-moved desks, Tristan hurriedly jotted notes on his assigned reading. He had struggled to identify the clippings from Professor Gracewright’s botany class, and judging by the frowns of his fellow classmates, they were having no more luck than he. When Rusty asked Tristan if they could work together, they quickly realized the contents of each bag were different.

Settling for his best guesses, he finally packed away his books late at night, hoping his work would be enough to win him favor with their professors. He fell asleep quickly...

...and slipped into a nightmare. The darkness resolved into a flash of brilliant light, the sudden illumination of a curve in the highway...why hadn’t he turned? The wheel was cold in his grasp, and everything was sluggish...a terrified scream and a thud, and Marcus was splayed beside him on the seat, hair limp and damp with sweat. Tristan’s eyes burned.

See what you’ve done, the darkness hissed.

Tristan threw his arms over his head, cheeks wet with tears, and tried to stifle the vision. *Go away. Leave me alone. I hate you.*

There was a hand on his shoulder, shaking him, and he knew it wasn’t part of the dream. Swallowing fiercely, he forced his eyes open.

Leila stood on the corner of Rusty’s bed, craning to see his face in the dim light of a single lamp. “Are you all right?” she whispered. “You were talking in your sleep.”

Tristan realized his eyes were wet—he really had been crying.

Embarrassed, he threw his covers over his head. “I’m fine.” His voice was muffled. In the silence that followed, he knew Leila was still watching him. “Thank you,” he whispered at last.

Leila squeezed his shoulder gently and then retreated.

Sleep eluded Tristan after that.

He had not dreamed of Marcus for over a month. Why did the nightmares have to return now?

Tristan pressed his face into the pillow, hating himself, angry that he had thought the Underground Academy would change anything.

No matter where he went or what he become, Marcus was never coming back.

He would always be a murderer.

* * *

In the morning, Tristan resolved anew to succeed at his studies.

Maybe if he learned enough, he would be able to save kids like Marcus when their weak hearts failed them. Maybe he would finally understand the strange circumstances of that ill-fated night—the earthquake and fire that drove him to his reckless, fatal decision.

He stumbled to the boys’ bathroom before any of his fellows rose and stood in the shower for ages, trying to wash away the memory of his nightmare.

When Tristan finished his shower and dressed in his uniform, he stood before the mirror and studied his reflection, pulling his hair back from his face to examine the scars.

Even months after the crash, his face had hardly improved. The gashes across his left cheek and through his eyebrow had healed badly—the scars were red and mottled, his skin rejoined in raised contours, as though something evil was trying to take root there.

With a grimace, Tristan dragged his hair violently back into place.

In their medicine class that day, Professor Grindlethorn called forward Finley Glenn, one of the boys Tristan hadn't known the day before, to participate in a demonstration. Finley, squat and bespectacled, looked confused when his name was called. His jacket was inside out.

“Glenn. Have you experienced a major injury?”

Bobbing his head, Finley almost walked into a desk on his way to the front.

“When I was twelve, I fractured my radius and tore the ligaments. I still have the scar.” He folded up the cuff of his left sleeve and showed Grindlethorn his wrist.

A thrill of excitement ran through Tristan—could Grindlethorn heal the scars on his face?

“Shoddy work,” Grindlethorn said. “With proper care, this scar should have disappeared entirely.” He gripped Finley's wrist with his stout fingers. “The bone is still weak. We might be able to improve that.” He turned Finley's wrist over, pinching and prodding at the boy's flesh. “Try eating less for the next month, Glenn. With so much fat around the bone, strengthening it will prove challenging.”

Finley turned bright red and tugged his arm away from Grindlethorn's probing fingers.

Tristan's excitement faded. He wasn't going to ask anyone to heal his scars if it meant public humiliation.

* * *

When they climbed the stairs for botany that afternoon, the students were awarded their first real view of the school's surroundings. At first Tristan didn't know what was happening when he found himself at the back of a holdup on the stairs; there was a great deal of shoving and cursing, and Zeke shouted, “Move it, spotty!” at Leila.

She didn't seem to hear him. She and Eli had frozen in the doorway, staring at something just out of sight; elbowing past Damian and Cassidy, Tristan edged his way to the top of the stairs...and stopped.

The mist had lifted, and in its absence the world had grown a hundred times larger. What had appeared to be an endless pine forest enveloping the school was nothing more than a tree-filled valley, beyond which loomed craggy mountains draped with glaciers. The midday sun glinted off every peak, smoothing out their crevices in a blinding sheen of white.

For a heartbeat, Tristan thought he could see the aura of the mountains, a faint turquoise shimmer that swirled and flared in the wind. When he blinked, the color vanished.

“That's something,” Leila said quietly.

Rusty blundered into Leila from behind. “Whoops—sorry, Leila, I didn't see you.”

She rolled her eyes.

“There you are,” an amused voice remarked.

Tearing his eyes from the mountains, Tristan saw Gracewright making her way toward the students, her face lost in the shadow beneath her wide-brimmed sunhat.

“It's a real beauty, isn't it? After a time you forget how it is to live anywhere else.”

When Gracewright stopped in front of round-faced Hayley Christiansen and stubby little Finley Glenn, she was beaming. “Well, I can see you kids won't be much use in a sit-down lesson today. I hope you have your textbooks—we're going to do a bit of a scavenger hunt.”

From a pocket in her heavy green apron, Gracewright produced a stack of papers, which she handed to Finley. “Pass those around,” she prompted; he had been squinting at the top of the stack. “You will each receive a list of important magical and medicinal plants; each specimen on this list can be found within a mile of this school. Whoever manages to find the most plants from this list will be excused from tonight’s homework. Oh, and speaking of which—” she held out her hands— “please return last night’s homework before you start.”

Tristan reluctantly dug his pouch of clippings and his list of guesses from his bag. He knew he had failed the assignment; he needed to do a better job at today’s challenge, or he risked getting kicked out of the Underground Academy.

Once Gracewright had collected his homework, Tristan frowned down at the list Finley had handed him. There were two columns running down the page—one was headed “Magical Specimens,” the other “Medicinal Plants.”

“I don’t recognize any of these,” Leila said. “Look—spotted jewelweed? Hooked crowfoot? Gnome plant? These sound ridiculous.”

Rusty laughed. “*Gnome* plant? What’s that supposed to be?”

With a groan, Tristan let his copy of *Beyond the Basics: Magical and Medicinal Herbs* fall open to the center. “Is it magical or medicinal?” He would be lucky to find even a single specimen from this list.

“Magical,” Rusty said. “But maybe it’s in the *Encyclopedia of Botany*, too. That’ll mean it’s real.”

Tristan flipped to the index of his textbook while Rusty began thumbing through his *Encyclopedia*.

“Of course it’s real,” Leila said impatiently. “How are we supposed to hunt for it otherwise? We just need a picture.”

“You know what I meant,” Rusty said. “Aha—I found it!”

Tristan looked up from his own book as Rusty read aloud the passage he’d found.

“Gnome Plant, or *Hemitomes congestum*, is a small, extremely rare flower limited to the northwest coastal region of North America.”

Leila snorted. “That’s really helpful. What does the other book say, Tristan?”

After a moment, he found the right page. “It says, ‘Apart from its high-volume production of congealed magic—I think that means those golden orbs—the gnome plant may also be used to slow or cease magical reactions.’” The passage continued for the remainder of the page, though none of the description seemed useful in identifying the Gnome Plant.

Tristan slammed the book shut. “Why don’t we start with something less rare?” He scanned the list of plants again. “Wild ginger, for instance—that’s something I’ve heard of before.”

Once Tristan, Leila, and Rusty had studied the picture of wild ginger until Tristan was sure he could recognize the dark, heart-shaped leaves, they set off into the trees, heading in three different directions.

Before long, he came across Amber, who was kneeling beside a tree and easing a small plant from the soil, its roots intact. She looked up briefly, blinked at Tristan, and returned her gaze to the ground.

“What’s that?” he asked, scanning his list.

“I don’t know, but its aura is brighter than usual. I think it means the plant has a higher concentration of magic.”

When Amber stood and slipped away, Tristan dropped to the ground where she’d knelt, trying to see which plant she’d unearthed. There were several tiny leaves hugging the base of the pine, along with a clump of moss—though none of these resembled the plant Amber had uprooted, Tristan plucked a bit of each just to be safe.

After trudging so deep into the forest that he could not longer hear his classmates rustling about and calling out to one another, Tristan still had not found anything that looked remotely like wild ginger. He had never gardened before, and his parents were skilled at killing any house plant that crossed their doorsteps. To his unpracticed eyes, everything looked the same—just endless pine trees

draped with moss, sometimes with toadstools or small clusters or unidentifiable leaves near the base.

He had forgotten his new watch, so had no idea what time it was, but he probably had to get back to the clearing now. Apart from the unlikely-looking plants he had collected near whatever Amber had harvested, at this rate he would be returning empty-handed.

With a sigh, he scanned the list of plants once more, this time choosing a mushroom to search for. Surely there were only so many toadstools that could be found in one forest.

This time he plucked every mushroom he came across, regardless of color.

When he finally stumbled back out into the clearing, he saw from Rusty's watch that they had ten minutes left in class. The other students were straggling back—Rusty was empty-handed and covered in mud; petite, curly-haired Cailyn Tyler clutched an armful of pine boughs and long grasses; and Leila looked as though she had actually managed to find a clump of wild ginger.

"What's that?" Leila demanded of Tristan, eyeing his handful of leaves and mushrooms.

"No idea."

When Zeke and Amber finally returned with only minutes to spare, Gracewright told the students to sit in a circle in the clearing. "Come up here, one at a time, and we'll see what you have. You first, Miss Ashton."

"I'm going to fail this class," Tristan muttered, noting the odd variety of plants Amber laid out before Professor Gracewright.

"Excellent work," Gracewright said, checking each plant off her list as Amber laid them on the grass before her. "That's over half the specimens I assigned—quite impressive." She smiled at Amber. "Mr. Fairholm, you're next."

Tristan reluctantly dropped his handful of plants on the grass before Gracewright.

"Ah," Gracewright said, picking up each leaf and toadstool one by one. "What were you looking for?"

Tristan's face felt hot; he heard Damian and Zeke laughing. "Um...I was looking for wild ginger, but I didn't find any. Then I tried to find a hedgehog mushroom."

Gracewright plucked one of the mushrooms from the pile. "Well, this is your hedgehog mushroom. That makes one out of twenty."

As Damian and Zeke guffawed louder still, Gracewright shot them a quelling look. "I do not expect immediate success from any of my students. These exercises are merely a chance for you to start practicing the powers of observation—both of identifiable characteristics that will help you recognize a plant in the wild, and of the great variety of species that lurk in what might look to an unpracticed observer like a uniform forest."

Tristan hurried back to his place in the circle, his face still burning. He fit the definition of an unpracticed observer perfectly.

He was grateful to find that most of his fellow classmates had done no better. Leila had guessed correctly with her specimen of wild ginger; Finley Glenn had correctly identified five species, besting everyone except Amber; and Eli had gathered what looked like a piece of every single plant in the forest, though only three out of his mound were on the list.

Zeke was the last to come forward. When he deposited his plants on the grass, Gracewright started laughing. "You don't know a thing about botany, young man, but you've spotted the loophole."

Still chuckling to herself, Gracewright turned to the other students. "You may have guessed this already, but your assignment wasn't terribly specific. Half of the species on these lists won't grow around here. Luckily we have our greenhouse for the less adaptable specimens, which Mr. Elwood here managed to break into." She shook her head in amusement. "Homework—sketch each of the plants you didn't manage to find. Mr. Elwood and Miss Ashton are both exempt from this—well done, you two."

Zeke smirked at the others.

“What?” Rusty protested loudly. “How’s that fair?”

Tristan shared his indignation. Was Gracewright trying to encourage them to cheat and steal?

Gracewright turned to Rusty. “One of the first things you should know about magic is that it can’t be restricted by human laws or codes. The only rules that matter are those of nature and power. If you have something else to show me, Mr. Lennox, I’d be happy to look. Otherwise, class dismissed.”

Fuming, Tristan ground the moss he’d collected into mush under one foot. If all of his classes were like this, he would hardly last a few months at the Underground Academy.

“Clovers look a lot like wild ginger, okay?” Rusty said, scowling at Gracewright.

“No, they really don’t,” Leila said.

Shoving his muddy list of plants into his bag, Tristan stalked off toward their next lesson. Maybe if he failed botany, Professor Alldusk would put a good word in for him. If he couldn’t succeed at everything, he could at least excel in one of his classes.

Chapter 7: Storm Chasers

Before long they had settled into a routine, where auras and fire and golden orbs became commonplace. Though Tristan's determination to succeed did not lessen, the novelty of homework on magical subjects began to wear off; essays and quizzes and note-taking reverted to the drudgery he was accustomed to.

Intent on earning good grades in his chemistry class and winning Professor Alldusk's favor—not only was he competent at the subject, but Alldusk was both understanding and approachable—Tristan spent as much free time as possible trying to see auras. He found this nearly impossible within the Lair, so at Amber's suggestion, he took to venturing aboveground and wandering the meadow and forest each afternoon before dinner.

The turquoise aura of the towering peaks materialized first, followed a week later by faint billows of palest eggshell blue buffeted about in strong wind.

When Amber joined him one day, she was surprised to hear he had yet to see the aura of the forest.

"I started noticing the auras of trees long before anything else—before even humans," she said, hands clasped behind her back, eyes tracking the aura billowing forward in a fierce wind.

Tristan laughed. "You've seen how awful I am at botany. Maybe the plants know I'll kill them if I come anywhere near, so they're trying to hide."

Amber giggled shyly, her gaze not leaving the clouds.

* * *

Tristan soon learned that the only thing teachers gave out as readily as homework was punishment; the only student who spent more time working off hours than Zeke was Leila. Though she did well enough at assignments, she was quick to question or talk back to teachers, and lashed out at Zeke whenever he tried to needle her—which was often.

After working off her first several hours of punishment in the kitchen, where she quickly took a liking to Gerard Quinsley, Leila never approached any other teacher. When Rusty asked if she ever got bored of it, she said, "Gerry knows lots of good stories. Besides, I like cooking."

Tristan received his first hour of punishment later that week, when he forgot Grindlethorn's medicine assignment in the bunkroom and had to run back to grab it. He approached Merridy to work it off, not wanting to make a bad impression with Alldusk; to his dismay, Merridy was curt with him, acting as though his offer to help grade their pre-test was an imposition.

While Tristan worked, Merridy hunched over her desk writing something that she concealed behind one hand. Her leg jiggled up and down, and she kept nibbling on the end of her pen.

Tristan was grateful to escape at the end of the hour, and resolved never to work off punishment with Merridy again.

When he received another hour the next week, Alldusk was grateful for his help bottling dried herbs and scrubbing accumulated soot from the walls of the chemistry classroom. He did not appear to think badly of Tristan for earning punishment.

After making a bad first impression, Professor Drakewell seemed determined to intimidate and unnerve the students further still. The headmaster had a disconcerting habit of roaming the halls of the Lair, appearing from the shadows when least expected and doling out punishments to any student

who couldn't come up with a good excuse for being there. Professor Drakewell was anything but stingy about giving out hours. By the end of the second week, everyone knew how Finley Glenn—surprisingly brilliant in class but slow at everything else—had blundered into Drakewell's office and earned himself ten hours to work off.

Though he wasn't about to confide his fears to Leila, Tristan had the uncomfortable feeling Drakewell was watching him more carefully than anyone else. The headmaster ran across Tristan in the hallways more often than could be considered strictly accidental.

If anything, Merridy seemed more frightened of Drakewell than any of the students were. On their second Monday of classes, Merridy's sixth period was interrupted by the sudden appearance of the headmaster in their midst.

"Though the overall tides are governed by the moon," Merridy was saying, "there are many smaller forces that can trigger much more dramatic phenomena. For instance, underwater earthquakes or tremors may lead to the formation of tsunamis, while the meeting of two separate currents will often create whirlpools or, on a larger scale, maelstroms. Whether we discuss—"

Merridy broke off with a hiccup of surprise, eyes widening behind her glasses. Tristan turned in his seat to see what had scared her—Drakewell had materialized at the back of the room, sneering at Merridy from beside a pillar.

"I hope I have not interrupted anything important," he said sardonically. "Would you please join me in the hallway for a minute?" Drakewell tapped at a black hourglass he always wore on a chain around his neck.

Gulping, Merridy hurried to the door, the headmaster close behind. In their absence, silence swelled to fill the classroom.

Tristan could have sworn Drakewell had been invisible a moment ago—the pillar wasn't wide enough nor the shadows deep enough to hide his tall form.

Merridy returned a full ten minutes later, white-faced and flustered. "Where was I?" She fidgeted with a pile of notes on her desk and glanced back at the door.

"What's the matter, Professor?" Zeke teased. "Can't keep your eyes off the headmaster? Darla and... what's his first name, anyway?"

For that, Merridy gave him an hour of punishment.

After class, Rusty was the first to jump from his seat.

"What're you up to?" Tristan asked, elbowing Rusty.

Rusty shrugged. "Just wondering where Drakewell had gone. There's gotta be something he's always doing, right? I mean, he's never in his office, and he isn't at dinner much either. So where does he keep hiding?"

"Maybe he's just invisible most of the time," Tristan said shortly.

"I doubt that," Leila said, though she surely realized Tristan had been joking. "Maybe he has some job here that the other teachers are afraid to do. Remember what Gracewright said about magic? It doesn't follow regular laws. Maybe Drakewell is torturing people, or—"

"Let's not talk about it," Tristan interrupted. For the first time since the crash, he was almost happy. This was his new home, and he would defend it with everything he had. Anything to avoid returning to Juvie.

He did not want to consider the possibility that he had chosen the wrong side.

* * *

Despite the increasing drudgery of homework, the classes themselves were quickly becoming more exciting.

Alldusk's chemistry classes were the most entertaining by far. Professor Alldusk was generous,

quick to smile, and—best of all—rarely doled out punishments. He explained that although the strongest magic often came from burning the subtlest plants or minerals, colorful flames and explosions were useful as well.

“This school is situated above a number of mineral deposits,” Alldusk said. “We therefore have ready access to any number of chemicals that would otherwise be too rare for everyday use in creating magical vapor.”

One day, Alldusk asked Tristan and Amber to stand by and help him bottle vapors while he proceeded to burn lithium chloride, copper sulfate, and several other chemicals. The resulting flames burned red, green, and purple.

The next week, Alldusk spent the lesson making explosions with different chemicals—Cailyn Tyler hung back, covering her ears and wincing at each deafening bang, while the other students crowded forward to get a better look. Every thunderous reaction rocketed off the stone walls, echoing around the tall chamber, until Grindlethorn showed up halfway through the lesson and told Alldusk to keep it down.

“I’ll go to the headmaster if I hear another explosion,” Grindlethorn said sourly, waving away the cloud of smoke that billowed toward the doorway.

“Beg pardon,” Alldusk said. “I assumed the stone walls would muffle the noise.”

“Well, they don’t. If you want to blow things up, go down to Delair’s mine. As long as you’re on *my* floor, I’d like a bit of peace.”

Grindlethorn stalked away, slamming the classroom door behind him.

Alldusk smiled. “Whoops. I had a feeling that would happen eventually.” He shrugged. “Maybe we should see about soundproofing this room.”

Tristan, Leila, and Eli laughed.

When Tristan and the other students made their way down to Delair’s first-floor classroom the next day, Tristan paused beside the dark tunnel, wondering if it really was a mine. Delair couldn’t be expected to show up for more than three classes a week, though when he did, he punished anyone who was absent. When he did attend class, Delair often brought rare rocks and colorful crystal formations to show off—he was much more interested in these than in his subject, which he claimed was purely theoretical anyway.

“Most books on magic assert that power can be collected from any of the elements,” he explained. “Unfortunately, we currently only know how to produce magic vapor from the elements of earth and fire—and, very rarely, water. If magicians were once able to use air as well, that knowledge is long since forgotten.”

Out of the corner of his eye, Tristan noticed Amber shaking her head.

Even Grindlethorn’s medicine classes were far more interesting than Tristan had expected. The majority of Gracewright’s herbs were used in Grindlethorn’s classes; usually the students spent the hour crushing plants to make poultices and copying down endless uses for each new herb they procured.

Grindlethorn also had a habit of calling impromptu class sessions whenever a student came to him for medical attention—after Cassidy and later Cailyn were put through this embarrassing ordeal, Tristan decided he would only visit the hospital room if he was dying.

* * *

After spending the first month of classes discussing the mechanics and implications of every type of natural disaster, Professor Merridy finally explained how her subject related to magic in late September.

“As I believe you have learned in your elementals class, magic comes in more than just one form.” Merridy removed her glasses and straightened her spine as though steeling herself for something. “The

gold marbles you collect in your chemistry lessons are fire magic. However, larger-scale acts of magic require power given off by earth, water, and air as well.”

“Are we ever going to learn to *use* magic, or are we just going to collect it?” Leila asked without raising her hand. “Are we supposed to be magicians someday, or just slave labor?”

Merridy flushed. “An hour of punishment, Leila. Please raise your hand if you wish to ask questions.” She cleared her throat. “That will be explained at the proper time. The scope of my class only relates to environmental sources of magic—”

“Disasters,” Tristan said. Everything suddenly clicked into place. *From destruction comes magic*—large-scale environmental disasters would provide a bumper crop of whatever magic the academy needed most.

“Precisely.” To his relief, Merridy did not scold him for interrupting. “Most types of elemental magic cannot be collected unless the scale of destruction is large enough. So we seek out the sites of recent or ongoing disasters, and collect as much magic as we are able—while also helping in the rescue efforts, of course.”

“Grindlethorn’s lessons,” Leila whispered.

“To enable you to accomplish this, my classes will prepare you for recognizing dangers associated with specific disasters, surviving any deadly after-effects, and pinpointing the source of the greatest magic given off by the destruction.

“However, your most important skill will be remaining calm in situations of crisis, which means experiencing and gaining familiarity with disasters. After two months of training, we will enter a controlled disaster situation—an avalanche detonated by an explosion—where you will be protected from harm yet still required to move through danger in search of the earth magic rising from the site of destruction.”

Whispers broke out among the students, which Merridy did nothing to quell.

“Who goes out chasing disasters?” Eli asked loudly. “Are there other magicians out there?”

“Think how cool it would be to chase storms,” Rusty whispered, eyes shining. “I’ve always wondered what it’s like to go after a tornado.”

Merridy ignored Rusty. “Yes, exactly. We have a dedicated team based around the world who respond to disasters as soon as possible.”

Unlike before, Tristan and his fellow students hung onto Merridy’s every word for the remainder of that lesson. She began by handing around photos of recent avalanche sites and pointing out where the debris had likely stabilized and where precarious shelves of snow still awaited the right trigger to crumble.

When she dismissed the class, a din of chatter broke out in the hallway as students speculated what they would learn next and discussed the implications of Merridy’s revelation.

Tristan did not join in, his thoughts retreading the night of Marcus’s death for the thousandth time.

He could still remember the overwhelming terror and helplessness that had assailed him as the ground shook and the house burst into flames.

Could he ever learn to set aside that fear and think rationally in the face of disaster?

The eager way his classmates discussed volcanoes and raging fires and hurricanes made him doubt any of them had experienced a disaster first-hand.

They would see soon enough. He was sure of it.

And as much as he dreaded facing up to his fears, he welcomed the thought of Damian and Zeke, smug bastards that they were, getting a good scare.

* * *

Easily the most disappointing class proved to be their magic lessons with Professor Brikkens. After the magic show on their first day at the Underground Academy, Tristan had expected more of the same; instead, Brikkens spent each period lecturing the students on the dangers of magic and the theoretical principles behind its use.

“Didn’t Professor Drakewell tell us he would send us back if we didn’t master the use of marbles before the end of the year?” Tristan muttered to Leila on their way out from a particularly dull lesson. “Do you think he was lying, or is Brikkens just trying to screw us?”

Leila shook her head. “I don’t get it. Why bring us here if not to learn magic? Sure, we’re helping the professors harvest marbles for whatever they need them for, but they could produce a lot more on their own if they didn’t have to spend time teaching us.”

“I really *do* want to learn magic,” Tristan said. “I don’t know what they’re planning for our future—it seems like having a bit of extra power would keep us safe no matter what happens.”

“Yeah,” Leila said softly. She tugged at her black braid, eyes distant. “I bet we could escape Juvie if we learned to use magic properly. Maybe we could even start over again, somewhere no one knew who we were. Create a fake identity.”

Tristan had not been thinking about Juvie. He had been referring to their future at the Underground Academy. He still had no idea why their teachers had chosen a bunch of juvenile delinquents to study magic; he couldn’t shake the fear that something nefarious lurked in the depths of the Lair, beyond the well-lit marble tunnels. Drakewell certainly played the part of a villain well, with his cold, sneering manner and determination to punish students without cause.

“We just need a marble,” Leila said unexpectedly. “We’ve listened to Brikkens ramble at us for weeks—maybe we could figure out how to actually use all that theory.”

Tristan did not have a chance to respond, since they had reached Grindlethorn’s medicine classroom and the stout, sour-faced professor was glaring their way, but that very evening, Leila produced a jar from her book bag, grinning mischievously. At the base of the jar, a gold marble rolled back and forth.

“What’re you doing with that?” Eli demanded, swooping down on Leila.

“Mind your own business.” She turned away from him, shoulders rounding over the jar, but not before Eli got a good look at the marble within.

“Are you going to try magic?” Eli’s eyes lit up.

“No, Tristan is.”

Tristan met Eli’s surprised stare with defiance, though his neck burned.

Others had heard Eli’s question; Rusty, Trey, and Cailyn edged closer, while Zeke crossed to the edge of the wall of desks to watch from his side of the room.

Leila settled onto her bed. “So, what did Brikkens say about starting a spell?”

Tristan had no idea. He scanned the room, wishing Amber could give him a hint—as usual, she was nowhere to be seen.

“You don’t have to use a special word, do you?” Cailyn asked.

Tristan shrugged. “I’ve tried paying attention every lesson, but I don’t think Brikkens ever got around to telling us how spells worked.”

Someone on the other side of the room cleared his throat, and Tristan heard Finley’s thin voice. “The key to magic is concentration. To direct the power within an orb, one must isolate a single directive from within the complexity of the mind.” It sounded like he was reciting notes from Brikkens’ lecture, copied down word for word.

“Thanks!” Tristan called over the wall of wardrobes and desks.

He heard a thump, as though Damian or Ryan had just punched Finley in the stomach. He winced.

Leila unscrewed the lid of the jar and tipped the marble into Tristan’s hand.

He clenched it in his fist, surprised to find it cold and metallic. He had half expected it to hold the lingering heat of the flames that had created it. Rocking onto his toes, uncomfortably aware of eight pairs of eyes following his every movement, he tried to think of something that would be easy. Changing the color of something was the only idea that occurred, so he decided he would attempt to turn Rusty's hair blue. He was sure Rusty would not mind.

He tried to concentrate on what he wanted to accomplish, to push away all other thoughts, but there was Zeke, smirking at the end of the makeshift wall, and Eli was whispering something to Trey.

With a deep breath, Tristan turned his hand over and released the marble.

It fell straight to the floor, landing with a loud clack and rolling under Leila's bed. Though Tristan had expected no better, his heart sank.

Zeke cackled with laughter, and Damian yelled, "You'd better hope I don't report you! Drakewell would kill you."

Leila dropped to her knees and dug out the marble. "I'm glad you didn't manage it on your first try. You've already made the rest of us look bad enough in chemistry."

When she handed the marble to Tristan, he pocketed it. "I'm not trying that again. You're just having a good time watching me fail."

Chapter 8: The Lemon Tree

The next afternoon, Tristan escaped into the meadow after classes were over and took the marble from his pocket. He had a feeling it would be easier to use magic outside, where he could escape the distraction of his peers.

This time he focused his attention on a knee-high pine sapling rising from the layer of decaying needles just inside the forest border. Winter was fast approaching—the bite in the wind attested to that—and this sapling might not survive the heavy snow to come. Perhaps he could help it grow.

Planting his feet shoulder-width apart, just before the sapling, Tristan closed his eyes.

Grow, he thought. *Go on, just a little taller.*

The first time he released the marble, it fell straight into the grass as before.

The second time, he kept his thoughts focused on the tree, waiting desperately for something, anything, to happen. *Grow, damn it! Come on!*

Abruptly he realized the marble was growing warmer.

His eyes flew open.

Now it was so hot he could no longer hold it. Dropping it with a curse, he shook out his hand. All thoughts of the pine sapling fled.

The marble fell just inches before it slowed. Solid gold expanded and grew hazy; before long it reverted to the small cloud of gold vapor that had originally risen from the fire in Alldusk's class.

Then it vanished.

Tristan cursed. The tree had not changed, and the precious store of congealed magic was gone.

Frustrated, he stomped back down the stairs into the Lair, where he found most of the students working on their homework in the ballroom.

It was only as he descended the many stairs to the bunkroom that he realized he had accomplished something remarkable.

He had held raw magic in his hand, not within the sterile confines of a mason jar, and he had used his own power to revert it from its congealed form to a volatile state.

“What have you done with that marble?” Leila asked that evening. “You should try casting a spell again!”

Tristan put his hands in his pockets, his fingers brushing a layer of debris accumulated from botany. “I must have lost it. Sorry.”

* * *

It came as a surprise when Brikkens announced, not a week later, that he would be giving each student a chance to try magic.

Several heads turned to Tristan, but he ignored them.

“Ah, Mr. Fairholm,” Brikkens said, perhaps noticing the attention Tristan was receiving.

“Yeah?” Tristan said warily.

“Brinley Alldusk tells me you're rather good at detecting auras. Is this true?”

Tristan shrugged.

“Well, come forward.” Brikkens pushed his tiny glasses more firmly into place. “You will be the first to attempt a rudimentary spell, because out of everyone here, you are most likely to succeed.”

Somewhat alarmed, Tristan blinked at Brikkens. Butterflies rose in his stomach as he sloped up to the front of the room.

Though the students usually spent their first period napping through Brikkens' lectures, no one looked sleepy now. Leila eyed him with guarded curiosity, while Zeke sat forward in his chair and smirked.

Digging into a pocket of the hideous maroon vest he always wore, Brikkens pressed a gold marble into Tristan's hand. Instinctively, his fingers closed around it.

"Now what? How am I supposed to use it?" Tristan tried not to look around the room—he could tell most of the others wanted him to fail spectacularly. They resented his easy success in Alldusk's class.

Brikkens cleared his throat. "As I have mentioned more than once, concentration is the most important aspect to redirecting congealed power. Focus on what you wish to achieve, and suppress all other thought. Allow unnecessary distractions to intrude, and the spell will be broken—hence, the magic will drain away with no results."

That's what happened last time, Tristan thought.

"Or, if you're unlucky, the spell could go awry."

At least he was prepared for the searing heat of the marble. This time it would not distract him as much.

"Well, now, let's see what you can do," Brikkens said enthusiastically. "The amount of magic stored in a single orb isn't enough to do any real harm, so give us a show, my boy!"

That was it? Had the professor given better instructions the week before, when Tristan had been dozing off? Why hadn't he paid better attention?

Tristan took a steadying breath and looked around the room. His stomach squirmed with nerves.

What could he try? He had almost succeeded with the sapling above the Lair, but had that been due to the spell he was attempting or his location at the time? Face growing hot as the students began to whisper and snicker, he shoved his hands in his pockets.

Then he felt it—the layer of dirt and twigs and seeds from botany that grew thicker with each passing week.

Maybe he could try growing a plant once again.

Cradling the marble in the palm of his right hand, Tristan scattered a handful of seed-dotted debris onto the clean marble floor behind his back.

Now what?

He had a feeling the spell he had tried in the meadow would have worked if his concentration had not broken. But it would be much harder to marshal his thoughts with an audience.

Though he felt silly, he closed his eyes and tried to block out the undercurrent of whispering and giggling. Slowly he managed to dull his awareness, until his mind was empty aside from the single desire. *Grow*, he thought, letting the word fill the darkness behind his eyelids. *I don't know what kind of plant you are, but you're getting plenty of sunlight and water and...*

The marble began to change in his hand, growing warmer and warmer, and this time he could sense that it was becoming less substantial.

When he opened his eyes a fraction, just to check the marble was still there, he caught sight of Damian ripping pages from his textbook and crumpling them into balls, and his concentration shattered. The marble began to cool at once—he was loosing his hold on the spell.

Squeezing his eyes shut once more, Tristan focused once more. *Okay. This time you're actually going to grow.* He pictured a seed unfurling its leaves, easing its roots into the earth, stretching a stalk toward the sky...

The marble grew hot again, until he might have held a naked flame.

Now grow.

Without opening his eyes, he turned his hand over and let the weightless magic vapor slide away.

He waited a moment, shoulders tingling with excitement, before finally opening his eyes. Across

the polished round table, Damian and Zeke were sniggering, while Eli had turned to mutter something to Trey, his oddly dyed yellow and black hair falling into his eyes.

Leila shrugged and mouthed, *It's all right.*

All at once, the room grew silent. Zeke sat up straight, and Hayley's round eyes widened until her eyebrows disappeared beneath her bangs. Tristan didn't know what they were looking at. Could they see his scars? He pressed his hair into place.

Something nudged Tristan in the back of the knee.

He jumped and whirled to look—something was shooting up from the ground.

His seeds were growing.

Shocked, Tristan stumbled away from the cluster of plants. The tallest was a pale, delicate tree that shivered as it grew, sending out leaves and new branches that uncurled faster than a lizard's tongue. Another plant blossomed to the rear, a tangled bush with thorns. As the bush crept its way up the tree's thickening trunk, it budded and then erupted in scarlet blooms.

When the tree unfurled like an umbrella beneath the domed ceiling, Tristan's spine tingled with power. In that instant he could feel magic coursing through his veins and hovering in the air, just beyond his grasp. A surge of desire swept through him—staying out of Juvie no longer seemed to matter. He wanted to master the use of magic so he could experience this intoxicating feeling again, lose himself to the power.

Professor Brikkens began applauding. "Bravo, my friend! Really excellent. What a surprise!"

After a moment of bewildered silence, most of the class joined in Brikkens' applause. Rusty grinned and said something to Leila, who scowled.

"I never expected you to succeed, Mr. Fairholm. You clearly have a remarkable—"

Brikkens stopped short, hands frozen in mid-gesture. The plants hadn't finished changing—the roses shuddered, and a moment later Tristan realized the petals were withering. The flowers crumpled in on themselves until the petals began dropping to the ground, brown and dead. After sending out one last branch, the tree seemed to droop, its leaves drifting down to join the rose petals on the floor.

"What's happening?" Rusty asked, his voice loud in the stunned silence.

"Unless Mr. Fairholm intended to kill his lovely new plants, I would assume this comes from a gap in concentration. That's only to be expected; I don't know anyone who has performed such a large-scale spell within a year of learning the method. My dear boy, you have a remarkable gift."

Disappointed though still tingling with the after-effects of the spell, Tristan slunk back to his seat. From here he had a better view of the tree—the tops of its dying branches sagged over the trunk, casting an odd shadow across the dried rosebush.

"But how come that tree died?" Rusty asked anxiously. Tristan heard a thud—Leila must have kicked him under the table.

"Well!" Brikkens adjusted his glasses. "Mr. Lennox, you have given me a splendid idea. I would like each of you to come up here and try reviving the tree. It won't require a great deal of magic; come on up, dear boy, you can begin."

Looking startled, Rusty joined Brikkens at the front of the room.

"So, um..." He took the marble from Brikkens and turned to stare at the tree, one fist on his hips.

With a furtive glance at Tristan, Rusty blew on the marble, closed his eyes, and then let the marble drop. As soon as the marble left Rusty's hand, Tristan knew the spell wouldn't work. The marble fell like a lump of metal, hitting the ground with a heavy thud and rolling to the foot of Brikkens' chair.

"Ah, well," Brikkens said cheerfully. "Next!"

Leila was also unsuccessful; when she returned to her seat, she nudged Tristan in the side and whispered, "How did you do that?"

"No idea." Tristan tapped his pencil on the table, trying not to look too pleased with himself. "I

just concentrated on what I wanted—it's like Brikkens said.”

Leila scowled at him, so he sighed and muttered, “Okay, he did a really bad job explaining it. I guess I've just had a lot of practice controlling my thoughts lately.”

Brikkens called up each student, none of whom succeeded, until he reached Amber, seated directly to his left.

“Well, we're already out of time,” Brikkens said, “but you might as well give it a shot, Miss Ashton.”

Tristan sat up straighter as Amber made her way uncertainly to the front of the room. Eyes downcast, she smoothed a wisp of white hair out of her face and studied her marble. Her brilliant blue eyes grew clouded, and she poured magic from her hand like water.

As the golden vapor drifted toward the tree, the leaves on the ground swirled as though caught in a breeze, while the remaining dead leaves dropped from the branches. As soon as the dry leaves fell away, they were replaced by green tendrils that bulged and unfurled into glossy new leaves.

The tree shot out another branch and began to grow larger than ever, stretching toward the high domed ceiling until it was fully twice as tall as Amber. Cloudy white flower buds swelled and then burst open, hugging each branch like a robe of brilliant moss.

A second breeze coursed through the branches, and as the petals swirled away in a honeyed rain, small yellow fruits swelled in their place.

Suddenly the floor creaked hideously, and the marble heaved. Tristan's chair rocked backward—he grabbed the table just in time.

“Earthquake!” Brikkens shouted, surging to his feet just as the tiles split in two with a deafening CRACK.

As the marble floor splintered, the tiles pulling apart, something thick and brown shoved its way through the crack. It took Tristan a moment to recognize the wooden thing as a massive root.

Brikkens stared at the root, face drained of color, opening and closing his mouth like a fish.

A sweet smell wafted through the room—when Tristan looked up, he realized the tree's branches were now drooping with lemons.

Smiling absently, Amber plucked one of the lemons and handed it to Tristan.

“Thanks—what's this for?”

Amber shrugged. “It's your tree.”

“But...but...” Brikkens sputtered. “My room...my classroom!” His face turned from white to crimson. “Miss Ashton. Mr. Fairholm,” he wheezed. “Ten hours' punishment for you both. If you had enough control over magic to grow that tree, you should have known better than to ruin my pretty floor!”

Frustration overwhelming any sense of triumph, Tristan tried to catch Amber's eye—this was by far the longest punishment he'd ever received. How could Brikkens expect them to control their magic if he had never taught them how to use it properly?

Amber didn't seem to realize what Brikkens had said, or perhaps she didn't care, because she was still gazing happily at the lemon tree.

Chapter 9: Auras in the Moonlight

Though they were already late for Grindlethorn's second period class, Tristan and Rusty stayed behind to help Leila gather an armful of lemons for Quinsley.

"That was completely unfair," Leila said as they walked down the hall toward the kitchen. "Brikkens didn't give you any instructions, so he can't blame you for wrecking his floor! If he had any decency, he'd blame himself."

"It does seem kind of messed up," Rusty said consolingly. "You could always work off the hours with Gracewright, though—she hardly makes you do anything."

"It's not that," Tristan fumed. "Do you realize how much *time* that is? It's three hours a night if I'm going to be done by Friday, and that's on top of homework! I won't be able to sleep!"

Leila paused to readjust her armful of lemons. "That's the problem with this place. No matter how nice some of the teachers are, there's always someone determined to punish us."

"But you've gotta admit, we're being treated awfully well," Rusty said fairly. "We're learning a ton, and I've never eaten so much good food in my life."

"Sure," Tristan said. "Still, if we had a different headmaster, I'd complain about Brikkens. But Drakewell would probably send me straight back to Juvie." He grimaced. "I'd also ask a less intimidating headmaster if we could split into two separate bedrooms. I don't like having Damian's crowd so close."

They had reached the kitchen, so Tristan held the door for Leila, whose arms were full.

"Hey, Gerry," she called. "Look what Tristan grew!"

Quinsley wiped his hands on his apron. "Morning, Leila. Aren't you supposed to be in class?" Then he noticed what they were carrying. "Lemons! Good morning, Tristan, Rusty—I haven't gotten a chance to talk with you two in ages! Did you really grow these, Tristan?"

Tristan nodded and dropped his handful of lemons at the edge of the enormous counter.

Quinsley beamed at him. "All right, now run along. I'll see you all later. Thanks a bunch, Leila!"

As they hurried from the kitchen, Leila muttered, "I wish we had separate bedrooms too."

"What?"

"It's like you were saying a moment ago—I don't like sharing a room with Zeke and Damian. Last week I stopped by the bunkroom before dinner, remember, and I ran into Zeke there. He was cutting a hole in my pillow with a massive knife."

"And you didn't tell anyone?" Rusty asked, wide-eyed.

Leila turned down the stairs, walking faster now. "Of course not." Tristan and Rusty bounded forward to catch up. "I pulled out a knife and threatened him—he ran for it."

"So you're stealing knives now, too?" Tristan asked, grinning.

"I'm always in the kitchen. How hard do you think it is?"

* * *

That afternoon, Merridy reminded her class that their practical test on avalanche survival was only a week away.

Tristan's stomach dropped at this news.

He had been avoiding thinking about it; he still did not trust himself to stay calm in a crisis.

They had spent the previous weeks preparing for the practical test both in Merridy's classroom and aboveground—orienteeing throughout the forest, hiking to the base of cliffs so they could more

easily recognize avalanche terrain in person, practicing self-rescue techniques in a mound of snow they took turns burying themselves in, and memorizing topographic maps of the valleys.

Though it was only halfway through October, snow had fallen several times; while it had melted from the valley floor, the mountains were now frosted white. Perfect avalanche conditions, Merridy said, and less dangerous than spring snow, as it would not be as dense or icy.

“There are three parts to the test,” Merridy explained. “Since it will be your first time experiencing a disaster, this is more a chance to test your own reaction in a crisis than anything else. Therefore, success at any one portion of the test will earn you full marks.

“The first part of the test is removing yourself from danger. You will each stand in the path of the avalanche, insulated from harm by a layer of impenetrable air that my fellow professors and I will cast, but once the snow has settled, we will lift this protection. Based on what you have learned about avalanche self-rescue, you will dig yourselves free and remove yourselves from the hazard zone.

“The second part of the test is collecting earth magic given off by the disaster. You will be equipped with jars at the start of the test, and if you can collect even one marble, you will pass this portion.

“And the third part is making your way back to the Underground Academy following your self-rescue. You will need to use the orienteering skills we have practiced, and think calmly about your location despite the disorientation that will occur during the avalanche.”

Evangeline raised her hand, brows drawn together in worry. “Miss Merridy? Won’t all of this be very dangerous? What happens if we get hurt after the avalanche, and we can’t make it back to the Lair?”

Merridy smiled gently at her. “Don’t worry. Professors Alldusk, Gracewright, and Grindlethorn—as well as Gerard Quinsley—will join me in supervising the test at every point along the way. If any injuries occur, you will be evacuated to the academy at once.”

Tristan’s stomach was still churning with worry when they left Merridy’s classroom.

He was determined to keep a straight head throughout the disaster. But every time he tried to visualize the panic and chaos, hoping to prepare himself, Marcus’s face intruded. His last words echoed in Tristan’s thoughts—*I trust you.*

Go away, Tristan thought miserably, digging his fingers into his temples.

* * *

After several hours of this, in which he hardly made any progress on his homework, Tristan stomped up to dinner in a foul mood. He still had Brikkens’ punishment to work off, and he would earn more if he didn’t finish his assignments on time.

His mood lifted fractionally when he noticed the glasses of lemonade on every table—at least something good had come of that morning.

Quinsley rounded off the dinner with lemon pie, and when Tristan finished eating, he and Amber made their way to the greenhouse to work off their punishment with Gracewright.

It was a perfectly clear night, the black sky peppered with stars. Tristan lifted his head, the ever-present wind grazing his cheeks, and watched the full moon bobbing along the distant ridge.

“That lemon tree was amazing once you saved it,” he said softly, though he wasn’t sure Amber was listening. Her eyes were clouded and distant, just like when she had used magic earlier that day.

“You’re not mad at me?” she asked, surprising him.

“Of course not! Though I’d love to punch Brikkens.”

He had asked Gracewright at dinner whether she needed help that night, and she had looked surprisingly relieved by the offer. Now the professor waved to them from the greenhouse door, her glittering silver shawl reflecting the moonlight.

“I’ve just been rearranging the greenhouse,” she said, “so I’ll need your help outside this evening.” Pulling the greenhouse door closed behind her, Gracewright crossed the lawn to join Tristan and Amber. “Auras tend to glow brightest under a full moon, so both of you should be able to distinguish magical plants from the regular varieties. I’m hoping to use whatever you find to restock the greenhouse, so be sure to dig up the roots as well.”

Tristan glanced at Amber, who nodded dreamily.

“I’m in desperate need of your assistance just now,” Gracewright continued, lowering her voice. “If you each put in three hours of good work tonight, I’ll give you credit for six. Sound good?”

“Thanks,” Tristan said fervently.

Amber had already wandered off into the forest, her dark coat and jeans melting against the black trees—Tristan could only make out her silver hair now, a small moonbeam against the soft darkness of the forest. He hurried after her.

“What was that about?” he asked. “Do you think Gracewright isn’t telling us something? Why does she need our help so desperately?”

Amber stopped abruptly. “I wonder...do you think one of the students has stolen plants from her?”

“But why would anyone do that?”

“To cause trouble?”

Tristan picked a clump of pine needles from a tree and started pulling them in half, one by one, thinking hard. “It does sound like the sort of thing Damian or Zeke would do. But why hasn’t anyone gotten in trouble?”

Amber did not reply.

“You know what? Once we’ve collected a few plants, let’s sneak over to the back of the greenhouses and see if we can figure out what’s wrong.”

He was surprised when Amber agreed without question.

They continued deeper into the forest, Tristan still pulling apart pine needles, until Amber stopped and dropped to her knees.

“I can’t see anything,” Tristan said. “I’m really bad with plants. I can hardly even see the aura of the forest.”

“You simply need to learn how to look. Concentrate now, just like this morning.”

Tristan didn’t know what he was supposed to concentrate on, so instead he tried emptying his mind. Before him, Amber was digging something from the ground, though it was so dark he couldn’t even distinguish where the decaying forest floor ended and the plant began.

From far away came the melancholy hooting of an owl; he followed the hollow note until it faded, until the only sound was the wind sighing through the pines. When he brushed his hair off his face, he caught the fresh scent of pine on his fingers. He looked down, running his eyes across the featureless dirt—and froze.

Ringling the base of the closest pine lay a wreath of glowing blue leaves speckled with white flowers.

“Whoa.” Tristan dropped to his knees beside the plant, afraid the glow would fade if he blinked. “So what is this, anyway?”

Amber’s lips twitched. “I understand magic, not plants. I have no idea.”

Just as he was easing a section of leaves from the earth, Tristan heard voices from the clearing.

“Who’s that?” he whispered, pausing with one hand in the dirt. One of the voices sounded like Merridy, and the others must belong to professors as well. “Let’s see what they’re up to.”

Amber nodded and crept closer to the clearing, slipping from the shadow of one tree to the next—if her white hair caught a stray moonbeam, it would give them away at once. Abandoning his plant, Tristan followed.

By the time they came within sight of the clearing, the teachers were halfway to the greenhouse. After the darkness of the forest, the direct moonlight seemed bright as a streetlamp. Tristan easily recognized dark-haired Alldusk—looking more like a vampire than ever in the silvery light—and bald, mustached Delair accompanying Merridy. Tristan and Amber followed them around the clearing, staying well within the shelter of the trees.

Gracewright emerged from the greenhouse as the other professors arrived, almost glowing in the light that spilled from the open doorway.

“So good of you to come,” Gracewright said. “I trust (she lowered her voice and whispered something that sounded like ‘Drakewell’) doesn’t know about this?”

“Of course not,” Merridy said brusquely, heading through the greenhouse door. “Though why *you’re* afraid of him, of all people...”

“Fear has nothing to do with this, Darla.” Gracewright’s wispy white hair bobbed as she shook her head fiercely. “I just think we ought to observe caution, as long—” She pulled the greenhouse door closed behind her, cutting off the end of her sentence.

Cursing under his breath, Tristan ran around to the back of the greenhouse, Amber close behind. The trees brushed right up against the rear of the greenhouse, so he crouched in the shadow of a towering pine and brought his face close to the foggy glass. After trying for a moment to pick up the professors’ voices, Tristan noticed a small pane of broken glass higher off the ground. He stood cautiously, trying not to rustle the dry mulch, and peered through the cracked pane.

The greenhouse had been completely torn apart. The long wood table that spanned the room had collapsed, as though someone had chopped it in half with an axe. The ground was strewn with wreckage, both dirt and shards of pottery from the flowerpots that had lined the walls, and mixed among this were shredded leaves from the plants that had hung from the ceiling.

The professors were silent and ashen, gazing around the room. Merridy twisted her hands together and kept glancing over her shoulder, as though she expected Drakewell to swoop down from the ceiling. When she peered at the broken pane, Tristan barely managed to duck out of sight in time.

“I do worry this school is not as secure as it once was,” Alldusk said gravely. “Keeping the location secret only goes so far, especially now that satellite imaging can map even the most remote wilderness. Perhaps we should look into a few additional safety measures.”

“The caves are thoroughly protected,” said Professor Delair.

Tristan got back to his feet and chanced another look through the broken pane. Amber stood a few paces back, listening with her lips parted and her eyes wide.

“Thank you, Osric,” Gracewright said tiredly, “but the caves are the least of our worries. Unless you’ve run into a colony of trolls or some other figment of your imagination, there is no way we could be attacked from underground.” She looked unhappily around the greenhouse; even her flyaway hair seemed to droop.

Delair shrugged. “I was merely suggesting that certain metallic compounds could be arranged into a defensive barrier. Of course, this method needs a good deal of work, and it may—”

“*Thank* you.” Gracewright’s tone was firm this time. “Unless you have something relevant to contribute, you’re welcome to return to your coffee. I’m very sorry I disturbed you.”

Shaking his head, Delair shuffled to the door.

When Delair was gone, Gracewright sank into a chair whose back had been smashed and put her head in her hands, looking smaller than ever. “I don’t understand,” she said sadly. “Nothing was stolen! Why would someone want to destroy this place?”

“What about the kids?” Merridy asked, looking at Alldusk for support. “Remember, most of them were criminals before they came here.”

Alldusk put his hands in the pockets of his black coat and studied Merridy. “I don’t think it was any of them,” he said at last. “This is their new home—I don’t see why they would try to sabotage it.”

“You don’t know them that well,” Merridy whispered. “It was different seeing them straight out of detention centers and jails—I doubt you would have recognized most of them.”

Alldusk sighed. “I’d like to think they have changed.”

“I agree with Brinley,” Gracewright said. “They’re not evil, Darla. Perhaps they were mean at first, but now they’re polite and obedient for the most part.”

“For the *most* part,” Merridy insisted. Her face had gone pale.

Alldusk cleared his throat. “You’ll need help putting this back together, I assume?”

“Yes, of course,” Gracewright said. “I should have enough to supply your class for a few more days, but after that, you may need to stick with minerals for a while. Tristan and Amber came to work off their punishment earlier tonight, so I’ve put them to work finding new magical plants.”

Alldusk chuckled. “I heard about the lemon tree.”

Something brushed against Tristan’s shoulder—he jumped back in surprise and tripped. Catching himself on a pine bough, he turned to see what had startled him. It was Amber.

“Don’t do that!” Tristan whispered. “Do you want us to get caught?”

Amber cringed. “I just thought we should keep searching for plants. Otherwise we might be out all night.”

She was right. Tristan set off into the forest, heading away from the light spilling from the greenhouse until he could no longer hear the professors’ voices. Several times he glanced back, just to be sure Amber was following him; her footsteps made no sound on the decaying pine needles.

At last they stopped, and Amber tilted her head back, white skin and hair silvery in the moonlight. Tristan was about to ask what she thought about what they had overheard when Amber said, “Can you see the moon’s aura?”

Tristan stepped back until he could see the full face of the moon, nestled between pine boughs. “You mean the white glow? Isn’t that just the sun reflecting off its surface?”

Amber shook her head. “The true light doesn’t extend so far. That white glow is the moon’s aura.”

“Why can’t anyone else see the magic vapors in chemistry? Why are we able to use magic, and no one else can?”

Amber tilted her head at him. “You answered that yourself, only this morning. You told Leila you had practice controlling your thoughts.”

Tristan hadn’t realized Amber had been listening. “Does everything have an aura?”

“Everything real.”

Tristan didn’t bother to ask what she meant by this. “Who do you think attacked the greenhouse? Why don’t the professors want to report it to Drakewell?”

Amber gave him a speculative look. “I don’t know. Both creation and destruction are bound up with magic—it can be used for evil as much as good. I think whoever attacked the greenhouse wants to either destroy the Underground Academy or stop us from using magic.”

After studying Tristan for another moment, Amber turned and began threading her way through the trees. Though she kept her face turned toward the moon, like a flower hungry for sunlight, she stopped every few steps and lifted a plant from the earth. Tristan had no idea which way they’d come, so he trailed behind Amber, squinting at the ground in search for the faint, elusive auras.

He wanted to tell Leila what he had seen and heard. She might have more ideas. He could not think who might have attacked their school—were there evil magicians somewhere in the world, seeking to overthrow the professors at the Underground Academy? How many magicians were out there, anyway?

Or had one of the students destroyed the greenhouse just to cause trouble? He wouldn’t put it past Damian or Zeke.

By the time the moon had risen directly overhead, casting shadows like the noon sun on a cloudy

day, Tristan was sure they'd been outside for three hours at least. "I think we're done," he said softly.

Amber paused, looking startled. Then she nodded, cast a final glance at the moon, and turned back toward the school. She hugged an overflowing bundle of plants to her chest, at least double what Tristan had managed to find.

It seemed like ages before they reemerged in the clearing. The lights were still on in the greenhouse—when Tristan knocked, Gracewright came to the door a second later, clutching a broom and wiping dirt from her forehead.

"Thank you so much," she said, slumping against the doorframe. "You can set those down right here." She waved to the stone step where Tristan stood. "Sorry—the greenhouse is a bit of a mess right now. I'll check you off for six hours. Sleep well." She sounded as though she had a cold; Tristan wondered if she'd been crying.

An instant later, Gracewright shut the door in his face.

Chapter 10: The Avalanche

Tristan did not have a chance to recount what he'd seen to Leila until their environmental studies class at the end of the day. They were orienteering in the forest again—this time Merridy led each student, blindfolded, to a different part of the forest and trusted them to deduce their location and find their way back by matching the mountains to the topo maps each carried—and Tristan cheated slightly, peeking from under his blindfold to see which direction Leila was led.

When he shoved his way between two towering pines to find her muttering to herself with her map spread across her knees, she glowered at him. “How did you find me so fast? And where is your map?”

“Never mind that,” Tristan said hurriedly. “Listen, when Amber and I were out helping Gracewright last night, we overheard the professors talking. The greenhouse has been attacked.”

Leila tossed her map aside and Tristan took a seat beside her. As he recounted as closely as possible what he had heard, her eyebrows drew together.

“But what I don’t understand,” Tristan said, “is why they haven’t reported it to Drakewell. It sounded like only the four of them—Gracewright, Alldusk, Merridy, and Delair—were in on it.”

Leila frowned. “Maybe they wanted to protect the students. I bet Drakewell would blame one of us, but that doesn’t make sense, does it?”

“Why not? We’re a bunch of criminals. Vandalizing stuff is what criminals do.”

“No.” Leila plucked absently at a pine bough. “I mean, in the past, sure, but now that we’ve been to Juvie...I just don’t think any of us would be stupid enough to do something that would get us sent back. Whoever attacked the greenhouse had a good reason to do it.”

“So who was it, then?”

“Well, it was either someone inside the school or an enemy on the outside. Since they went for the greenhouse, which is above ground, I’m guessing it was someone on the outside.”

“Which means we have an enemy. Someone who found our school.”

Leila nodded. “Probably. But we know so little about the magic world. I was under the impression it was just our professors and whoever else they trained, but maybe there are other schools around the world—other magicians. Rivals, or enemies.” She tossed away her handful of pine needles and stood. “Come on, let’s find our way back.”

They studied the map together, Tristan adjusting his compass until he thought he knew which way to go, and then set off at a brisk pace through the forest. As Tristan glanced at the snowy ridges surrounding their valley for the umpteenth time, an idea occurred to him.

“If some enemy has found us, they’ve probably come over a ridge. It looks like the valley south of the lake is too narrow and steep for anyone to get through, so I bet they’ve crossed over that way.” He pointed at a ridge to the east, which was high but looked climbable. “If they came recently, their footsteps would still be showing in the snow.”

Leila stopped so abruptly Tristan walked into her. “Sorry,” she said. “But I bet you’re right! And Merridy keeps talking about all the great avalanche terrain over that way. We’ll probably be dropped over there for her test.”

They looked at each other.

“After we dig ourselves out, let’s head to the ridge and see if we can find any footprints,” Tristan said.

“Genius,” Leila said. “And if Merridy asks why we’re going the wrong way, we can say we read the map wrong.”

Less than a minute later, they broke from the trees into the clearing. Tristan stopped, surprised—he had forgotten to pay attention to the compass. They had made it back completely by accident.

* * *

At dinner that night, Merridy and Alldusk were missing from the great round teachers' table. Stranger still, Drakewell filled Merridy's usual seat, glowering at the other teachers and looking extremely out-of-place.

"What's he doing here?" Tristan asked in an undertone.

"Beats me," Rusty said.

The teachers ate in silence, looking just as confused by Drakewell's presence as the students were. Tristan, Leila, and Rusty did not dare speak; Tristan even took care to muffle the clank of his silverware against his plate.

Just as dinner was ending, Alldusk and Merridy came down the stairs into the Lair. Both looked windswept and upset. Alldusk stalked across the ballroom, Merridy hurrying close behind, until they reached the eating platform and stopped in front of Drakewell.

"This is unacceptable," Alldusk said harshly. "Since when were you authorized to act without the consent of your colleagues?"

Drakewell's eyes flashed. "Do not speak of these things in front of the students."

Merridy cleared her throat. "Maybe they should know some of it. I mean..."

"That's true," Alldusk said. "The students have a *right* to know." He slammed his fist on the table for emphasis.

Tristan was surprised to see Alldusk so riled—he never raised his voice in class.

Alldusk turned to face the students. "Magic is dangerous," he said carefully, though Tristan could see the anger in his dark eyes. "It can be very destructive if not properly regulated. Now, when we came here, we agreed that preserving the natural order was more important than adhering to any individual's moral code, but—"

"Enough." Drakewell's voice shook with fury. "Brinley, Darla, come to my office. We need to talk." Standing abruptly, he swept from the ballroom.

"What's happened?" Tristan asked softly, catching Alldusk's eye. Was this about the greenhouse?

Alldusk crossed to Tristan's table and leaned forward. "I wish I could give you a real answer," he whispered. "Don't mention I said this, but—there was a huge avalanche earlier today, not far from this school. It destroyed an entire village."

Merridy put a hand on Alldusk's shoulder; the gesture was surprisingly intimate. "We should go," she said quietly. "Professor Drakewell should not be kept waiting."

"Wait," Leila said. "What about your test? Is it still happening?"

Merridy glanced at Alldusk before nodding. "Yes. It will be completely safe with us on hand to supervise."

* * *

At last the Friday of Merridy's practical test arrived. Their other classes were cancelled for the day, and Merridy informed them they had until sunset to return to the academy.

No further snow had fallen since the night of the full moon, so Tristan and Leila still planned to sneak away from the site of the avalanche and hunt for traces of anyone entering their valley.

Tristan's apprehension had increased after hearing of the avalanche in the nearby village—wrapped up in preparation for the test and curiosity about their attacker, he had almost forgotten they would be facing a deadly disaster—but he tried to push it from his mind.

Merridy woke the students before dawn, turning on every light in the bunkroom—Tristan burrowed deeper into his blankets, clinging to the fragments of a good dream.

“No one said we had to start the test in the middle of the night,” Cassidy moaned from the opposite side of the room.

“It might take all day,” Merridy said sharply. “Anyone who is not in the ballroom in the next fifteen minutes will receive an hour of punishment.”

Groaning, Tristan rolled from bed, nearly missing the rungs on his way down the ladder, and joined the bleary-eyed students stumbling to the bathrooms.

He had no clothes apart from the jeans, shirt, and coat that comprised his school uniform, which would do little to insulate him against the snow, but he pulled them on regardless. Maybe keeping himself from freezing to death was part of the test.

But he needn’t have worried—when he reached the ballroom, he spotted a stack of clothes and an ugly brown rucksack on each chair. Alldusk, Merridy, Gracewright, and Grindlethorn were already eating breakfast, and while Quinsley served hot chocolate and omelets, Merridy reminded the students one last time what they needed to think about during the avalanche.

“Your best bet is to avoid getting buried in the first place,” she said. “As soon as the avalanche begins, try to run to the side to escape the heaviest snow. If you do end up buried, we will come after you if you cannot dig yourselves free in five minutes.”

“What if we refuse to go?” Damian asked. “This is madness. I’m not getting myself killed in your stupid lesson.”

“Then you can take a zero on the exam,” Merridy snapped. “And thirty hours of punishment.”

Finley raised his hand. “And what if we fail the test?”

“Then you are likely to fail my class for the semester. As Professor Drakewell explained, you may not be allowed to remain at the Underground Academy if your grades are not high enough.”

Tristan swallowed. He was afraid he would lose his head completely and dig the wrong direction in the avalanche.

“Is there a prize for getting back first?” Rusty asked.

“No. However, you will have the rest of the day free once you return.”

Once they had finished eating—the omelet, though delicious, sat heavily in Tristan’s stomach—Merridy sent them back downstairs to change and sort through their supplies.

Tristan gratefully pulled on the new clothes—long underwear, a long-sleeved thermal shirt, thin ski pants, long wool socks, a wool hat and gloves, a fleece sweatshirt, and a waterproof down jacket—and dug through the backpack to see what supplies Merridy had given them. There were three glass jars for collecting earth magic, wrapped in layers of fleece padding; a compass; the same topographic map of the valley they always used in class; a small trowel; two home-baked energy bars; a full water bottle; and a rope.

“Hey, Leila.” Zeke was grinning slyly. “Come look at this.”

“No.”

Zeke crossed around the barrier, holding his backpack open. He made a beeline for Leila. “Go on, you’ve got to see this.”

When she peered into his messy rucksack, frowning, Zeke upended his water bottle over her head.

Leila shrieked and jumped back. Water gushed down her braid and drenched her shirt; she had not yet put on the waterproof jacket.

“You moron! I’m going to freeze to death out there!”

She flew at Zeke, who danced out of the way, laughing.

Tristan and Rusty grabbed her shoulders and restrained her with difficulty.

“Let go of me! I’m going to kill him!”

Rusty scooped up Leila's pack and the rest of her warm layers, and Tristan dragged her out of the bunkroom.

"Stop that!" she snapped, wrenching her arm from his grip. "I don't need your help. Zeke's going to regret ever coming near me, I swear..."

"Don't forget what we talked about," Tristan said, giving her a significant look. He had not mentioned their plans to search for the attacker to Rusty. "We can't let Zeke distract us."

"Sure. Easy for you to say." With a huff, Leila snatched her supplies back from Rusty and stomped up the stairs to the ballroom.

When Tristan and Rusty caught up with her, she was slumped in a chair with Quinsley sitting across from her. Leila's clothes and hair were steaming.

"Are you gonna be okay?" Rusty asked. "That was really mean of Zeke."

"Gerry's drying my clothes out," Leila said, and sure enough, Tristan spotted a small pile of gold marbles on the table in front of Quinsley. "I'm still going to kill Zeke, though."

It was seven o'clock by the time all the students returned to the ballroom, though the sun would not be rising until after eight. When Quinsley and Merridy led the way up the stairs, Tristan stopped abruptly at the doorway to the longhouse, startled. Beside him, Eli swore.

A helicopter sat in the meadow, lights blinking.

"What the hell?" Eli said. "We've got a plane *and* a helicopter?"

"I bet the teachers are millionaires," Leila whispered. "Maybe whoever attacked the greenhouse isn't a magician at all, just someone trying to steal their fortune."

"Will we all fit?" Hayley asked nervously.

"If we can't," Eli said, "we'll tie you to the tail and drag you behind."

Quinsley opened the helicopter doors and clambered up to the cockpit.

"How come you're the one flying this thing?" Damian asked indignantly.

"I *am* actually a licensed pilot. I didn't come get you at the start of the year just because I liked doing the extra work." Smile widening at the look on Damian's face, Quinsley pointed at each of the student in turn, counting them. "Now, if you'll climb on in, we can be off."

As he followed Trey up the ladder into the belly of the helicopter, Tristan realized why they were leaving so early—he could see nothing from the windows. This way Merridy could ensure they had no idea where they were when the test started.

The helicopter creaked as Alldusk, Merridy, Gracewright, and Grindlethorn climbed in. Tristan wondered how it could hold the weight of so many—maybe it was supported by magic.

By the light of Merridy's lamp, Tristan buckled himself in. Once everyone was seated, she extinguished the light, plunging them into darkness once more.

After a moment of silence, the helicopter blade began to spin overhead with a thunderous chop-chop-chop. It spun faster and faster until the nose dipped forward and they lifted off the ground. Tristan's stomach dropped.

As they flew, the sky began to lighten, though not enough for Tristan to recognize which mountain peaks they approached. Quinsley shone a spotlight on the ground below to find a safe place to land; less than ten minutes after they left the Lair, they settled onto a patch of snowy ground.

Merridy lit her lantern again. Hayley looked queasy, and Eli was grey in the face.

"Well, here we are," she said, her tone falsely bright.

They climbed down onto the snow, and Quinsley shut off the helicopter. Merridy had to shout to be heard over the slowing *thwap...thwap...thwap*.

"Just a little ways farther. Careful, mind your step."

She led the way up a rocky slope, approaching one of the peaks that towered stark white in the lightening dawn. They were above the treeline—the last scraggly pines lay a few hundred feet beyond the helicopter—and the snow underfoot had formed a thin, icy crust that snapped with each footstep.

The foot of the mountain was deceptively far; Tristan's legs burned as they climbed, and his breath seared his chest.

Pale pink began to line the edges of the wispy clouds, and the sky turned from grey to blue, though the sun still hid behind the peak ahead.

So they were heading east—Tristan thought he recognized the ridge he and Leila hoped to climb, though it looked different from this perspective.

When they stopped at last, he caught Leila's eye and jerked his head toward the ridge.

She nodded.

"Right." Merridy's voice quavered slightly. She cleared her throat; when she continued, her voice was firm. "The avalanche will take this path down the slope." She indicated an obvious bowl where snow hung ready to collapse. "Remember, this will be completely safe—the goal is to accustom yourselves with remaining calm in a crisis. If you will each come here, please—"

The students shuffled over to where she stood alongside Alldusk, Quinsley, Gracewright, and Grindlethorn.

One by one, she held a marble over the head of each student and let it dissipate into gold vapor. When Tristan's turn came, he felt the oddest sensation pass over him, as though his entire body was muffled in something insubstantial. The wind no longer grazed his skin, and the cold seemed less intense.

"There," Merridy said when she finished. "The air around each of you is now dense enough to cushion you from any impact during the avalanche. This will last around fifteen minutes."

Eyebrows raised, Leila punched Tristan in the arm—or at least, she tried to.

"Hey!" Tristan said instinctively, but Leila's fist never collided with his arm. Instead, it glanced off the air about two inches from his skin.

"Crazy," she said. This time she tried to poke Tristan's shoulder with one finger, but again, she was repelled before her finger came in contact with his coat.

Others were experimenting with this new power as well—Eli threw himself facedown onto an icy-looking snowdrift, and Tristan laughed to see Damian and Zeke wrestling with their hands firmly planted on nothing at all.

"Okay, enough messing around," Merridy said sharply. "Line up here, and make sure you can each put your arms straight out to the side without touching those nearest to you."

Tristan hurried to stake out a place on the southern end of the avalanche path, where he was closest to the ridge he and Leila wanted to explore and likely to escape the brunt of the impact. Before Leila could claim the place beside him, Rusty, Eli, and Trey moved into line. Leila was stuck in the middle of the avalanche path—she caught Tristan's eye and grimaced.

Tristan's heart was beating fast now, though he tried to think only of what would come after the avalanche. The snow waiting to crush them loomed far overhead, casting a deep shadow.

The professors lined up on either side of the avalanche path, standing well out of danger.

"This is where we find out they've just brought us here to kill us," Eli muttered.

Then Quinsley hurled something small in the direction of the unstable snow.

Tristan held his breath, waiting.

With an echoing *boom*, the dynamite exploded. Snow and rocks rocketed from the hillside.

For a long moment, nothing happened. Several small piles of snow crumbled down the hillside—Tristan's legs tensed, and it took a great effort to keep from fleeing.

Everything settled. Tristan breathed shallowly, afraid any movement would set off the avalanche.

Then, with a deep rumble like distant thunder, the hillside above began to shift.

Evangeline screamed and sprinted for the edge of the avalanche path. Her foot slipped on an icy patch, and she sprawled on the snow with a shriek.

As the whole mountainside sagged, Tristan took off running for the edge of the danger zone.

A rock tumbled loose underfoot, and he dropped to his knees, the impact cushioned by the dense air around him.

Snow and rocks rained down as the avalanche gained speed. A clump of hardened snow whalloped Tristan in the head, smashing him against the slope despite the cushioning spell, and then the whole ground was sliding away underfoot.

Tristan flailed for a handhold, but ice coated everything, and the few rocks that protruded were loose and skittered away beneath him. His knee slammed against a boulder—this time it hurt; was the cushioning spell weakening?—and he finally managed to shove his toe into a rock, slowing his fall. He hunched against the slope, shuddering and fighting to draw breath, and then—

WHAM!

The full force of the avalanche slammed into Tristan, smashing him backward with the force of a truck.

He screamed, but his voice was ripped away in the thunderous volley of snow and rocks.

He fell blindly, yelling until his throat was raw. Odd images flashed before his eyes in the flickering blackness—Leila smiling at him, Amber gazing up at the moon, Rusty and Eli laughing over a game of cards, Marcus slumped lifeless over the dashboard.

Then Tristan smashed to the ground, one leg wrenched beneath him. The snow pounded him against the rocks, slamming his head and ribs until he gasped for air.

At last the earth stilled.

Blackness pooled in his eyes, but he fought it; his mouth was filled with something bitter and grimy, something that pressed his throat closed so he could hardly breathe. He gagged and tried to spit out the filthy snow, but he couldn't even manage that much. He was pinned to the ground, the oppressive weight of the snow growing heavier by the second. Everything ached; he could hardly find his own arm beneath the crushing mass of snow.

Think, he ordered himself.

Merridy had told them to take a deep breath when the avalanche hit, so their inflated lungs would leave a larger space for movement, but it was too late for that. His ribs were close to collapsing beneath the weight of the snow.

From the rocks that dug into Tristan's legs and back, he knew the cushioning spell had worn off—still, he would likely be dead if not for it.

The next step was to dig a cavity around his face, so he could breathe while he tried to figure out which way was up and which was down. He remembered the trowel in his pack, but that was buried behind him.

He yanked at one of his arms, which sent a spasm running through him.

Now that the snow had settled, he could make out soft light filtering through—he must not be buried too deep.

Remembering Merridy's next piece of advice, he spat into the tiny space hollowed out by his warm breath. The spit fell forward—he was lying facedown.

This time, when he tugged at his arm, he managed to drag it into the larger cavity beneath his stomach. The air felt thinner than before; with each breath, his lungs seared.

Scrabbling his fingers against the snow, he dislodged a few more chunks and managed to shift incrementally to the side. The air grew staler still, wrenching at his lungs, and he tried not to breathe, though black spots danced before his eyes. It was so cold, the ice seeping through every layer.

Mustering the last of his strength, Tristan thrust his fist forward and smashed a hole through the snow above.

A stream of icy air swirled down to him, and he inhaled deeply, shuddering. Punching the hole wider still, he wrenched his body from the depression he'd created and shoved his way up onto the snow.

For a long time, he simply lay there, chest aching as he gulped down deep breaths of fresh air. “Well done, Tristan!” Alldusk shouted from far away. “Are you okay?”

Groaning, Tristan pulled himself into a sitting position. “Yeah, I’m fine,” he yelled back hoarsely. Every muscle ached, and he was sure his legs and chest would be mottled with bruises, but he did not want to draw attention.

Only a few students were visible in the jumbled debris of the avalanche. Rusty appeared to have run to the side and escaped most of the impact; he was now wading back in to help someone whose foot protruded from the snow. Amber was climbing up the center of the avalanche chute, not a trace of snow clinging to her clothes. Tristan guessed she had somehow deflected the avalanche so it did not hit her at all. Cailyn was digging her way determinedly from the snow, her usually springy blond curls bedraggled, and Zeke stood at the foot of the destruction, hurling snowballs at the rocks overhead.

Where was Leila? She had insisted they should meet on the ridge, rather than hike up together, or the teachers might accuse them of cheating. Had she already dug herself free and disappeared around the slope, or was she still trying to conserve oxygen beneath the crushing mass of snow?

Though worry squeezed at his chest, Tristan stood and limped out of the avalanche path. Despite the twinges and spasms that shot through him with every step, he could tell nothing was seriously injured.

He stopped beside Alldusk, whose eyes flicked between three unremarkable spots in the jumble of snow. Tristan guessed there were students buried in each.

“Are you definitely going to be able to rescue everyone else?” Tristan asked.

Alldusk spared a glance in Tristan’s direction, his eyes softening. “Don’t worry. In another minute, we’ll go after the others. They have nothing to worry about.”

Tristan nodded stiffly and limped on. Soon he reached a place where the mountainside turned sharply to the east; past that, he would no longer be able to see the remains of the avalanche.

He paused and watched as Trey and Damian struggled free. Leila, Eli, Hayley, Evangeline, and several of Damian’s friends had yet to emerge. He should hurry, disappear around the corner before the professors realized he was missing, but until Leila reappeared, he couldn’t tear his eyes from the destruction.

All at once, the professors waded into the avalanche debris. With shovels and magic that quickly melted the hardened snow to steam, they quickly freed the remaining students one by one. As soon as Tristan spotted Leila’s black braid and saw Quinsley helping her to her feet, the pressure on his chest eased.

He hurried around the corner and struck off toward the low ridge. Leila was fine; surely she would join him in minutes.

Now that he was no longer afraid, shame crept through him. Why had he panicked so badly? He had lost his mind. If he had just run to the side, he could have avoided the avalanche entirely. Instead he had lost his bearings as soon as he fell; terror had clouded his judgment and sent him flailing in the wrong direction.

Tristan kicked at a snowdrift, anger swelling in his throat.

If he had been able to think rationally, he might never have endangered his brother. Marcus might still be alive, and Tristan would be at home, working his way through a stack of painfully dull homework.

He stomped through the hardened snow, feet crunching with each step.

Maybe something good had come of his arrest. The Underground Academy was much more exciting than school—if hadn’t crashed the car and gone to Juvie, he would never have been recruited to learn magic.

Don’t even go there, Tristan thought furiously. *That’s a terrible thing to contemplate.*

Hating himself, he trudged on. Soon his path took him through a boulder field, snow concealing dangerous holes between the stones, and he slowed, picking his way carefully forward. Halfway through the boulder field, he heard a small intake of breath.

Tristan jumped, his foot sliding off the rock he stood on and wedging beneath a boulder. He seized the boulder to keep his balance and tried to work his foot free.

“Who’s there?” he asked warily. Was it the attacker?

A dark shape rose slowly from behind a boulder.

Tristan yanked his foot sharper than ever; his ankle wrenched painfully as it sprang free at last. He fumbled at his backpack, trying frantically to think of what he could use to defend himself. The rope and trowel would be no use against magic—

Then the figure turned.

It was Evangeline.

“Crap,” Tristan said weakly. “You scared me! What the hell are you doing here?” She was still supposed to be buried in the avalanche—how had she escaped so easily?

Evangeline blinked rapidly, backing away from Tristan. “I thought I saw a couple people on the ridge while we were hiking up, so I wanted to figure out who they were.” She gestured at the same ridge Tristan was headed for. “I stood off to the side so I didn’t get caught in the avalanche, and hid while the professors were watching the other students.”

“What did they look like?” Tristan asked urgently. He couldn’t believe his luck—if he found the actual attacker, the school would be safe. “Were they familiar? Did they look dangerous?”

Evangeline shook her head. “No. Tristan...can I trust you? Will you promise not to say anything to the professors?”

Tristan frowned at her. “What do you mean?”

“I’m afraid the professors will do something awful if they know. Maybe they’ll kill them.”

Tristan was nonplussed. Why did Evangeline want to protect a couple of people she had barely seen off in the distance? But he needed to know what she had found. “Sure. I promise I won’t tell the professors.”

“They—they were small,” she whispered. “They looked like children.”

Chapter 11: After the Test

Tristan cursed. “Come on. We need to get to them fast. If they’re actually kids, they won’t survive long out here.”

Leaning on the icy rocks, they stumbled through the boulder field as fast as possible. Tristan’s ankle kept twinging, though since his feet and lower legs were growing numb by the minute, he found it easy to ignore. When they reached the edge of the boulder field, they broke into a run, cutting a line uphill as they dashed for the ridge. Several times Tristan fell, landing hard on the icy snow, but each time he scrambled to his feet at once, hardly noticing the new bruises.

“Look!” Evangeline panted after a while. “There they are!”

Tristan staggered to a halt and tried to find what she was pointing at. It was not until the two dots moved that he was able to distinguish them from the jumble of rocks protruding from the snow. Evangeline had been right—they looked very small, bundled in so many layers they appeared to be walking marshmallows, and they were holding hands.

“But what are they doing here?” she asked, still breathing hard.

Tristan had the unpleasant feeling he knew where they had come from, but he said nothing.

This time when Evangeline broke into a run, she quickly outstripped Tristan.

“Stay where you are!” she shouted. Her voice echoed against the mountainsides. “We’re coming to help you!”

The two small figures stopped moving and appeared to grow smaller still—they must have sat down.

Tristan dashed after Evangeline. If they didn’t reach the children fast enough, they would freeze to death out here, layers or no. And if they were survivors of the avalanche that destroyed their village, as Tristan suspected, he was amazed they had lasted this long out in the elements.

As they climbed higher, the wind strengthened, digging its fingers into Tristan’s neck and raking his cheeks with ice. Sweat soaked his thermal layers; when they stopped moving, it would freeze and drain the warmth from his core.

It felt like hours before they reached the children. Would the professors notice their absence, or would they assume Tristan and Evangeline were on the way back to the Lair?

At last they staggered to a halt, gasping for breath. The two children looked up at Tristan, both red-faced from the cold, while he clutched at the stitch in his chest. They were much younger than he had expected, no older than five or six; he could not believe they had made it over the ridge unaided. Both were blond and shaggy-haired, the older a boy, the younger a girl.

Evangeline knelt before them. “We’re here to help you,” she said softly. “Can you walk?”

The girl nodded, her eyes round and sparkling with tears.

“My name is Evangeline—you can call me Evvie. I’m going to take care of you now.” She helped them to their feet and started down the hill.

“Wait,” Tristan whispered. “We don’t even know how to get back to the Lair from here. And what are you planning?” He hardly knew Evangeline, and could not guess what she was thinking. “I thought you didn’t want to tell the professors about them—do you think they’ll be safer around a bunch of criminals?”

“I’ll figure something out. But we can’t let them die here.” Evangeline took the girl’s hand. “And I’m not a criminal,” she snapped.

“Wait—what?”

“I’ll tell you later.” Evangeline jerked her head at the boy, who was staring at her. “You can figure

out the map and catch up with us.”

While Evangeline skidded and half-ran down the side of the ridge, now holding the hands of both children, Tristan dug out his map and struggled to unfold it in the strengthening wind. The school was not marked, but he knew where it lay from their previous orienteering assignments, and that—a thin line wreathed on either side by contour lines—had to be the ridge. Unfortunately, it was hard to tell exactly where he stood; with no trees to gauge the distance by, he could be anywhere from a quarter of the way to halfway between the two peaks flanking the ridge.

If they got hopelessly lost in the forest, he would have to trust the professors would find them. At least the valley floor was not snowy, and the pines would protect them from the icy wind.

Fumbling with his compass, Tristan took a quick reading before tearing off down the hillside after Evangeline and the children.

He caught up with them at the treeline, where gnarled, stick-thin pines struggled to maintain their hold on the steep, rocky ground.

“How did you get here?” Evangeline was asking.

The girl sniffed. “Daddy took us hunting all the time. There was a town over a ridge we wanted to get to, b-but I think we went the wrong way.” She sniffed again and wiped her eyes with her hand. “Now we’re gonna f-freeze to death out here. D-Daddy always said we shouldn’t go out alone.”

“No, you won’t freeze,” Evangeline said gently. “We’re nearly to somewhere warm and safe. You’ve done so well.”

The little girl stumbled on a root and fell facedown into the patchy snow, her hand ripping free from Evangeline’s grasp. Bursting into tears, she lay where she fell.

“Can you carry her?” Evangeline asked Tristan.

He grimaced. “I’ll try.” Though the girl was small, they still had a long way to walk back to the Lair.

Evangeline pulled the girl back to her feet and gave her a hug. “Don’t worry. I promise I’ll keep you safe. Can you climb onto Tristan’s back?”

Handing his pack and compass over to Evangeline, Tristan hoisted the girl onto his back. His numb hands felt clumsy and useless; almost at once, the girl began slipping. He struck out through the trees at a hurried pace, hoping he could make it back before he dropped her.

Several times they had to stop so Tristan could rest his aching back, and after a while, the boy started tripping every few steps. Evangeline took the girl on her back, and Tristan lifted the boy, who was several pounds heavier than his sister. It was all Tristan could do not to collapse as he staggered forward. At least snow no longer covered the ground, so he was able to find firmer footing on the decaying pine needles.

The sun was setting by the time they stumbled across the top of the hill leading down to the lake. By following this, they were able to find the carved native arch marking the entrance to the Underground Academy.

Tristan and Evangeline set the children down just inside the forest.

“What now?” Tristan asked. “How are we going to get them inside without anyone seeing?”

Evangeline shuffled from one foot to another. “I don’t know.”

“Maybe they can hide up here until everyone is asleep.”

“They’ll freeze to death!”

Tristan knelt in front of the children. “If we bring you a blanket and something hot to drink, can you stay up here for a few hours and keep quiet?”

“Yeah,” the boy said in a tiny voice.

“Do you have any relatives we could contact?” Tristan asked, though he had no idea how he would get ahold of a phone or computer. He had seen no trace of technology since he had arrived at the Underground Academy.

“They all lived where we did,” the boy whispered. “They’re gone, aren’t they?”

“I don’t know.”

After Tristan and Evangeline settled the children into Gracewright’s indoor garden, which was warmer than the outside air, they crept down the stairs into the Lair.

Any hope of sneaking down to the bunkroom without being seen evaporated the moment they passed through the barrier on the stairs—a storm of shouting and cheering broke out.

Once his eyes adjusted to the bright lights in the ballroom, Tristan realized every professor and student was gathered on the dining platform—even Drakewell and Delair were present. Leila’s right leg was encased in a bandage, Zeke’s left eye was blackened, and Eli had a grazed forehead, but the students looked otherwise unharmed.

“Oh, thank goodness,” Merridy said faintly, slumping back in her chair.

“I still cannot understand how you lost track of your students,” Drakewell said coldly. “The situation was well-controlled, and there were enough professors present to keep an eye on the proceedings.”

Uncomfortable with the stares, Tristan pressed his hair over the left side of his face and hurried to his usual seat between Leila and Rusty. His cheeks and hands tingled and began to burn as they thawed in the warmth of the Lair.

“What happened?” Leila whispered. “What was Evvie doing with you?”

“Later,” Tristan said. “Where were you?”

She gestured dramatically at her leg. “I tore something in my knee. Obviously. Oh, and I made Zeke pay for what he did this morning.”

“That black eye is your work?”

Grinning, Leila nodded. “He tried to follow me, but I threw a rock at him. Not a bad aim, if I say so myself.”

Zeke seemed to realize he was the subject of their conversation, because he shot an angry look their way.

“What took you two so long to return?” Alldusk asked from the professors’ table.

Tristan gave a start. “Oh—uh, I went the wrong way. I had to climb a ridge to figure out where I was, and I ran into Evangeline there. But we’re fine.”

“Did you manage to collect any marbles?” Alldusk asked.

Tristan swore. “I completely forgot. Sorry.”

“It’s fine,” Merridy said weakly, still slumped low in her chair. “You managed to dig your way out and navigate back to the academy. You will still receive full marks.”

From the way Eli glared at Tristan, he guessed several of his fellow classmates had failed the test.

“Dinner is ready, if anyone wants to eat,” Quinsley said from the kitchen doorway. “You can go shower and warm up first, if you want.”

“No, I’m fine,” Tristan said quickly. How was he supposed to sneak back upstairs and make sure the children were okay?

Evangeline found a chance to slip away as soon as Quinsley served their dinner of hearty chili in bread bowls, cheese dripping down the sides. She made an excuse about forgetting something in the meadow and hurried away from the table, something Tristan guessed was a mug of hot cider hidden beneath her jacket.

When the ballroom began to empty, Tristan lingered, telling Leila and Rusty to head down without him. Evangeline had returned from the meadow empty-handed, and she nodded when he caught her eye.

Once they were the only ones remaining in the ballroom, Tristan muttered, “Where are we supposed to hide them?”

Evangeline reddened slightly. “I thought—I mean, we’d get in huge trouble if we were caught,

but—what about those tunnels? Maybe there are hidden rooms somewhere.”

“Yeah, that’s probably our best chance. Do you think we can get them down now?”

“We should try. The girl’s asleep—I’m afraid she won’t wake up if she gets any colder. And, Tristan—” Evangeline met his eyes briefly before looking away, reddening further. Tristan thought he caught a look of disgust flash across her face.

Angry, Tristan flattened his hair over his scars. He could imagine what he looked like to Evvie, especially if she was telling the truth and she was not a criminal.

“I don’t think you should be involved after this,” she said at last. “I can look after them and get them to safety on my own. The fewer people who know, the less likely we are to be caught.”

“Right,” Tristan said, with an attempt at nonchalance. “Fine.” He couldn’t say why he cared so much about Evvie’s dismissal—he had enough to worry about without trying to keep a pair of helpless children safe—but he thought he recognized fear in her voice. Evvie was scared of him. That hurt.

Both children were asleep and shivering lightly when Tristan and Evvie pushed open the door to Gracewright’s longhouse garden. The mug of apple cider lay on its side, empty.

“Aspen. Drew.” Evvie shook the children lightly. They groaned and stretched, rubbing their eyes.

Each scooping one into their arms, Tristan and Evvie staggered across the meadow and back down into the Lair, where they tiptoed down the stairs until they passed the bunkroom.

“Here,” Evvie whispered. “Let’s look down this tunnel.”

Once they were deep enough into the roughly-hewn tunnel that Tristan could no longer see, he set the boy—Drew—gently onto his feet. Dashing back to fetch one of the enchanted lamps from the bunkroom hallway, he rejoined Evvie and the children.

“I’m hungry,” Aspen said, reaching for Evvie’s hand.

“Wait.” Tristan still wore his rucksack from the test—digging through it, he unearthed his uneaten energy bars. Aspen and Drew devoured them as they continued deeper into the tunnel.

As they rounded yet another corner, the ground sloping gently away underfoot, the dank, cloying odor of decaying wood rose in the stale air.

“Look,” Tristan said. A solid wood door sat in the rough stone wall.

While Evvie held her lamp high, Tristan leaned his weight on the door. It was unlocked, though it stuck when Tristan pushed at it; he had to shove his shoulder hard against the door before it swung inward.

The room beyond was huge, double the size of the bunkroom—the lamplight barely reached the far side. Vaguely circular, the place was empty aside from a crumbling bookshelf.

“This will work,” Evvie said, though her face was pinched with worry. “Wait here. We’ll be back with blankets and things.”

Eyes wide and distrustful, the children settled beside the door, knees to their chests, backs against the wall.

“Don’t lock us in,” Aspen said, her voice thin and quavering.

“Of course not,” Evvie said. “I promise we’ll take care of you. We won’t hurt you.”

Leaving the lamp with the children, Tristan and Evvie felt their way blindly back up the tunnel, hands trailing along the rough walls.

“When you said earlier that you’re not a criminal,” Tristan said tentatively, “what did you mean?”

He wished he could see Evvie’s expression—she was quiet for a long time before responding. “Miss Merridy explained it to me when she invited me to study here. She said the school needed someone without a criminal background for a very important job.”

“So you *knew* you’d be studying with criminals, and you came here anyway?” Tristan couldn’t believe it.

“I hated my foster family,” Evvie whispered. “I was scared, but I was desperate to escape.”

“And do you regret coming here?”

Evvie did not respond. Tristan realized again how little he knew about her—had she made friends in the months since they arrived? He had seen her spending time with Hayley and Cailyn, but now he thought about it, she was alone as often as not.

He felt an unexpected surge of pity and protectiveness. He wanted to prove to Evvie that he was not evil, regardless of what he had done. He would look out for her, even if no one else did.

“You can go to bed now,” Evvie said as they turned into the marble-lined hallway, blinking in the bright lights. “I’ll get everything for the kids. I’m going to tell one of the professors, and they can help send them somewhere safe. Don’t mention them again, okay?”

“Yeah, sure,” Tristan mumbled. What would it take to earn Evvie’s trust?

Chapter 12: The Secret Underground Bedroom

Tristan woke the next morning to someone screaming.

He bolted upright. Everything was dark. “Whassamatter?” he mumbled, throwing off his sheets.

The scream died abruptly, and a girl’s voice began shouting.

“I’m going to murder you, Zeke Elwood!”

It was Leila.

“Leila, what—”

She didn’t notice Tristan. “You’re a wretched, hateful...where’s that damn knife?”

Frightened, Tristan jumped down from his bed and dashed over to Leila’s bunk. “What’s happe—”

Tristan stopped abruptly. Rusty had blown one of the lamps to life, and by its glow Tristan could see exactly what was wrong. Leila’s hair—her beautiful black hair, long and sleek and always trapped in a braid—was gone. The entire plait had been shorn off, leaving nothing in its place but ragged curls.

Tristan opened and closed his mouth, gaping.

“Get away from me, Tristan,” Leila said in a low, threatening voice. Lurching to her feet, she grabbed a pencil from her bedside table and brandished it like a dagger. A moment later she was hurtling toward the dividing wall.

“Don’t!”

Tristan dove after Leila. When they both went crashing to the floor, he wrapped his arms around Leila’s shoulders to restrain her. “You—can’t—do anything,” he grunted. Leila struggled and jabbed him in the chest with her elbow.

Several lights on the other side of the room were now glowing. Zeke and Damian stood beside their bunk, laughing so hard they weren’t making any sound.

The other students from Tristan’s side of the room were starting to gather behind Tristan and Leila, curious and almost protective. Then Rusty stalked over and stood above Tristan.

“Give me that.” Rusty yanked the pencil out of Leila’s hand. He tossed it to the ground and strode forward, glaring at Zeke.

“What—d’you think—you’re gonna do?” Zeke choked out, still laughing. He collapsed on his bed and pounded the mattress.

Without a word, Rusty drew back his fist and punched Zeke full in the face.

There was a hideous crack, and Zeke howled.

As blood dribbled down Zeke’s upper lip, Damian’s laughter died at once.

Without pausing to wipe away the blood, Zeke lunged at Rusty, yelling. He slammed his fists into Rusty’s his stomach and bashed his shoulder against Rusty’s jaw.

Rusty roared in pain and lashed out at Zeke, pounding an elbow into Zeke’s chest.

Then Damian threw himself into the fight—the three boys crashed to the floor, writhing and kicking in a furious tangle.

Tristan’s hands were numb with fury. Grabbing the edge of a desk, he wrenched himself to his feet and threw himself at Damian.

As Rusty wriggled free of the tangle, Tristan’s fist connected with Damian’s ribs.

Leila hurtled into the fight right behind him. With a shrill curse, she rammed her knuckles into Zeke’s unbruised eye.

Zeke screamed.

Taking advantage of his distraction, something slammed Tristan in the stomach—he fell backward, arms flailing, and cracked his head against the frame of Zeke’s bunk. A spasm of pain ripped through him, blacking out his vision.

He couldn’t think.

Dimly he noticed a hot trickle of blood seeping down his forehead; he tried to blink away the darkness, hoping the blood wasn’t his own.

“STOP!”

The roar came from the doorway. Still dazed, Tristan tilted his head back to see who had shouted.

It was Drakewell.

The headmaster stood just inside the bunkroom, his sunken eyes flashing as he watched the brawl. Even half-conscious, Tristan was frightened.

Leila punched Zeke one last time before the five of them broke apart, crawling and stumbling away from one another. Wiping his forehead on his sleeve, Tristan struggled to his feet and nearly fell over again as the blood surged to his head. He clutched a bookshelf, waiting for his vision to clear.

Rusty and Zeke had definitely taken the worst beatings—blood was smeared across Rusty’s battered chin, and Zeke now squinted past two swelling black eyes. His nose was still dripping blood.

“Damn you,” Zeke spat at Leila. He no longer looked handsome.

With a rueful smile, Leila stood and helped Rusty to his feet. “Thanks.”

He grinned and licked blood off his lip.

Once Tristan, Leila, Rusty, Zeke, and Damian had changed out of their bloodied, torn pajamas, they were patched up under Grindlethorn’s irritable care. Not one of them dared to speak.

Drakewell was waiting for them in the hallway, face white with fury. Tristan shifted on his feet between Leila and Rusty, his head throbbing.

“Despicable behavior,” Drakewell spat. “Are you nothing more than criminals? Prove that you can do better. *Prove* that you are more than delinquents, or you will be treated as such. There is no place for criminals here.”

Each of them received twenty hours of punishment, and they were immediately put to work cleaning every toilet in the school. Between worrying that Drakewell would send him back to Juvie and regretting that he hadn’t been able to hit Damian and Zeke more, Tristan wished there weren’t so many bathrooms in the school.

Tristan and Leila started out cleaning the boys’ bathrooms, their jeans rolled up to the knees and their shoes kicked to the side.

“This damn magic is completely useless,” Tristan said, sloshing water irritably over a black scuff mark. “What’s the point of it if we’ve still got to clean by hand?”

“Hmm.” Leila paused with her scrubbing brush in the bucket of sudsy water. “Do you think my hair could be grown back magically?”

“Probably,” Tristan said, not looking up, “though you look nice with it short, too. Are you going to ask someone to grow it for you?”

Leila shook her head. “I’ll keep it like this. I just wanted to know I had a choice.”

* * *

Rusty joined them at lunch, complaining that the bathroom he’d just spent hours cleaning looked as though it hadn’t been touched in centuries.

“You should’ve seen the mold! I’ve probably got some awful lung disease now.”

Tristan had no energy to complain—exhaustion from the previous day’s hike had caught up to him, and every muscle ached. He had bruises on top of his bruises; even sitting down felt like torture.

“How’d you do on the test, anyway?” he asked Rusty.

“I made it back okay, but I couldn’t see the stupid magic vapor. I didn’t manage to get any marbles.”

Tristan shrugged. “I doubt anyone but Amber figured that out. I was too busy trying to stay alive.”

“What happened with you, Triss?” Leila asked in an undertone. “You vanished for hours, and when you showed up, you were with *Evvie*. What the hell were you doing?”

“Are you jealous?” Tristan whispered, quietly enough that Rusty would not hear.

“Of course not! It’s just—I thought we had a plan, but you didn’t even bother to see what happened when I didn’t show up. Oh, and I don’t like Evvie. She acts like she’s so much better than the rest of us.”

“Listen,” Tristan said softly. “I’ve got something to tell you. Can you promise not to share it with anyone?” He looked at Rusty.

“I’m not stupid,” Rusty said. “I won’t say anything. Promise.”

Leila raised her eyebrows at Tristan as if to say, *Who would I tell?*

“First of all, I thought we agreed to meet at the ridge,” Tristan said to Leila. “You can’t get mad at me for doing exactly what I was supposed to. I would’ve gone back for you when you didn’t show up, but then I ran into Evvie.”

Leila snorted; Tristan ignored her.

“She said she’d seen someone on the ridge, and I thought it might be the attacker we were looking for. So we raced over to catch up with whoever it was before they could slip away.”

“Was it?”

Tristan shook his head. “It was a pair of children. Their homes were destroyed in the avalanche Alldusk told us about last week, and they’d somehow made it all the way here.”

“Oh my god.”

“They were about to freeze to death, so we had to get them back to the Lair. Evvie was afraid Drakewell might hurt them if he knew they were here, so we hid them last night. Evvie’s going to ask one of the professors to help get them to safety. She doesn’t want me to have anything else to do with them.”

“Oh my god,” Leila said again.

“I don’t get it,” Rusty said. “What do you mean about an attacker?”

Tristan ignored him. “But what about you?” he asked Leila. “How did you get hurt? I thought the spell was supposed to protect us.”

She shook her head. “It wore off, or maybe I just fell the wrong way. My knee twisted underneath me, and I couldn’t pull it free. I didn’t manage to dig myself out until Gerry came to help.”

“Yeah, I saw,” Tristan said. “I didn’t leave until I was sure you were okay.”

“Well, thanks for that, anyway,” Leila said grudgingly.

* * *

Leila didn’t show up in the bunkroom that night, and when Tristan found her helping Quinsley serve pancakes the next morning, he noticed someone had evened out the ends of her now-short hair. Tristan thought it looked nice curling delicately around her chin. Though her knee was still bandaged, she had only a slight limp.

“Where were you last night?” he asked. “I was worried.”

“I don’t feel comfortable sharing a bunkroom with Zeke. Who knows what he’ll do next?” She sighed. “Gerry let me sleep in a storage room near the kitchen. He dug up a mound of blankets to make a bed.”

“We need to find a new bedroom,” Tristan said. “I’m going to figure something out. I promise.”

You can't sleep in a storage room forever.”

Leila smiled grimly. “Thanks.”

When he ventured outside to see if Gracewright needed help in the greenhouse, he found the meadow buried in two feet of fresh snow. Fat flakes still drifted down; the mountains had vanished beneath a curtain of white.

He flew back down the stairs, grinning. Their previous dustings of snow had been nothing compared to this.

“Leila! Rusty! You've got to see this!”

Abandoning their half-eaten breakfasts, Leila and Rusty hurried after him, Rusty taking the stairs two at a time.

“Wow,” Rusty breathed as he waded into the snow. He lifted his head and closed his eyes, mouth open to catch the flakes. “I've never seen this much snow before.”

Leila grinned. “I love snow!” She picked up a handful and threw it into the air, where it disintegrated into damp clumps of white.

The other students began emerging from the Lair, some shouting in delight, others running around and kicking at the fresh snow.

Soon their excitement devolved into a snowball fight—Tristan, Leila, Rusty, Eli, Trey, Hayley, and Cailyn against Damian, Zeke, Cassidy, Finley, Ryan, and Stacy—and when Zeke, Damian, and Leila began rolling rocks into their snowballs, the once-playful battle became violent.

When Damian's snowball gave Cailyn a bloody nose, Rusty suggested a truce while they went inside to warm up.

* * *

Leila slept in the storage room again that night—the bunkroom seemed oddly lonely without her—and the next day, Tristan stayed after class to ask Alldusk if he knew of any spare rooms he and his friends could convert to a second bunkroom.

“I'm sorry, Tristan,” Alldusk said, circling the room as he gathered jars from each table. “This is about the fight yesterday, isn't it? We used to have separate boys' and girls' bunkrooms, but Professor Grindlethorn took over the second room for his hospital. There aren't any other spare rooms that I know of.”

“Right. Thanks anyway.”

Tristan was nearly to the door when he remembered something so obvious he couldn't believe he had not thought of it before. He turned slowly.

“Professor? I know we're not meant to go into the tunnels, but...if we found a room we could use somewhere outside the main school...would you report us?”

Alldusk stopped abruptly and turned the jar he held over in his hands. “There are—secrets hidden in the tunnels. Very dangerous secrets. If Professor Drakewell knew I had given you permission to explore...”

Alldusk sighed.

Abandoning caution, Tristan said, “It's just, I found a room not far from the bunkroom, and it's pretty much empty. There's nothing hidden in it, and no other rooms nearby. If we could use that, I swear we wouldn't go anywhere else in the tunnels.” He spoke in a rush, before he could think better of it. If Evvie realized he had betrayed their secret, she would never forgive him.

Alldusk shook his head. “You don't understand how much danger our academy would be in if you stumbled across the wrong part of the tunnels. But I agree it isn't safe or smart to confine everyone together in the bunkroom.”

He turned the jar over again, stirring up the gold vapor so it thinned and grew fainter.

“I want to trust you, Tristan,” he said at last. “If you promise to take responsibility for every student who joins you in this new bedroom—which means we will hold you accountable if they wander elsewhere in the tunnels—I will agree to help keep this secret.”

Tristan sagged against the doorway in relief. “Thank you. Thank you!”
Alldusk smiled reluctantly. “Don’t make me regret this.”

* * *

When Evvie slipped out of the bunkroom that evening, Tristan took his chance and hurried after her. She paused before turning down the dark tunnel, her eyes flashing with anger when she spotted Tristan.

“What are you doing?” she demanded in a whisper. “I thought you promised you’d stay away from Aspen and Drew.”

“Are they still in that room we found?”

“No. Why do you care?”

Tristan grimaced at the hatred in her voice. After the way they’d worked together to get the children to safety, he had hoped she might think better of him. “Leila doesn’t feel safe sleeping in the bunkroom any longer, not with Zeke harassing her every chance he gets. I thought we might move into that room we found. It’s large enough.”

Evvie frowned. “You and Leila?”

“Any of us who want to get away from Zeke and Damian’s gang. You can join us too, if you want.”

“But we’re not allowed in the tunnels.”

Tristan snorted. “That didn’t stop you from hiding the kids down there. Besides, Alldusk said he’ll help keep it a secret.”

“You told him about that room? Without asking me?” Evvie’s face reddened.

“I’m sorry. But I didn’t have any other ideas.”

“Do what you want. It’s not like anything I say is going to stop you.” She turned and stalked off into the dark tunnel.

* * *

Evvie’s anger could not dim Tristan’s excitement at escaping Damian and Zeke at last. He bounded up the three flights of stairs to the kitchen, sure Quinsley would know where Leila was; instead he found Leila elbow-deep in sudsy water, washing dishes.

“Where’s Quinsley?”

“Helping Gracewright with something, I think. It sounds like she’s just gotten a new shipment of plants that urgently needs repotting.”

Tristan raised his eyebrows. “In the dark?”

Leila laughed. “Gerry didn’t seem to mind. I think he’s half in love with Gracewright, personally. What are you doing up here? Want to help dry dishes?”

Tristan automatically grabbed a towel and took a dripping plate from Leila. “I think I’ve found a new bedroom.”

“Really?”

Tristan described the room he and Evvie had found. “We’ll need to drag our mattresses down, but it’s big enough for everyone on our side of the bunkroom if they want to join us.”

Leila’s eyes sparkled. “It sounds perfect. But—didn’t Drakewell threaten to send us back to Juvie if we caused trouble again?”

“I talked to Alldusk—he’ll help keep it a secret. As long as we swear not to go anywhere else in the tunnels.”

“You’re amazing.” Leila threw her arms around him, smearing soap suds down the back of his coat. “Thank you!”

* * *

The next afternoon, as soon as Merridy released them from class, Tristan led Leila and Rusty down the dark tunnel to their new bedroom.

When Tristan pushed open the door and held up his lamp, Leila and Rusty stared openmouthed at the huge circular room.

“This is brilliant.” Leila made a slow circuit of the room, appraising every contour of the walls. “We’ll need more lights, and probably a table and chairs, and a rug if we can find one. There are tons of things in the storage room I’ve been sleeping in—I bet Gerry wouldn’t mind if we took a few.”

“Sounds good,” Tristan said. He could already imagine what the room would look like once it was finished, bright and cozy and safe. “Do you think we can get enough stuff together to sleep here tonight?”

“Sure,” Leila said. “Let’s tell the others, shall we?”

Rusty’s grin was wider than ever. “This is gonna be awesome. Like we’ve got a real home here, or something.”

Tristan nodded fervently.

Back in the bunkroom, Tristan, Leila, and Rusty ran across Eli and Trey, who were collecting their books.

Once Tristan had explained the plan, Rusty asked, “Are you in on it?”

“You kidding?” Eli said. “Hell, yeah!”

Trey, who rarely smiled, gave Rusty a brief grin.

“Should we assume everyone on our side of the bunkroom will join us?” Leila asked.

“Definitely,” Rusty said.

While the other students remained in the ballroom working on homework, Tristan, Leila, Rusty, Eli, and Trey dragged nine mattresses from their side of the bunkroom down to the new bedroom. The spare mattress they left in place, in case someone refused to join them—Tristan worried Evvie would stay behind, still angry at him for betraying their secret.

At dinner, Eli and Trey whispered the news to Hayley, Cailyn, and Evvie; Evvie shot Tristan a sour look but finally nodded.

That left Amber, who was sitting alone at her table, as always. When Quinsley cleared away their dinner and began serving warm brownies for dessert, Tristan joined her.

“You’re not here just to talk, are you?” she asked softly.

Tristan fidgeted, wishing she were mistaken. “We’ve found a new room for everyone on our side of the bunkroom to move to,” he said. “Just to get away from Damian and Zeke, you know. I’d love it if you joined us.”

Amber stared at him for a long time, her expression unreadable. Tristan busied himself with eating his brownie, uncomfortably aware that he had not spoken to Amber since the night they had discovered the attack on the greenhouse.

Finally Amber said, “I would like that. Thank you for inviting me to join you.” She lowered her eyes, her cheeks coloring daintily. “Anyone else would have forgotten me, I think.”

She was right, of course. “You should eat with us sometimes,” Tristan said.

Amber smiled sadly, not looking up.

After dinner, Tristan, Leila, Rusty, Eli, and Trey led the others down to the secret room in the tunnels. The mattresses were sprawled haphazardly around the floor, and the only light came from a single lamp propped on the dusty bookshelf.

“This is incredible,” Eli said, punching Trey lightly in the shoulder.

“We need to be very careful, though,” Tristan said. “If we get caught anywhere else in the tunnels, I’m going to be the one who pays for it. And we can’t let Damian’s gang know where we’re sleeping.”

“We should give this place a code name,” Rusty said eagerly. “That way no one will know what we’re talking about when we mention it.”

“I don’t think anyone’s that stupid,” Leila said.

“It should be ‘The Cave,’” Rusty said.

Leila shook her head. “That sounds dumb.”

“But what if it stood for something else?” Eli said, flopping down on one of the mattresses. “Like...the Cool Awesome Very...Eh...”

Tristan and Leila snorted.

“If we got more books, it could be called ‘The Library,’” Hayley suggested.

“Or the magical bedroom,” Cailyn said.

Eli laughed. “That sounds dirty.”

Leila shook her head. “We’re trying to keep it obscure, remember?”

“What about calling it the Subroom?” Trey asked. “It can stand for the Secret Underground Bedroom.”

Tristan stared at him.

“Okay,” Leila said, eyebrows raised in surprise. “That’s actually a good idea. Everyone like the Subroom?”

The others nodded.

“Home sweet home,” Rusty said, falling back onto a mattress.

Chapter 13: Prasadimums

The next day, Tristan enjoyed school as he never had before. Every time Damian or Zeke shot a confused, accusatory look his way, he smiled. It felt wonderful to hold this secret over their heads.

On the way up the stairs to Gracewright's class, Zeke grabbed Leila by the collar of her coat and shoved her against the wall. "Where did everyone go last night, huh?" he demanded.

Leila must have been expecting this—digging her nails into Zeke's hand, she wrenched her coat from his grasp.

Tristan shoved red-haired Cassidy aside and rounded on Zeke. "Get away from her." He didn't want to start another fight; he had enough hours to work off already.

Leila jammed her fist into Zeke's jaw and ducked under his arm. Rusty dove toward Zeke, but Tristan grabbed his shoulders just in time.

"Snap out of it." Tristan yanked Rusty around to face him.

Breathing hard, Rusty lowered his fist and ran a hand through his messy brown hair. "Sorry."

Thankfully, Gracewright was waiting for them in the snowy meadow, forestalling any retribution on Zeke's part. As the students followed her to the longhouse garden, Tristan wondered about Rusty's aggression as he had leapt to Leila's defense these past few days. He had always come across as overly nice—a pushover—but was that just an act?

Gracewright rubbed her hands gleefully together as she shepherded the students into the longhouse garden. She wore a colorful wool hat and a thick scarf; shivering, Tristan wished he had remembered his warm layers.

"We just received a shipment of Prasadimums," Gracewright said, pulling the door shut behind her.

The Prasadimums were not immediately obvious; eventually Tristan spotted a pile of what looked like dried tulip bulbs.

"What the hell's a Prasadimum?" Damian asked, scowling at the bulbs.

"They're magical plants. Very rare, and very potent." Gracewright brushed the crumbling skin off the largest bulb.

Finley Glenn raised his hand. "Where are the shipments coming from?" He shoved his glasses up his nose. "I thought everyone who wasn't a professor worked on collecting magic from disasters. Or are there other magic schools out there?"

"An astute remark," Gracewright said. "There are no other academies of magic—as far as we are aware—but one of our former students specializes in hunting down rare magical plants around the world."

Dropping the bulb, Gracewright clasped her hands. "Back to the Prasadimums. Once fully grown, these plants morph into a protective barrier, a very special barrier that only allows certain people through. We will be growing the Prasadimums without magic—unless allowed to flower properly, they become an impenetrable wall."

"Wouldn't that be useful," Zeke said, smirking.

Gracewright smiled patiently at Zeke. "We'll tend to the Prasadimums at the start of class each day. It takes about twenty days for them to flower, at which point we'll replant them around the school." She began passing around bulbs and clay pots.

Tristan took a seat on the grass and eyed the shriveled bulb. When Leila joined him, he whispered, "I bet they're thinking about the attack on the greenhouse. They mentioned looking into new security

measures.”

“You’re probably right.” Leila watched Gracewright as she continued around the room, evidently lost in thought.

“Hey, Leila,” Zeke called softly, leaning forward. “You know what this bulb looks like?” He held it up and squinted in her direction.

Leila threw her bulb at Zeke’s head.

By the end of the lesson, Tristan, Leila, Rusty, Zeke, and Damian were covered in dirt, most of which had been thrown by Zeke or Leila. Gracewright let them out early to change for their next lesson—she hadn’t minded the dirt fight, since the Prasadimums had ended up in pots regardless.

When he buttoned up his coat and turned to leave, he noticed Evvie hanging back, eyebrows drawn together in worry. He lingered, pretending to search through his textbooks in hopes of overhearing whatever she asked about, but Leila grabbed his elbow and dragged him into the snowy meadow.

“Hey,” Tristan said, hunching forward against the cold wind as he waded through the snow. “I wanted to hear what she was up to. Maybe she was asking Gracewright to help take care of the children.”

Leila snorted. “You were being super obvious. She wouldn’t have said anything with you there.”

* * *

After class, instead of working on homework, the nine students who had relocated to the Subroom began tracking down furniture. Chairs were first to appear in the secret bedroom—Evvie brought a serviceable wood chair, while Eli hauled down a squashy maroon armchair, which he sat in until dinnertime just to lord it over the others.

Tristan, Leila, and Rusty decided to ask for additional furnishings while they worked off punishment—Rusty went down to the deepest floor to help Delair, Leila made for the kitchens, and Tristan stopped at Alldusk’s classroom.

The heavy stone door was ajar when Tristan approached, a crack of light spilling onto the marble tiling.

Tristan eased the door halfway open. “Professor?”

Hearing no response, he slipped into the classroom.

Then he froze.

Alldusk had his arms around someone, and it was a split second before Tristan recognized her as Merridy. Her hair was unbound for once, cascading halfway down her back, and her glasses lay abandoned on a desk.

Tristan stumbled back a step. Were they a couple? He supposed it was not that strange, but it was jarring to see his professors in such an intimate context; his face grew hot with embarrassment.

When Alldusk saw Tristan, he released Merridy at once. She yelped and stumbled into a table, her glasses clattering to the floor.

“Tristan!” Alldusk said wildly. He fidgeted with his hands for a moment before shoving them into the pockets of his black trench coat.

Cheeks flushed crimson, Merridy fumbled for her glasses. When she found them, she jammed them on and hurried from the room, head down. She slammed the door on her way out—for a moment there was no sound but the dull reverberations of the crash.

Tristan swallowed. “I’m really sorry. I’ll just go now.” Alldusk was his favorite teacher; Tristan felt awful for embarrassing him like this. “I won’t say anything, I promise, I—”

Alldusk shook his head. “Don’t worry.” After a moment he took his hands out of his pockets and straightened one of the chairs. “Were you hoping to work off your punishment?”

“Yes. And—” Tristan cleared his throat. “How old are you and Merridy?” The question slipped out before he could stop himself.

Alldusk’s mouth twitched. “Darla and I are thirty. New students are selected every fifteen years, though Professor Drakewell is the only one remaining from his year.”

“Why?”

Alldusk laughed quietly. “No one knows. And I wouldn’t go asking questions, if I were you.”

Tristan frowned, his mind racing.

“The headmaster keeps his job for a reason,” Alldusk said, “but even the older teachers won’t say why.”

For the next two hours, Tristan and Alldusk worked side by side, separating and labeling and grinding ingredients. Neither spoke.

By dinnertime, Alldusk’s mood seemed to have improved considerably. As they cleaned up their workspace, sweeping plant dust into a metal trashcan and wiping the table with lemon-scented rags, Tristan remembered why he had come here to begin with.

“Um, Professor—do you have any spare furniture we could use for that new bedroom we’ve moved to?”

Alldusk smiled. “I have a few spare shelves, if you want to collect them after dinner. And I’ll keep an eye out for anything else that turns up.”

* * *

When Tristan returned to the Subroom after dinner, he and Leila each carrying one of the shelves Alldusk had donated, he was surprised to find the space cluttered with furniture.

“Where’d all this come from?” he asked, setting down his shelf.

Leila deposited the second shelf beside the maroon armchair and wiped her sweaty hair from her forehead. “Gerry didn’t even let me help in the kitchen, so I’ve been moving things all afternoon. That storage cupboard I’ve been sleeping in is packed with old junk.”

Rusty joined them a moment later with a sack full of magic lamps and nails. Leila was better at hammering them into the wall than Tristan or Rusty, so they handed her nails and held the metal plates in place.

Eventually all sixteen lamps were fixed to the wall and glowing merrily. The room was completely transformed, as bright and cheerful as the ballroom upstairs.

Just then, footsteps in the tunnel signaled the arrival of Eli and Trey.

“Hey,” Eli said, grinning. “This looks nice.” He spun in a circle, eyeing the walls and furniture. “The lights are crooked, though.”

“It’s Leila who put them up, not me,” Rusty said.

Leila glared at them both.

As the others began to arrive, Tristan and Leila set to work clearing a space along the far wall, where they spread the nine mattresses side-by-side, leaving enough room for a book bag and a pile of clothes between each. Since the wall was curved, the mattresses ended up in something of an arc.

Rusty and Eli were supposed to be arranging furniture, but instead they dug through the drawers, scattering bits of paper and other debris across the floor. In what looked like an attempt be helpful, Trey knelt beside the pile of litter and sorted through it, occasionally flattening a crumpled sheet to see what was written on it. Tristan struggled to keep a straight face—the Subroom was such a wonderful secret, as though the earth had folded its rich, cold layers around this one bright heart.

According to the small clock perched atop a burnished copper vase, it was past eleven by the time Hayley and Cailyn joined them.

“We should play cards,” Rusty said, beaming at the girls.

Tristan had been shoving a heavy desk against the back wall—he straightened, rubbing his bruised arm. “Sure.”

Leila glanced up from the stack of books she was organizing. “Gerry has an enchanted fireplace we can bring down tomorrow, Triss,” she said vaguely.

“Great. Do you want to play cards?”

There weren’t nearly enough seats for the eight of them, so Hayley and Cailyn shared a wooden chair; Eli reclaimed his squashy armchair, with Trey perched on the arm; and Tristan, Leila, Rusty, and Evvie sat on pillows around the short coffee table Leila had scavenged with help from Quinsley.

“We’ll play poker,” Eli said, whipping his usual deck of cards from his back pocket. “There’s plenty of junk here—we can bet with pens or something.”

As Eli dealt the cards, Leila described her plan for the room.

“We should put the fireplace across from the door. Once we get more chairs, we can group them around the fire.” She pointed to the space, which was currently empty aside from an overflowing trashcan. “If we can find a larger table, we’ll turn it into a study space.”

Pushing her cards to the side, Leila started writing up a list, ignoring Eli’s scowl.

“What else do we need? I’ve got more chairs, a larger table, that fireplace...”

“We’ll need a broom,” Hayley said. “And a bunch of rags for dusting, if we can find them.”

Leila nodded and added to her list. “Anything else?”

Tristan looked up, struck by a sudden inspiration. “We need one of those Prasadimums. Didn’t Gracewright say they only let certain people through? If we planted one in the doorway, none of Zeke’s gang would be able to get in here.”

“That’s brilliant!” Leila said. “I’d never have to worry about Zeke again. And it’d keep the teachers away, too, if they tried to kick us out.”

“Are we going to play poker or not?” Eli asked.

“Sorry,” Leila said.

“What do you get for winning?” Evvie asked, frowning at her cards.

Rusty grinned. “Maybe Leila can bake you something.”

“No way,” Leila said. “If you win, you can clean up these pens.”

Amber wandered into the Subroom just after midnight. Giving Tristan a distant smile, she chose a book from Leila’s pile and settled down on one of the mattresses to read.

“We should get to bed soon,” Tristan said, stifling a yawn.

“You’re only saying that because you’re losing,” Eli said. More than half of the pens were stacked by his elbow.

Hayley got to her feet. “We still need to put the sheets back on the mattresses.” She had lost her entire pile of pens on the second round; for the past hour, she’d been watching and trying to help Cailyn. “No, you keep playing,” she told Cailyn. “It’ll only take a few minutes.”

Now that she had the chair to herself, Cailyn curled her feet beneath her and propped her chin on her hands, watching with a sleepy, contented smile as Eli dealt the next round.

* * *

When at last the game was finished—Eli won, to no one’s surprise—Evvie stopped Tristan on his way up to brush his teeth. In the shadowed tunnel, he didn’t recognize her for a moment, and his heart raced as he squinted at her face.

“Tristan?” Evvie’s voice was thin and nervous.

Tristan tried to steady his breathing. Neither carried a lantern, so the shadows lengthened as the others turned a corner. “What is it?”

“Can you come with me? I—uh—need your help with something.” She sounded reluctant to be

asking, or perhaps frightened.

“Sure.” Maybe then Evvie would believe he was more than just a criminal.

She led the way back down the tunnel, deeper into the earth. The open door to the Subroom spilled light as they passed, but it quickly faded to an all-consuming darkness. Tristan trailed his hand on the rough stone wall as they walked, blindly shuffling his feet along the uneven floor; if not for her soft breathing, he might have feared Evvie had abandoned him. The air grew staler and heavier as they walked, the cold settling on Tristan’s skin.

At long last, Evvie stopped and said, “Here. No one will overhear us now.”

“What is it? Is it about those kids?”

Evvie was silent for a long moment. Then she sighed. “Yes.”

“I thought you were going to find a way to move them somewhere safer.”

Evvie scuffed one foot against the floor. “I asked a professor for help, and they said there’s no way to relocate them without Drakewell finding out. Not until the end of the school year, anyway.”

“So—what, they’re just going to hide down here for months? In the cold and the dark? They’ll go insane!”

Tristan wished he could see Evvie’s face. “We’ll make sure they’re looked after properly. But that’s not why I wanted to talk to you.” She sounded annoyed. “You know how Gracewright told us about those Prasadimums this morning?”

“Yeah?”

“I asked her after class, and the way the plants recognize who to let through their barriers is with a drop of fresh blood. It has to be fed directly from the person to the plant—we can’t just collect it and then give it to the plants later.”

With a dawning horror, Tristan realized what she was talking about. “So if we don’t get the children up to the meadow to give their blood to the plants, they’ll be trapped down here forever.”

“Right,” Evvie said in a small voice.

“And Gracewright isn’t the teacher you told about them?”

“No. She supports Drakewell.”

Tristan’s mind raced. “What if we told Quinsley? Maybe he could fly them somewhere in secret.”

“The professor I talked to doesn’t trust Quinsley—or anyone else here. I think this school is doing something bad, Tristan. There’s a reason they’ve recruited criminals, not ordinary people.”

Tristan closed his eyes and leaned back against the rough, cold wall. He did not want to contemplate this—if he had to choose between supporting something evil or returning to Juvie, he did not know what he would do. Returning to Juvie would break him; he was sure of that.

Letting out his breath, Tristan opened his eyes, though the darkness was as impenetrable as ever. “What do you want me to do?”

“I need a diversion,” Evvie said softly. “We’ll get the children up to Gracewright’s longhouse beforehand, and I need you to do something that will make everyone move away from the greenhouse long enough for us to sneak the kids in and out.”

“Right,” Tristan said heavily. “I’ll see what I can do.” He couldn’t think of anything off the top of his head; whatever he came up with was likely to get him in the exact sort of trouble he was trying to avoid.

“Promise?” Evvie whispered.

Tristan sighed. “I promise.”

Chapter 14: The Diversion

Though it was past midnight, Tristan struggled to sleep that night, his stomach twisting at the thought of the diversion he had to arrange. He had several ideas, but all were likely to land him back in Juvie.

Still, he couldn't refuse. Even if he was driven to the brink of insanity in Juvie, it would be a small price to pay if he could save two innocent lives. He was a criminal, a murderer; his life was worth little compared to those of Drew and Aspen.

At least, that was what he tried to tell himself.

Despite his growing apprehension, he could not help but enjoy the Subroom. By now it was easily the coziest place in the Lair—Quinsley had dropped by to install the magical fireplace Leila had promised, and it burned almost constantly to ward off the chill of the tunnels, never consuming the two logs at its heart.

Zeke, Damian, and Cassidy kept trying to find the Subroom, standing by the entrance to the tunnel for hours on end in hopes someone would pass by. After a few nasty scuffles, Evvie showed them a secret entrance to the tunnels by which they could bypass Zeke's gang entirely. Tristan felt guilty each time he used the secret entrance, sure this was violating his promise to Alldusk, but he could see no way around it.

Halloween was approaching, and Brikkens threw himself into decorating the Lair, recruiting any students who looked idle to help hang fake cobwebs from the ceiling and carve pumpkins. A frighteningly realistic skeleton appeared in an alcove near his classroom, and more than once Tristan did a double-take when he spotted it looming in the shadows on his way down from dinner.

The final piece of the Subroom fell into place just two days before Halloween, when Gracewright announced the Prasadimums were about to bloom.

"It should happen any moment now," she said brightly, stroking a fist-sized bud that topped one of the rather ugly vine-like plants. The Prasadimums were each about three feet tall now, filling the greenhouse with a coarse, prickly tangle of grey stalks. "Since this is a matter of school safety, all teachers and students will be required to report to the greenhouse as soon as the Prasadimums bloom. The flowers only last an hour or two."

"And why do we want to see a bunch of dumb flowers?" Damian said.

"Maybe they're carnivorous." Zeke pretended to take a bite out of the air.

Gracewright smiled at Zeke. "They're not carnivorous," she said. "As I told you before, the barriers they form only allow people they recognize to pass through. And in order to be recognized, we will need to give a drop of fresh blood to each flower before they close."

Throat tightening, Tristan glanced at Evvie, whose face was pale and strained. She was placing a great deal of trust in him; he was determined not to let her down.

"What if no one gives the plants any blood?" Finley asked.

"Good question. The barrier will allow all living things through, which unfortunately includes rats and cockroaches, but it will exclude other materials such as debris and rain and wind, unless carried by a person."

"Is the barrier on the stairs a Prasadimum?" Finley asked.

"Very good!" Gracewright beamed at him.

On their way back to the Lair, Evvie grabbed Tristan's arm. "Are you ready?"

"I think so." He knew what he would do, though he had tried to push it from his thoughts. Every time he contemplated the diversion, he felt sick.

“Thank you,” she said with a wan smile. “Really, Tristan. I don’t know who else I could trust with this.”

As he hurried to catch up with Leila and Rusty, the knot in Tristan’s stomach eased slightly. Evvie trusted him. That alone made the risk worthwhile.

“What was that about?” Leila asked, eyes narrowed with suspicion.

“Nothing.”

Leila glared at him.

* * *

Tristan was wary of speaking to Leila that afternoon, afraid she would pry the truth from him—or somehow guess what he was planning.

On his way to breakfast the next morning, he caught up with Eli and asked quietly what materials would give off the most smoke when burned.

Eli sniggered. “Don’t they teach that at criminal school? ‘How to be a delinquent, in four easy steps. One: burn things. Two: attack people with knives. Three—’”

“Seriously,” Tristan snapped. “Do you know?”

Eli shrugged. “Rubber’s best. Leaves work too, though they don’t light well if they’re wet.” He grinned. “What are you trying to burn down, huh?”

“Nothing,” Tristan said. “You’ll see, all right?” Giving Eli a brief smile of thanks, he turned and waited for Leila and Rusty to catch up.

Leila scowled when she fell into step beside him. “I hate when you do that. You’re *definitely* hiding something from us.”

Tristan shuffled up the stairs, kicking his toes against each step. “I’m sorry, okay? You’ll be glad I didn’t drag you into this.”

Leila’s scowl deepened.

When Leila dumped her bag beside their usual table and dropped into her chair, she hissed, “If you’d rather share secrets with darling *Evvie*, you can sit with her.”

Tristan rolled his eyes as he sat down beside her. “Oh, come on, she’s not even my friend. I’d do the same for anyone in the Subroom.”

At a sudden clatter, Tristan and Leila jumped—Rusty had dropped the metal lid of the coffee pot.

He replaced it sheepishly and poured himself a cup. “What’s wrong with you guys? Aren’t you excited to see the Pretty-mums?”

“No,” they said together.

Tristan left breakfast early, muttering an excuse about having forgotten his textbook in the greenhouse, and took the stairs two at a time up to the meadow.

Outside, the wind sank its icy teeth into his neck. Hugging his arms across his chest, Tristan hurried to the cover of the trees. Though it hadn’t snowed recently, the meadow was still encrusted with patches of frozen snow; Tristan had to look beneath the pine boughs to find dry aspen leaves and pine needles.

Dropping to his knees, Tristan wrenched open his book bag and began shoving leaves into its empty depths. More than once, he stabbed his hands on a pine needle; wincing, he shook off the sting, fingers growing heavier as the wind bit into his flesh. Handful after handful he crammed in, shoving the leaves down until they were smashed into a dense bulk.

When the bag was so full it strained at the seams, Tristan tucked the flap over the mess of leaves and forced the clasp shut. Something dark was closing down on him. It was so easy to plan this—too easy.

He shuddered.

It was a thin line—such an insignificant thing—that separated criminals from everyone else.

Shivering from more than just the cold, Tristan slung his weightless book bag over one shoulder and dashed back into the warmth of the Lair.

Brikkens and Gracewright were still in the ballroom, along with Cassidy and her tall friend Stacy Walden, when Tristan slunk down the stairs. He kept his eyes fixed on the double doors at the far end of the ballroom, pretending there was nothing odd about his bulging bag.

As soon as the doors swung closed behind him, he broke into a run, bounding down the stairs and sprinting along the hall until he reached the second floor. He had no time to return to the Subroom, so he hurtled into the boys' bathroom and shoved his bag into the stall farthest from the door. Then he dashed back up to Brikkens' class.

Tristan was gasping for air, his hands aching as the numbness wore off, when he collapsed into his seat between Leila and Rusty.

"Oh, Triss," Leila said. She rubbed Tristan's shoulder as though trying to ward away the chill, her expression a mixture of sympathy and irritation; only then did Tristan realize he was still shivering.

Tristan was tense and jumpy all through his morning classes. Leila shared her textbooks with him, but he couldn't concentrate on Grindlethorn's lesson and kept answering questions incorrectly.

They had barely sat down to lunch when Gracewright came bounding down the stairs to the ballroom, her fruit-topped hat askew and hands smeared with dirt. "They're blooming!" she called, breathless with excitement.

Tristan clenched his hands under the table to keep them from shaking.

"Everyone come quick! The Prasadimums are blooming!"

The teachers jumped to their feet, followed more hesitantly by the students. Above the scraping of chairs, Alldusk shouted, "Bring your coats, if you have them. The greenhouse isn't large enough for us all."

"No, no time for that." Gracewright beckoned them toward the stairs. "Oh, good morning, Headmaster."

Tristan flinched. Before he had time to think, Leila was tugging on his sleeve, dragging him toward the stairs.

An icy draft met Tristan just past the invisible barrier on the stairs, and he shuddered, still chilled from that morning. The sun had come out, softening the edges of the lingering ice patches, but tall mounds of snow still lurked in the shadows of the wooden longhouses.

Tristan shivered worse than ever as he fell into place in the circle of students and teachers around Gracewright. Clenching his jaw, he stamped his feet to keep warm. His stomach churned with nerves; he worried he might be sick. Evvie looked pale and fearful—when she met Tristan's eyes, he nodded fractionally.

"Students first," Gracewright said. "Form a line, please—careful there, no pushing."

Tristan jostled his way to the front of the line, where he stopped just behind Cassidy. She tossed her red hair and glared at him as though daring him to cut ahead of her. Tristan stayed where he was.

"Hurry along," Gracewright said by way of greeting when Tristan joined her in the greenhouse.

The windows were steamed over, rivulets of water running down the glass and pooling on the wooden sills. Tristan's numb cheeks tingled in the humid warmth, and his hands shook with nerves as he rubbed them together.

"Now, all I need is a drop of blood for each flower," Gracewright said.

In his distraction, Tristan hadn't noticed the Prasadimums—he realized suddenly that the greenhouse was crowded with garish color. The Prasadimums had bloomed a brilliant purple, each flower so large it was barely supported by the brittle, twining stems. The petals were wrapped in a cluster like a sprawling head of cabbage.

“Don’t worry,” Gracewright said gently, misinterpreting Tristan’s shaking hands. “It won’t hurt. And I dispose of the needles after each use, so there isn’t any risk of contamination or—”

“Professor?” Tristan said, remembering suddenly. “Do you have an extra plant that we could—er—borrow?”

Gracewright gave him a knowing smile. “By ‘we,’ you mean yourself and the other students who have moved to a new bedroom?”

Wary, Tristan shrugged.

“You do realize the barrier will be permanent,” Gracewright said. “That means none of the teachers will be able to enter the room once it’s planted. Unless it’s removed, which isn’t the least bit practical.”

“How do you get rid of the barrier, then?” he asked quickly, trying not to think of the diversion.

Gracewright laughed and straightened her precarious hat. “Dynamite is the most effective method.” She pointed to the back of the greenhouse, where a row of *Prasidimums* were crammed together on a clumsily repaired workbench. “You kids can take the vine on the left. I’ll help plant it when the time comes.”

Taking Tristan’s wrist, Gracewright gently pricked the tip of his index finger with what looked like an ordinary sewing needle. He barely felt the pinch of the needle, though blood welled from the hole. Reaching for the nearest flower, he brushed a streak of blood onto its brilliant petals.

“Very good,” Gracewright said. A split second later, something that looked very much like a butterfly’s proboscis unfurled from the center of the flower and touched the smudge of blood.

“Damn,” Tristan said, momentarily distracted. “Do those flowers eat other things besides blood?”

Gracewright chuckled. “No. They’re not carnivorous, as I explained in class. Now, if you could smear a little blood on the other flowers, I’ll get the others through here in time.”

Tristan’s pulse thudded in his ears as he continued around the greenhouse, occasionally squeezing his finger to keep the blood from clotting. This was taking too long—even if his diversion worked, would it give Evvie enough time to get the children in and out before anyone noticed? So many things could go wrong, and Evvie had placed her trust in him...he couldn’t let her down...

At last he left the greenhouse. As the chill air swept across him, the moisture that had clung to his hands and cheeks turned to ice.

Without glancing at Leila, he hurried across the clearing to the Lair. As soon as he reached the longhouse, he broke into a run, bounding down the stairs three at a time.

The ballroom was empty aside from Cassidy, who had returned to her usual table and started eating lunch. She narrowed her eyes suspiciously at Tristan as he skidded past, but he had no time to make an excuse.

Tristan flew down the stairs and dashed to the boys’ bathroom, where he grabbed his precious bag of leaves. He slung it over his shoulder and broke into a run once again, gasping for breath.

At the top floor, Tristan veered toward the kitchen. He should have gotten matches earlier—he was an idiot—

Hands shaking, he scabbled through the drawers beside the stove. Forks, knives, papers—he shoved it all aside, the silverware rattling, and clawed at the back of the drawer.

Nothing.

The second drawer was crammed with papers, choked so full Tristan could barely get it open. He yanked it out, sending scraps of paper skidding across the tiles.

In the third drawer, he finally found a box of matches. He shook it just to be sure it wasn’t empty, and the matches rattled.

Leaving the kitchen in a shambles, he wrenched open the door to the ballroom. Cassidy flinched as he dashed through.

Tristan paused at the edge of the dining platform. “Don’t say anything to the teachers.” He clutched the bag of leaves to his chest, heart pounding so hard it pressed against his throat. “Please.”

Cassidy’s eyes were still wide, her nostrils flared. “Why would I report you?” she asked sarcastically.

Tristan didn’t trust her, but he was already out of time.

Bounding up the stairs, Tristan stopped just past the invisible barrier. He dropped his bag on the first dark step and began tearing handfuls of crumpled leaves and pine needles from the densely packed mass inside. When it was empty, he kicked it down the stairs and pulled the box of matches from his coat pocket.

His hands were surprisingly steady as he slipped a match from the box and scraped it down the side.

As the match sparked into flame, Tristan froze.

There was no turning back now. Maybe he could blame the car crash on panic and desperation, but this time he had made his decision rationally. He was choosing to commit a crime because he could see no other way. What did that make him?

The flame crept close to his fingers—there was no time for second-guessing.

He dropped the match.

The brittle leaves crackled at once as the flame took hold and curled greedily along the step.

Tristan knew he had to open the longhouse doors so the teachers would see the smoke, but he couldn’t wrench his eyes from the growing blaze. The invisible barrier, usually indistinguishable in the darkness, now gaped below like a black void.

Then someone opened the doors for him, letting in a shaft of pale light.

With a great effort, Tristan raised his head, squinting to see past the billows of black smoke already pouring from the fire.

“Triss! What the hell are you doing?”

It was Leila.

“It’s a diversion,” Tristan said grimly. His eyes were beginning to sting—rubbing away tears with the back of his wrist, he coughed.

“Don’t just stand there,” Leila snapped. She hurried down the stairs, arms raised to shield her face from the smoke.

When she made to grab Tristan’s arm, she skidded on a dry leaf and lost her footing. Hurtling forward, she crashed into Tristan and knocked him over. They both flew backward—Tristan smashed his shin against the edge of a stair, and together they went careening down the steps.

Yelling and scrabbling for a handhold, they crashed down stair after stair, passing straight through the barrier.

At last they came to rest near the foot of the stairs.

Tristan let out a stream of curses as he untangled himself from Leila. Everything hurt like mad; bruises throbbed all down his legs, and his lungs were knitted tight from the smoke. He coughed and slumped against the wall, waiting for the dizzying blackness to recede.

“I’m sorry,” Leila said weakly. She clambered unsteadily to her feet and held out a hand.

Coughing again, Tristan spat out a charred leaf and allowed Leila to pull him to his feet. With all the noise they’d made, he hadn’t needed the fire to draw attention.

It was eerie to stand there, surrounded by perfect silence, knowing that chaos and flames consumed the stairway just past the barrier. Leila put a hand on Tristan’s shoulder, and he was grateful for the weight of her fingers.

Agas passed. The silence stretched thinner and thinner, no sign of the fire reaching the muffled safety of the Lair. Tristan longed to dart up the stairs and slip through the barrier, just to see what was happening, but for all he knew, the small blaze could have flared into a towering inferno.

How much longer could they wait?

Finally something appeared through the barrier. It was a shoe, dusty with ash; as Drakewell emerged, the oily reek of smoke wafted down the stairway.

Startled, Tristan grabbed Leila's arm and dragged her away from the stairwell.

"You have soot on your face," Leila whispered urgently. She scrubbed at his forehead with a thumb; once she nodded, satisfied, he smoothed his hair back into place over his scars.

The other teachers and students followed Drakewell down the stairs—all except Gracewright. Evvie was the last to slink into the ballroom, wiping her muddy hands on her pants, soot particles clinging to her blond hair. When she caught Tristan's eye, she mouthed, *Thank you*.

Tristan grimaced.

Drakewell's sunken eyes lit first on Cassidy, who had dropped her fork and stared wide-eyed at the grim procession; then he spotted Tristan and Leila cowering by the wall.

"Fairholm!" he yelled. "What is the meaning of this? Are you trying to destroy our school?" He seized the black hourglass that hung from a chain by his neck; for a moment Tristan thought he would wrench it from his throat and hurl it at him.

"Headmaster!" Alldusk said loudly. "You cannot accuse Tristan without proof."

Nostrils flaring, Drakewell turned on Alldusk. "What more proof do I need? He stands there, covered in ash, one of the only students unaccounted for in the minutes leading up to the fire." Drakewell rounded on Tristan again. "What do you have to say for yourself?"

Tristan gulped, every nerve urging him to flee; it was all he could do to stay rooted to the spot. He had known this would happen, yet he could not draw breath, could not think. This was the end. His life was over.

At last he choked out, "What happened?"

"What *happened*?" Drakewell roared. "Don't give me that bilge." He lurched forward, hands curling into fists. "You burned the entire building down, Fairholm. Don't lie."

The words landed like a blow to Tristan's chest. He swayed and clutched Leila's shoulder for support.

"No," he whispered. "I didn't mean to—I wasn't—"

The room seemed to be closing in around him; his vision grew fuzzy, his legs weak.

"Professor?" Leila said, stepping forward, her hands twisting behind her back. "Please—I was the one who started the fire. But I didn't mean for it to destroy anything."

"Swanson!" Drakewell bellowed. "Is this true?"

Panicked, Tristan blinked away the encroaching darkness. "No, Professor, she's lying, I—"

Leila kicked him sharply in the ankle, and he broke off, wincing.

"This behavior is intolerable," Drakewell said harshly. "If you don't give me the truth *right now*, you're both going into the tunnels. People have died down there—it wouldn't be the first time."

"Headmaster, be reasonable!" Quinsley barked.

Drakewell took a deep breath. "You're right. Perhaps we can do without these two if they insist on jeopardizing our work. They can return to Juvie and serve a ten-year sentence."

"You know we need Tristan," Alldusk said, an edge to his usually mild voice. "He and Amber are the only ones with a natural inclination for magic. Tristan may have to take your place someday, Headmaster. You said it yourself."

"I did not give you leave to speak of this," Drakewell said coldly.

As though emboldened by Alldusk's words, Merridy raised her hand timidly, and said, "We should take a vote."

Drakewell rounded on her. "Put your hand down! This is not a democracy."

"Who says it's not?" Quinsley said angrily, advancing on Drakewell. "We all started from the same place. We weren't meant to divide power like this. I'm not just a goddamn *cook*." He smacked

his palm against the wall.

“Who appointed you as headmaster, anyway?” This was from Damian.

“You remember why I took charge here,” Drakewell said. He was no longer shouting—his voice was low and dangerous. “You know *damn* well why I had to take the job.”

“That doesn’t give you authority over every decision we make.” Alldusk’s voice remained even, though there was a dangerous glint to his eyes. “We could send you away, if it came to that.”

Drakewell gave a harsh laugh. “Who would take my job?”

The teachers looked at one another.

Still shaking, Tristan took a step back and pressed his spine against the wall. He legs felt as though they might give way.

“I’m sure we could manage it,” Alldusk said grimly.

“And where would you send me?” Drakewell’s sunken eyes narrowed. “No one has ever left our employ.”

“Someone has left,” Quinsley whispered.

Drakewell whirled, his face draining of color. Without another word, he stormed off, the ballroom doors crashing shut behind him. From the hallway, Tristan heard something like a muffled explosion ringing against the marble.

The teachers exchanged startled glances; Alldusk whispered something to Merridy, who straightened her glasses, her face pale.

“Fairholm,” Grindlethorn said gruffly. “The fire upstairs is not our biggest concern at the moment. If you confess responsibility, we will give you hours to work off rather than sending you away.”

The pressure on Tristan’s chest eased; he could breathe again, though his legs still shook. “I set the fire,” he said hurriedly, before Leila could intervene. “I didn’t mean for it to spread, though—I had no idea it would burn down the longhouse. I’m really sorry.”

“Ridiculous,” Grindlethorn said coldly. “Fifty hours of punishment for inexcusable stupidity. You can start by helping us rebuild the entrance.”

All dusk stepped forward. “Classes this afternoon are cancelled while we relocate the Prasadimums. After lunch, please return to your rooms and stay put.”

“Professor, please don’t give Tristan so many hours,” Leila said. “It was my fault too.”

“Do you want punishment as well?” Grindlethorn snapped. “Shut up and get out of here.”

Chapter 15: Delirium

It was a very subdued group that retreated to the Subroom. Tristan wondered why the others were so quiet and serious—they had not received fifty hours of punishment. They were not in danger of getting sent back to Juvie, or worse.

Then he overheard Eli mutter to Trey, “What do you think it is?”

Trey frowned at him. “What d’you mean?”

“Whatever Drakewell’s doing that none of the other teachers are comfortable with!” He was no longer bothering to keep his voice quiet. “There’s something messed up going on here.”

“I think you’re right,” Evvie murmured. “But what can we do about it?”

Eli jumped up from his favorite armchair and began pacing before the enchanted fireplace. “I don’t know. But there must be something. Some way to get leverage, to threaten the teachers until they tell us the truth.” He laughed harshly. “We could always kill ourselves, if it came to that.”

Trey seized Eli’s arm and wrenched him around to face him. “Don’t you dare say that.” Trey’s face was stony, his dark eyes cold. “Not even as a joke.”

“Wait a moment,” Tristan said loudly. “Stop. Are you actually considering fighting our teachers? When they can use magic and we can’t?” He struggled to rein in his temper. “Do you *want* to go back to Juvie? Because I don’t. I want to live, and I don’t know if I’d survive another few years locked up.”

Eli rounded on him. “So you’ll happily go along with whatever they’re doing because you’re scared? What if they’re murdering people to collect some other type of magic we don’t know about? What if they want to take over the world? What if there are good magicians out there, and we’ve been recruited by the evil side? Why else would they want a bunch of criminals?”

Leila stalked over to Tristan’s side. “Maybe some of us don’t care. We’ve been locked up—thrown out of society—and I don’t think most of us deserved what we got. Unless you think whoever arrested you was right to ruin your life?” She glared at Eli.

He cleared his throat. “Maybe not, but that doesn’t mean everyone is horrible and deserves whatever the professors are doing to them.”

“Hang on,” Tristan said. “You have no idea what they’re doing. You’re just making this into a big deal because you don’t like Drakewell. But what about the other professors? What about Alldusk and Quinsley and Gracewright? Do you really think they’re evil?”

“I don’t know what to think!” Eli said loudly. “I didn’t trust this place from the start, and the other professors are definitely uncomfortable with something Drakewell’s doing. Am I supposed to just ignore it? Pretend I don’t care?”

“I just don’t want you to do anything rash,” Tristan shot back. “If we mess up, all of us might get sent away. Coming here was the only good thing that happened since—since—” He had been about to say “since my brother died,” but he couldn’t get the words out. He drew a sharp breath. “I don’t want to ruin this. I’ve got nothing waiting for me out there—my family doesn’t care about me, and I don’t have a future once I leave Juvie. I don’t know what you were arrested for, but my record is going to follow me forever. Here I actually have a chance at doing something with my life.”

“Of course you’d say that, you’re actually good at magic,” Eli said sourly.

“Listen,” Leila said. “Let’s all just calm down for a moment. Eli, not everyone wants to give this place up. Maybe that makes us evil, or maybe we just don’t belong anywhere else. But you can’t ruin it for us all.”

“I—”

Tristan talked over Eli. “If I try to figure out why we’re here, will you promise not to do anything

stupid until we have a better idea what's going on?"

Eli glared from Tristan to Leila. He was breathing hard, hands fisted by his sides. At last he shook his head. "Fine. Just don't take too long."

* * *

The next day was Saturday; it should have been a relaxing, festive day as they prepared for Halloween, yet the students and teachers were equally quiet and grim-looking—all except Zeke's gang.

"I can't believe you just stood there," Zeke said under his breath when he caught up to Tristan on the way to the ballroom. "It's like you wanted to get caught! What sort of idiot does that?" Smirking, he shoved Tristan aside and bounded up the stairs.

"I've been thinking," Leila whispered over brunch. "You should try to work off a few hours helping Delair. Alldusk told you something dangerous was hidden in the tunnels, right? I bet that's the key to whatever the academy is doing. Delair would know all about it."

"Yeah, maybe," Tristan said. He didn't know Delair very well, and worried the professor would report him to Drakewell if he started asking questions.

"I can go with you," Rusty said. "I've got a couple hours to work off too."

"Good idea," Leila said.

Tristan shook his head—there was no arguing when they both ganged up against him.

As soon as they finished eating, Tristan and Rusty headed to the lowest level of the school, where they hoped to find Delair in the mine tunnel across from his classroom. If Delair was in an unhelpful frame of mind, he could punish them for venturing into his mine, but Tristan hoped he would appreciate the help enough to let it slide.

"Tomorrow's Halloween, remember?" Rusty said as they started down the last flight of stairs. "D'you think Drakewell's gonna let you come to the feast?"

Tristan hadn't thought about this. "I hope so. I might not be eating again for weeks if I can't work off these hours fast enough."

Delair's classroom was locked, as Tristan had expected, so he and Rusty turned to the rough mine tunnel. When Tristan lifted the lantern propped beside the entrance and blew gently on the top, it flared to life, casting an inadequate glow into the gloom of the tunnel.

"Are you sure about this?" Rusty asked, peering down the tunnel. From here they could smell the heavy, dank air that drifted up from the mine.

Tristan snorted. "I don't know what you're worried about—it's me who might get thrown out if I get in any more trouble, not you. There aren't any trolls down there."

"Says who?" Rusty said. Then he grinned. "It'll be an adventure."

Holding the lantern high, Tristan led the way into the dark passage. The uneven floor was littered with loose stones; Tristan stumbled as soon as the bright lights from the marble hallway faded.

The tunnel quickly began sloping down, the air growing colder and mustier. Soon the passage took on the mildewed, closed-in feel of a natural cave, nothing like the warm elegance of the Lair. From the dim light spilling from the lantern, Tristan glimpsed the occasional passage heading off the main tunnel; he was wondering if they had taken a wrong turn when he heard a distant thud.

He stopped at once, alert and listening, and Rusty collided with him.

"Oof. Don't do that!"

Tristan hushed him. "Listen. I think it's Delair."

They stood still for a moment, until a resounding clang echoed nearby. Tristan flinched.

As they rounded the next corner, treading carefully now, Delair came into view. He was no more than a hunched shape at the end of the tunnel, illuminated in the soft glow of two lanterns. The bald teacher stood beside an empty cart, and as Tristan and Rusty watched, he hefted a pickaxe over his

shoulder and swung it at the tunnel wall with a clanging crash.

“Professor?” Rusty called out.

Delair jumped and dropped his pick; when he turned and saw Tristan and Rusty, though, his face relaxed into a broad grin.

“You’re here to do punishment, eh?” He bent and retrieved his pick. “Bad idea for you kids to come wandering down here alone. Drakewell wouldn’t like it.”

Tristan grimaced.

“Still, I could use the help.”

As Delair pushed his cart forward, Tristan caught sight of an odd, splintered luminescence coming from the rock he had been chipping away at. In his surprise, he forgot to worry about Drakewell.

“It’s *glowing*.” Tristan elbowed Rusty out of the way so he could get a closer look.

The hazy silver glow was nearly as bright as the two lanterns on the wall, casting its odd sheen across Delair’s bald pate.

“Course it is,” Delair said, thrusting a pick at Tristan.

Tristan barely caught it—the heavy wood handle slipped and slammed into his knee. He winced.

“It’s a vein of the purest metal.”

Rusty squinted at the wrong part of the wall. “I can’t see anything. It’s one of those auras, isn’t it?”

Delair handed Rusty a second pickaxe. “Indeed. Put out that lamp, Fairholm. It’ll look brighter in the dark.”

As Tristan blew out his own lamp, Delair extinguished the two lights on the wall with a quick wave of his hand. In the absence of other light, the exposed vein shone brighter than ever, infusing everything with a ghostly brilliance. It was like an icy moonbeam sculpted from rock—Tristan shivered and clutched the handle of his pickaxe.

“Now can you see it?” Delair asked eagerly.

Rusty squinted at the wall for a long time. His face had taken on the deathly pallor of a drowned person in the odd light. “I think there’s something...how bright is it supposed to be?” His gaze was still fixed on the wrong section of the wall.

“Just as with magic vapors, auras appear brighter to certain people.” Delair nodded happily at Tristan. “No one knows why that is, but everyone can become better with practice.”

“How bright is it for you, Tristan?” Rusty asked worriedly.

“It’s nearly as good as the lanterns.”

“Impressive,” Delair said, relighting his with a flick of his finger. “You’re better than I am, I seems—without the lamps, I can barely make out your shapes in the darkness.”

Rusty stared at Tristan, mouth open a fraction.

To distract Rusty, Tristan asked, “Was that magic, what you just did? Lighting the lamps without blowing on them, I mean.”

“Of course,” Delair said. “Now, if you’ll get to work widening this tunnel, I can teach you a few things that I should’ve gone over in class.” Even now he rarely came to lessons more than twice a week. “Don’t worry about falling rocks—I’ve got a safety barrier in place. Same as Professor Merridy used to keep you safe from the avalanche.”

Tristan hefted the pick onto his shoulder and frowned at the wall. Not at all sure what he was supposed to do, he took a step backward and swung wildly at the stone. A few small rocks broke free and crumbled to the ground.

“Wait a moment,” Rusty said. His pick dangled uselessly at his side. “Did you just say you used magic *without* those marbles?”

Delair grunted. “Don’t aim straight at the wall, Fairholm. You have to single out a weakness first.” He pointed to a craggy knob of rock before turning to Rusty. “Yes, I can use magic without it first

being concentrated. So could you, theoretically.” Delair shouldered his pick and resumed chipping away at the end of the tunnel.

“Huh?” Rusty squinted at the wall.

“Drakewell doesn’t want me to tell you this,” Delair shouted over the sound of his own hammering, “at least not yet. So don’t go telling the other kids.” He tossed a chunk of stone over his shoulder and resumed his attack on the wall. “The teachers decided you’d be less tempted to make trouble if you thought magic could only be used with marbles.”

“What’s the point of the marbles, then?” Tristan asked quickly. They were getting so close to it—the reason why he and his fellow students were here in the first place.

Delair paused, resting his pick against one knee. “The main reason is something even I can’t tell you yet. However, there is a second reason for the marbles.”

He set aside his pick and turned back to the wall. Now it looked as though he was shaping something with his hands, though he touched nothing but air.

“As you know, magic vapor is created by destruction—when you collect the vapor, you are gathering the essence of destruction. Even when you don’t use the congealed form of magic, you need to destroy something to make the power work. When you use magic without the marbles, you destroy your own strength.”

Tristan stared at Delair, thinking hard. To his left, Rusty was tapping the handle of his pick on the wall with a vacant sort of rhythm.

“I’m sure you boys can see why this would be dangerous. When you draw from your own strength, you quickly become exhausted—if the spell is allowed to go too far, you could damage yourself beyond repair. It takes many years to build up the sort of endurance necessary to perform even the most basic tasks without depleting your strength.”

Amber could do magic without using marbles, Tristan remembered suddenly.

“But you can do it now?” Rusty asked.

Delair stepped away from the end of the tunnel and wiped his hands on his pants. Then he reached forward and splayed his hands just inches from the wall. With a click, a piece of glowing ore shifted and dislodged itself from the wall. The ore tumbled away from the dull rocks, perfectly intact; Delair caught it and threw it into the empty cart.

“What’s that glowing metal?” Tristan asked. It had to be powerful, with such a bright aura. “What are you going to do with it?”

“Ah, I’m so glad you asked.” Delair blew rock dust off his moustache so the ends fluttered. “This element exists almost exclusively in the earth’s core. I was the first to realize we had discovered something new—I’m planning to call it Delairium.”

Tristan laughed.

“In fact, this is one reason the academy was built here in the first place—it’s the only location in the world with such an impressive concentration of Delairium. As to what it’s used for…” Delair lifted his pick and chipped off a loose sheet of rock. “Delairium releases a great deal of magic when it’s melted. Among other things.”

“Like what?” Tristan asked.

“I’m saving that for one of my lessons.”

Thinking hard, Tristan resumed his work widening the tunnel. The answer was so close, yet he didn’t know how probe for more details without raising suspicion.

The marbles were harvested for some larger purpose—something beyond using one at a time for minor spells. And since the marbles disappeared after their chemistry classes each day, they had to be stockpiled somewhere…in Alldusk’s office? Or, more likely, in the tunnels?

Tristan had to figure out what the stockpile was used for. It was the only way to convince Eli that the school was not evil, to keep him from antagonizing the teachers and getting everyone sent back

to Juvie.

Yet if he ventured into the tunnels, he would be risking expulsion. Maybe there was another way to piece together the limited information he could extract from his professors.

Lost in thought and the rhythm of the hammering, Tristan did not realize how much time had passed until Rusty set aside his pick and said, "I'm hungry!"

Delair glanced at his watch. "You need to hurry, or you'll miss dinner! Go on, off with you."

Tristan wiped sweat from his forehead, which was caked with grime. "Thanks, Professor. We might come back next week."

Delair chuckled. "You're planning to earn more punishment?"

"Not planning," Rusty said. "It just kinda happens."

"And I've got fifty hours, remember?" Tristan muttered.

* * *

When Tristan returned to the Subroom after dinner, he was disgruntled to see Eli, Trey, Hayley, Cailyn, and Evvie huddled in a corner, speaking in undertones. As soon as they spotted him, they fell silent; Evvie cast a suspicious look in Tristan's direction.

"Have you learned anything useful?" Eli asked pointedly.

Tristan took off his coat and folded it, stalling. He did not want to give away too much information, for fear Eli would start poking around where he wasn't allowed and get everyone into even worse trouble, but he had to prove he was making progress or they wouldn't trust him.

"Delair mentioned the marbles are mainly used for something other than the spells Brikkens is teaching us," he said slowly. "So if we could figure out what that is, we'll know why we're here."

"And he wouldn't tell you anything more?"

Tristan shook his head. "Everyone keeps saying they can't talk about it. Drakewell must've made them promise to keep quiet."

"That's bull—"

Trey cut across Eli. "It sounds about right. We know the teachers are hiding something from us, and that we've been recruited for a specific purpose that they refuse to explain. It does make it sound as though we won't like whatever it is—or maybe they don't trust us yet. We are criminals, remember."

"Can we really wait to find out what it is?" Eli asked darkly. "I mean, what if a baby dies every time a marble forms? What if this is like Ender's Game, and we're doing horrible things without even realizing it?"

"It wouldn't be the worst thing if the earth's population went down just a bit," Cailyn said, folding her arms over her chest. "Not everything is good or evil. Something that can be good for a lot of people can be horrible for plenty of others. Maybe we should give the professors a chance before we start plotting against them."

"Whose side are you on?" Eli snapped.

Cailyn arched her eyebrows at him. "You don't know anything about me. Have you ever bothered to ask what I did to get arrested?"

"No, of course not. Don't you want to forget about that? Pretend it never happened?"

"No," Cailyn said airily. "I did it for a reason. To make a statement. I knew I'd get in trouble, but that wasn't the point."

Tristan dropped onto a sofa by the enchanted fire and opened a textbook at random, pretending he was not listening. Cailyn was not his friend; it seemed indecent to eavesdrop on such a private conversation.

But Cailyn was not bothering to keep her voice down.

"Now you've got to tell us," Eli said. "What did you do?"

“I broke into a feedlot and let all the pigs escape. Then I set fire to the place. Did you know that pigs are as intelligent as dogs?”

Tristan could not help himself; he glanced over to see that Cailyn’s eyes were shining with indignation.

“Damn,” Eli said. “That was brave—and a bit stupid. Don’t they have security cameras at those places?”

“Of course. Again, that was sort of the point.”

Eli shook his head.

Tristan was baffled. He could not comprehend putting himself in danger—knowingly breaking the law and jeopardizing his entire future—for the sake of making a statement. And for a bunch of pigs! What had Cailyn accomplished in the end? Surely the pigs were rounded up and slaughtered just the same as if she had done nothing.

“Well, that doesn’t change anything about this academy,” Eli said. “Tristan—you’d better figure out why we’re here soon, or we’re going to put up a fight.”

Chapter 16: Hoarded Magic

Tristan had intended to work with Alldusk the next morning, in hopes he could learn more about what the marbles were being used for, but Grindlethorn informed him at breakfast that he needed to pitch in with building the new longhouse.

Tristan, Grindlethorn, Gracewright, and Merridy spent most of the day sawing away charred wood from the destroyed structure and hauling trees to the clearing; though the sky was clear, the air was crisp and the wind icy, numbing his exposed fingers. Only Gracewright had the sense to wear gloves, and Tristan's hands were soon blistered and bristling with splinters.

The sun was sinking low in the sky by the time Gracewright declared them finished.

"You've got a bit of time to wash up before the feast. Gerard would hate for you to miss it—he's been preparing food for days now."

Tristan did not need to be told twice. Abandoning his stack of salvaged nails and faded old boards, he dashed down to the ballroom.

When he reached the foot of the stairs, he paused in surprise. Brikkens was tottering around putting the final touches on his decorations, but the ballroom was already transformed. Eleven jack-o-lanterns leered at him from the edge of the raised platform, candlelight flickering within. The chandeliers had been dimmed, and the ballroom floor looked like a graveyard—headstones hulked above the polished floor, draped in dusty cobwebs and curling brown leaves. The whole room smelled of pumpkin innards and candle smoke.

"Not bad, eh?" Brikkens said, spotting Tristan. "I think the skull's a nice touch, don't you?" He waved to a narrow animal skull of some sort propped beside one of the gravestones.

"Very nice, Professor," Tristan said quickly. "I've got to shower, so—" He hurried away before Brikkens could recruit him to help with further decorating.

When he reached the Subroom, Tristan pulled open the door and was confronted by impenetrable darkness. Where were the other students?

He stepped inside, groping for the nearest lamp, but as soon as he crossed the threshold, lights flared all around. Voices and the crackle of the enchanted fireplace replaced the silence.

"Where've you been?" Rusty called from his perch on a pillow by the fire. He was playing cards with Eli, Trey, and Cailyn; for once it did not appear to be poker.

Tristan just stared at him, unable to comprehend what had just happened.

Then Cailyn noticed his expression and giggled. "Oh, you weren't here—Gracewright planted our Prasadimum at lunchtime! Now no one else can get in."

Tristan shook his head to clear it. "That's really trippy. But yeah, it's great." He glanced around. "Where are Leila and Amber?"

"Leila's up in the kitchen—big surprise," Rusty said. "She doesn't even have hours to work off this time! And I've got no idea where Amber is. She's always disappearing, though, isn't she?"

Eli set his cards carefully to one side. "Have you learned anything useful yet?"

"I've spent all day rebuilding that damn longhouse," Tristan snapped. "Give me a bit more time."

Grabbing a pair of clean clothes, he stalked off to the showers before anyone could interrogate him further.

Once he was clean, he still had an hour before dinner; instead of getting a start on his homework and resting his aching arms and back, he headed to Alldusk's classroom to ask whether he needed any help. If he could just think of the right questions, Alldusk might be willing to answer. He trusted Tristan.

This time he knocked on the classroom door and waited. He did not want to intrude if Merridy was there again.

But instead of voices, he heard a loud thud, like a textbook falling off a table. Crashes and a clatter like rolling marbles followed it; what was Alldusk doing? Tristan knocked again, louder this time.

At last the sounds faded, and the door swung open. Sweat glistened on Alldusk's forehead, and his black hair stuck out in sloppy tufts.

"Tristan! What are you doing here?"

"Um—I thought I could work off an hour of punishment with you. But if you're busy..."

"Not exactly, but—this isn't the best time." As Alldusk wiped his forehead, Tristan glimpsed the classroom behind him.

It looked like the aftermath of an earthquake. Shelves were smashed down the middle, shattered jars and marbles littering the floor; chunks of marble had been gouged from the walls; one of the tables had broken clean in two; and pages torn from textbooks lay like dead leaves over the rubble.

"Holy crap," Tristan breathed. "Is this what you meant about having more important things to worry about?"

Alldusk nodded grimly.

"Is it the same person who attacked the—" He realized his mistake a second too late.

"Tristan, is there something you're not telling me? How do you know there was another attack?"

Tristan swore under his breath. "I know what this looks like, but I'm not—I swear I had nothing to do with it." His hands were sweating, so he hid them behind his back. "Amber and I were helping Gracewright collect plants the night after the greenhouse was attacked, and we sort of...overheard you talking about what happened."

Sighing, Alldusk sagged against the doorway. "I don't want to get you in more trouble than you're already in—especially if you're telling the truth—but this is a matter of safety for the academy. Can you tell me why you set fire to the longhouse? I still can't understand why you did that, and until I do, I have to assume you were involved in the other attacks as well."

Tristan pressed his hair over his scars, thinking furiously. He wanted to tell Alldusk that he had lit the fire to help someone else—he liked Alldusk, and hated the thought of losing his professor's trust—but Alldusk was not stupid. If he knew Tristan had deliberately created a diversion while the Prasadimums were being set up, he would assume someone was hiding in the school. And if Alldusk told Drakewell, they might go hunting around in the tunnels and find the two children.

"I can't tell you anything," he said at last, "or someone might get hurt. But I seriously didn't mean to burn down the longhouse. The fire just got out of hand. I would never do something like *that*." He indicated the wreckage of Alldusk's classroom with his chin.

"I see." Alldusk let out a breath through his teeth. "I'm not going to do anything just yet. But I will investigate further, and if I find out that you had anything to do with this..." He closed his eyes for a moment. "I'd be grateful if you didn't mention this to anyone. You can work off hours next week, but for now, I need to get a few things in order."

"Right," Tristan said. "Sorry to bother you. I'll see you at the feast?"

Alldusk nodded, looking older than usual. "Just try to stay out of trouble, won't you?"

Tristan grimaced. "Of course." He *had* been trying his best—studying hard, keeping up with his homework, and not exploring any deeper into the tunnels—yet none of it made any difference. Now he had fifty hours of punishment to work off, and his favorite teacher suspected him of attacking the school twice more.

Not wanting to return to the Subroom, Tristan slouched up to the kitchen, where he hoped to find Leila. Even before he reached the kitchen, he could smell the rich aromas wafting down the corridor. As he breathed in the smell of spices and sizzling turkey, he almost expected to find his mom standing over the stove, humming along to the radio. Instead it was Leila who stirred a simmering pot

of broth, face lost in the steam, while Quinsley chopped potatoes behind her.

“What’s with the Thanksgiving food?” Tristan asked, endeavoring to keep his tone light. He didn’t want Quinsley to suspect anything was wrong. “Shouldn’t we have little skeleton cupcakes or—”

Leila whirled at his voice. “Triss! I thought they’d keep you up in the meadow all day!” She turned down the heat on the stove. “Gerry says we won’t be celebrating Thanksgiving, so we have to enjoy this while we have a chance.”

Tristan frowned at Quinsley. “No Thanksgiving?”

Quinsley popped a chunk of what looked like raw potato into his mouth. “Canadians celebrate Thanksgiving in October, not November, so we’ve decided to compromise and combine it with Halloween.”

“Oh,” Tristan said, “so that’s where we are!”

Quinsley chuckled. “Drakewell probably didn’t want us to mention that. No idea why, but there you go.”

Leila grinned at Tristan, though her smile quickly faded; she must have noticed something in his expression. “What’s wrong?”

As though to give them privacy, Quinsley retreated to the opposite side of the kitchen and began washing dishes with excessive clatter. Lowering his voice, Tristan told Leila about the destruction of Alldusk’s classroom.

“And he thinks *you* might be involved?” Leila’s voice rose with indignation.

“I sort accidentally mentioned the attack on the greenhouse,” Tristan mumbled. “I’d be suspicious too, if I were him. I don’t know how to convince him it wasn’t me.”

“We’ve got to catch the real attacker,” Leila said. “Not that it’ll be easy, when we’re not even allowed into the tunnels. And stupid *Eli* isn’t helping at all—he’ll get us all kicked out if he’s not careful.”

Leaving the soup to simmer, she began mashing a bowl of sweet potatoes, muttering a string of curses under her breath. “This is all Evvie’s fault,” she said at last. “Evvie and her stupid—wretched—interfering—” She punctuated each word with a thrust of the potato masher.

“What?” Tristan was nonplussed.

“You were talking to Evvie just before you started that fire. The diversion was for *her*, but of course you’ll never tell the teachers that. No, perfect little *Evvie* gets away with everything while you’re the one working your ass off rebuilding the longhouse.”

“It wasn’t just for her,” Tristan muttered, though he had to admit he was also angry at the injustice. Evvie hadn’t even thanked him properly. “Those kids are still here, and they might’ve been trapped in the tunnels forever if they couldn’t get through the new Prasadimums.”

“Oh.” Leila stopped mashing the sweet potatoes abruptly. “I thought they’d long since left.”

“So did I.”

“But that’s still rotten of Evvie. She doesn’t even trust you enough to tell you where they’re hiding, but she’s happy for you to get in trouble instead of her.”

Quinsley had been watching the two of them with amusement, and now he held out a hand for the bowl of sweet potatoes. “The feast is about to start, so you may as well get out there and enjoy yourselves.”

The feast was delicious, though Tristan was too worried to appreciate it. Neither Drakewell nor Alldusk appeared until halfway through dinner; Tristan was sure they were discussing his supposed crimes.

When Alldusk finally slipped into the ballroom—hair damp but no longer caked with dust—he gave Tristan a wan smile. The headmaster was still nowhere to be seen.

At last Tristan was able to relax. It seemed Alldusk had kept his word, at least for the time being.

Hunger suddenly gripped Tristan—he had spent the day laboring hard, and his lunch had consisted of nothing but a small sandwich—and he dug in with relish. There were slabs of turkey and rich gravy, creamy mashed potatoes, stuffing packed with herbs and spices, sweet potatoes baked with a syrupy topping of caramelized pecans, and green beans with slivered almonds.

“I think Alldusk’s on your side,” Leila said quietly as Quinsley began clearing away the empty platters. “You don’t need to worry just yet.”

Nodding absently, Tristan leaned back in his chair and watched the shadows of two enchanted paper bats darting across the ceiling.

“What are you guys talking about?” Rusty asked, helping himself to one last scoop of sweet potatoes before Quinsley took the pan.

“Nothing,” they said at the same time.

When Tristan rose from his seat, yawning, Alldusk said, “Wait. Can I speak with you quickly before you head to bed?”

All trace of sleepiness vanished. Tristan nodded warily—had Alldusk found evidence to condemn or acquit him? Or had he spoken to Drakewell after all, and the headmaster was saving his wrath for after the feast?

“You too, Amber.”

Amber’s eyes widened. “What?”

Alldusk merely beckoned her to follow him from the ballroom. Giving Leila a significant look, Tristan hurried after.

“Sorry about this,” Alldusk said when they reached his classroom. “I just wanted to catch you before the news slipped out.”

Amber made a small noise of surprise at the sight of the destruction. Even though Alldusk had swept away the dust and torn papers and broken glass, there was no way to hide the splintered shelves and table or the gouges like small bomb craters in the walls.

He led them through to his office, which was just as much a mess as the classroom. A once-comfortable leather chair had a slash down the middle, stuffing hanging out, and a bin in the corner held the remnants of what looked like the school’s entire stock of glass jars.

Sinking into the gutted leather chair, Alldusk beckoned Tristan and Amber to sit on two wooden chairs whose backs had been smashed off.

“Has Tristan talked to you today, Amber?”

“No, I haven’t seen anyone. I was just up in the forest—the sky was so clear, and the snow makes everything sparkle.”

“Where did you go after you left my office?” Alldusk asked Tristan.

“Just up to the kitchen to help Leila.”

Alldusk nodded. “Amber—Tristan mentioned you know something about another attack on our school, similar to what has just happened to my classroom. How do you know about it?”

Amber’s expression cleared, and her eyes flickered to Tristan’s for a split second. He nodded fractionally.

“Tristan and I were helping Professor Gracewright work off punishment. It was right after we grew the lemon tree that broke Professor Brikkens’ classroom floor, and she said she would sign us off for extra hours if we helped her that night since she needed to restock the greenhouse. We were searching for auras when we heard voices in the clearing, and we followed them to the greenhouse. There was a broken pane, so we could see that everything was smashed apart.”

“Thank you,” Alldusk said quietly. “And you haven’t told anyone else about this?”

Amber shook her head.

“Just Leila,” Tristan muttered. “But she wouldn’t tell anyone else.”

Alldusk steepled his fingers before his face and studied Tristan and Amber for a long time. Tristan

tried to look as innocent as possible, though his hands were hot and itchy and he couldn't remember how often a person was supposed to blink.

At last he spoke, slowly and deliberately. "I want to believe neither of you were involved in this. I can't see what would compel you to risk your places at the Underground Academy, but then again, I don't understand why you started the fire a couple days ago, Tristan."

Alldusk sighed. "We need to catch whoever is attacking our academy, and soon. If you know anything, you must report it to me. No matter who is involved. If one of the students is behind this, they have no idea how much danger they are putting us all in. You see—" Alldusk paused. "You must promise not to share this information with anyone. I am only telling you because I want you to understand how urgent it is that we catch whoever is attacking our school."

"Of course," Tristan said. Amber nodded solemnly.

"There is a place deep within our school where magic is stockpiled."

"What's it for?" Tristan asked before he could stop himself.

Alldusk smiled grimly. "That is for Professor Drakewell to explain when he sees fit. But the point is, large quantities of magic are extremely volatile. If anything disturbed this stockpile, it would combust with incredible force. The whole Lair would be destroyed."

"Do you think the attacker is going to target the magic stockpile eventually?" Tristan asked.

"It depends on who they are," Alldusk said. "If it is a student just trying to cause trouble, I doubt they realize how serious the repercussions of their actions could be. And if someone outside the school has broken in and intends to destroy us, that must be their eventual aim, though the Prasadimums should stop them now.

"My classroom was attacked yesterday, just before we planted the Prasadimums, so it could be our enemy knew they would be unable to get into the Lair before long. They probably wanted to bide their time until they found our stockpile, but once that was no longer an option, they decided to cause as much chaos as they could before escaping."

"Why are you telling us this?" Tristan asked.

"Because I need your help." Alldusk leaned forward. "I need you to keep an eye on the other students. If you see any of them straying deeper into the tunnels or doing anything suspicious, can you tell me? I want to keep Drakewell out of this if possible—I'd prefer if you didn't get in any more trouble unless you deserve it. But that means we *need* to find out who is attacking our school, before it's too late."

He held Tristan's gaze. "Our lives are in grave danger until our attacker is caught."

Chapter 17: Pinecones and Punishment

Tristan followed the familiar path back to the Subroom as though in a daze.

What if Eli was behind the attacks—Eli, with his simmering hatred of the teachers and distrust of whatever they were doing in secret? What if Eli found and tried to destroy the magic hoard, and everyone in the Lair died because Tristan had been unwilling to betray his friend?

Eli wasn't even really his friend, but Tristan felt he owed his loyalty to everyone in the Subroom. It was a few seconds before he realized Amber had spoken. "What? Sorry, I was distracted."

"Oh—I just asked if Alldusk thinks you destroyed his classroom."

Tristan nodded. "I don't blame him—I did burn down the school entrance, after all."

"But you didn't even try to hide that you had done it. If you were behind the other two attacks, surely you would have set the fire in secret."

"That's a good point." Tristan wondered if that was why Alldusk had decided to trust him—because he had been so obviously guilty of starting the fire, whereas the other two attacks had been carried out in secret. "You believe me, don't you?"

"Of course."

* * *

Alldusk was bleary-eyed and disheveled when he greeted the class on Monday. "I'm sorry to say we've unexpectedly lost most of our supplies."

When he pushed open the classroom door, Tristan was surprised to see that he had already replaced the broken bookshelves and table; new bookshelves covered the craters in the wall, and the shelves that had once held rocks, dried plant cuttings, and hundreds of jars of marbles and liquids were now bare. Every surface had been wiped clean, but this only served to draw attention to the emptiness.

"We obviously can't hold regular classes at present," Alldusk said wearily as he took his place at the center of the room. "Instead, we'll take the chance to study the chemical uses of magical ingredients."

"You mean we're making potions?" Cailyn asked eagerly.

Alldusk frowned. "No. First of all, we don't have any ingredients to play around with, so we'll be *studying* magic rather than working with it. Second, what we are primarily concerned with is dissecting plants and rocks into their magical components. There will be no brewing of potions in this class. Take out your notebooks and pens. I'm sorry, but this means copying down what I tell you."

With a collective sigh, the students reached for their book bags.

* * *

Tristan had wanted to tell Leila what Alldusk said ever since he returned to the Subroom the previous night, but it was impossible to have a private conversation in the Subroom, especially with Rusty hovering around. It was not until Merridy's class, where they were practicing belying techniques in the meadow, that he had a chance to speak with Leila in private.

"Do you think it was Eli?" she whispered as soon as he recounted what Alldusk had said.

"I don't know."

She kicked at a fallen log. "I don't think he would have done all that. Maybe he doesn't like the

professors now, but he only started worrying about what we're doing after you set that fire."

"Yeah, but what if he stumbles across the hoard of marbles and decides to do something reckless with it?"

"Hmm." Leila pursed her lips. "We just need to keep him distracted. If we can get him to worry about something else, he won't have a chance to explore the tunnels."

"Maybe Rusty can help," Tristan said.

Rusty was currently practicing solo belaying with a rope tied to a pine—walking backward across the ground, because Merridy didn't trust them to actually dangle themselves in the air until they had the technique down—but when he finished and untied the rope from his waist, he joined Tristan and Leila.

"What're you guys talking about? You look so serious."

"Can you think of some way to distract Eli?" Tristan said. "Something that will keep him from trying to find out more about what the teachers are doing?"

Rusty grinned. "That's easy. I'll suggest a poker marathon with a real prize—the first person to win fifty games gets to keep everything."

* * *

As November wore on, Tristan slowly worked his way through his fifty hours of punishment. The longhouse came together in just a week with most of the professors chipping in; the fresh boards looked odd beside the dark, weathered buildings all around the clearing. By the time the new structure was finished, Tristan's hands had developed calluses and he thought his arms looked more muscular than usual.

Though he had very little spare time to spend in the Subroom, Rusty assured him the poker marathon had completely distracted Eli from his suspicions. Leila was not so confident; she reported that Eli spent more time than usual whispering to Trey and Hayley in the corner, and seemed to disappear regularly.

When Friday came around, Tristan was no longer allowed at meals until he finished working off his punishment—he still had thirty-two hours left, despite sacrificing homework time for work every night—so Leila brought meals for him in the Subroom, which he ate hunched over his textbooks. Alldusk had donated the broken table from his classroom for their use, so they finally had a space for working on homework and eating.

Two more weeks passed, Tristan growing more and more exhausted. Each night he returned to the Subroom long after dark, head pounding or arms aching from his work in Alldusk's classroom or Delair's mine, only to head straight for his waiting pile of textbooks, essays, and worksheets. More than once he forgot to complete an assignment, which just added to his hours of punishment.

By the end of the third week, Leila and Rusty had to drag him off the end of his mattress to wake him, and he stumbled drunkenly to class without breakfast.

On the third Sunday in November, Tristan still had nine hours to work off. He was ready to collapse.

Leila shook him awake at noon; smoothing his hair off his ear, she whispered, "Good morning, sleepyhead."

Groaning, Tristan rolled onto his back and rubbed his eyes. "Tell Grindlethorn I'm sick," he mumbled. "I'm too tired to work." Every muscle in his body ached.

"Quinsley says they're letting you off." She tucked another strand of Tristan's hair into place—he knew his scars were showing, but he was too sleepy to care. "He says it's a Thanksgiving treat. It's this Thursday, you know."

Tristan sat up, surprised, and squinted around the Subroom. "Where is everyone?" By this point,

he had been anticipating another fifty hours added to his punishment once he'd finished this round of work.

Leila sat back on her heels. "They're up in the kitchen. Quinsley made brunch for us to make up for the fact that we don't get a proper Thanksgiving break."

Tristan climbed out of bed and let his rumpled blankets fall into a heap on the mattress. "I can't believe I slept so late." Though he was still groggy, he smiled as he pulled his sweatshirt and socks over his pajamas. It was wonderful to be free at last.

Rusty was waiting in the kitchen when Tristan and Leila arrived, along with Eli, Trey, Hayley, and Cailyn. All five of them were wearing their pajamas.

"He's alive!" Eli said, waving to Tristan. He seemed to have forgotten his annoyance following the Halloween argument, or perhaps he figured Tristan deserved a bit of slack after working so hard for the past three weeks.

Grinning, Rusty pulled out the chair to his right. "Leila thought you'd never wake up. Nice to see you again."

Smoothing his hair over the left side of his face, Tristan sank gratefully into the empty chair. As Quinsley passed around plates, Evvie slunk into the kitchen, followed a few minutes later by Amber. Tristan avoided Evvie's eyes—he was still irritated that she hadn't so much as thanked him for the diversion.

"Happy holidays," Quinsley said, beaming at them all. "Dig in."

There were towering plates of chocolate-chip pancakes, Nutella-filled crepes, pumpkin muffins dotted with raisins, and sweet cinnamon French toast. Tristan stacked a little of everything on his plate and doused it with warm maple syrup before digging in. He ate ravenously, spearing whole pancakes and shoveling them into his mouth. It felt as though he hadn't eaten for weeks.

"We should decorate our room," Hayley said. "Isn't Thanksgiving supposed to be the official start of the Christmas season? We can get a tree from the forest, even if we don't have ornaments."

"Let's—" Rusty began, his mouth bulging with food. He swallowed and tried again. "Let's make popcorn balls and string cranberries, like we used to do for the birds."

"Ooh, and we can fold origami stars," Cailyn said, eyes sparkling. Her curly hair was frizzier than usual, like a yellow halo.

"I haven't had a tree in years," Tristan said, tracing the rim of his mug. "That was before my mom left." It had been their family's first and only real Christmas tree, and he remembered with a pang the way Marcus had dashed all over the house in excitement when it first appeared.

The others were looking at him curiously; Tristan gulped at his hot chocolate to distract himself before his eyes started stinging.

"A tree would be awesome," Eli said. "Tristan, you can chop one down for us—you've got lots of experience hauling wood around."

Tristan grimaced, and the others laughed.

* * *

Thanksgiving passed without any celebration, though Quinsley baked a couple pumpkin pies for Leila to bring down to the Subroom, and then, before anyone was prepared, midterm exams were upon them.

With classes winding down for the semester, Tristan nearly forgot his promise to keep an eye on the other students, though Eli and his friends seemed equally distracted.

Tristan and the others spent the whole weekend before their exams studying in the Subroom—Rusty called out questions, and whoever answered fastest won a chocolate truffle from the tin Quinsley had given them. There were essays to write as well, and Tristan ended up seeking refuge in

the ballroom when the Subroom grew too loud to concentrate.

Despite the last-minute studying, Tristan struggled with every exam the following day; he had been too exhausted to pay attention in class during his recent bout of punishment, and no amount of cramming would make up for it. If he passed any of them, it would be a miracle.

Once their midterms were finished, there was no remaining homework before the holiday break, so the final day of classes was easy and festive.

Most of the teachers went out of their way to make the last day enjoyable. Just as with Halloween, Brikkens had taken it upon himself to decorate the Lair for Christmas; when they arrived in class that morning, they found hundreds of red and green baubles hanging from the branches of his lemon tree.

Best of all, Brikkens gave an actual lesson in magic for the first time in months.

Reaching down with great difficulty, he lifted two overflowing baskets of pinecones onto the table and announced they would be attempting to change their color.

Though the others tried with varying degrees of commitment, Tristan and Amber were the only ones who succeeded. Before long, everyone—Damian and Zeke included—was crowded around Tristan’s end of the table, shouting out colors to Amber.

“Gold!” Eli said. “Make a gold one.”

“Can you do patterns?” Zeke asked lazily.

Amber looked flustered by the attention; she tugged at her wispy white hair and stared at the marble in her hand as though she didn’t know what it was. Tristan suspected she could do the spell without using a marble.

After a long pause, she released the marble, and candy-cane stripes blossomed on the two pinecones closest to her hand.

“Oh, bravo, my dear!” Brikkens said from behind the cluster of students. “That’s very good indeed, very nice.”

“What about little hearts?” Zeke suggested. He sniggered at Tristan, whose pinecone had begun to smoke.

“That’s not very seasonal,” Leila said derisively.

Tristan looked between them, and Zeke shrugged. “Stars, then, if that’s what little miss grumpy-face wants.”

With an unhappy glance at Tristan, Amber gave her next pinecone stars.

Tristan swatted at his own pinecone, hastily smothering the tiny flame that had flared from its core. He seemed to have an affinity for fire as well as for magic, he thought sourly.

At the end of the lesson, Tristan stuffed his four splotchy pinecones into his pockets and watched as Rusty and the others fought over the pile that Amber had enchanted.

“You should teach the rest of us how to do that,” Leila said.

Tristan snorted. “Yeah, because I’m such an expert. I might as well open a house-painting business right now.”

“Good idea,” Leila said, laughing.

“Hey,” Rusty said, joining them in the doorway, “at least painting houses would be easier than building them.”

Once Merridy’s lesson was over, the holidays had truly begun. Tristan, Leila, and Rusty returned to the Subroom with the poinsettias Gracewright had given each student; the room was empty, so they lazed by the fire and shared a bowl of popcorn. Leila had somehow gotten ahold of one of Zeke’s old quizzes, and she amused them by reading aloud his snarkiest answers.

“I’m amazed the teachers still tolerate him,” she said, shaking her head.

“Well, at least it means they’ve got a good sense of humor,” Tristan said.

Hayley and Cailyn joined them before long, each carrying an armful of pine branches and red ribbon, which they deposited on the clumsily repaired table.

“Don’t worry—we’ll sweep up the needles when we’re finished,” Hayley said as she and Cailyn began twisting the boughs into garlands and wreaths.

Soon after the two girls arrived, something thudded against the door. Tristan whirled to see the top of a pine tree poking into the room; the rest of the tree was cut off by the invisible barrier, so it appeared to hover in midair. Swaying alarmingly, it grew longer and longer until, with a swish of branches, an entire tree was thrust through the doorway.

“Look what we’ve got,” Eli called as he appeared from behind the tree, Trey slipping through the barrier after him.

Brushing scraps of bark from his hands, Trey hoisted the tree in his arms and carried it to the far corner of the room. The toffee-vanilla scent of fresh pine sap wafted through the stale air of the Subroom.

“Nice,” Leila said. “It smells wonderful.”

Rusty joined Eli and Trey in positioning the tree, which already had two thin boards nailed across the base of its trunk. “Is it snowing yet?”

“A bit,” Eli said. “Where’s Amber gone off to, with all those pinecones of hers?”

Tristan stretched out his legs and leaned back in his armchair. “No idea. The extra pinecones are there, though.” He gestured to the far side of the room.

Amber joined them in the ballroom for dinner, cheeks flushed and snow sparkling in her white hair. Evvie was still missing; even after dinner, when they retreated to the Subroom and began settling in for the night, she did not reappear. Oddly enough, no one else seemed to notice or care. It saddened Tristan to see Evvie’s isolation—in her mistrust of the other students, she had kept herself at such a distance that no one registered her absence.

Once he’d showered and changed into his pajamas, Tristan decided he couldn’t ignore Evvie’s disappearance any longer. What if she had run away? Or what if she was exploring deeper into the tunnels, where she might get them all in trouble?

“Does anyone know where Evvie is?” Tristan asked the room at large.

Hayley and Cailyn shared a look of alarm. “I thought she was helping Professor Merridy with something,” Hayley said, “but she should have gotten back hours ago. I can’t believe we didn’t notice.”

“I’m going to look for her,” Tristan said. “If she’s down in the tunnels or something—”

“Oh, stop it,” Leila hissed, shoving a stack of books against the foot of her mattress with unnecessary vehemence.

“What?” Tristan said.

Leila snorted. “You’re only worried because you think Evvie’s *pretty*. I wish you’d stop worshipping her—she still hates you.”

“I don’t worship her,” Tristan said, peeved. He punched his pillow flat along the wall, where it served as a back rest. “I’d do the same for any of you. Even Eli.”

“Aw, thanks,” Eli said sarcastically.

Leila flopped down on her bed and hid her face behind a book. “I doubt it. If I vanished, you wouldn’t go tearing off to look for me like this.”

“No,” Tristan said mildly. “If you were missing, I would’ve searched for you hours ago. But I’m worried she’s somewhere down in the tunnels, and she’ll get us all in trouble.” He frowned at Eli. “You haven’t put her up to anything, have you?”

Before Eli’s expression resolved into anger, Tristan caught a flicker of worry. “What the hell are you talking about? I’ve got nothing to do with Evvie.”

What had Eli and Trey been planning in their whispered conferences over these past weeks? Tristan did not bother interrogating him further; Eli was unlikely to reveal anything if confronted directly. Instead he pulled on his coat—the tunnels were much colder than the cozy Subroom—and grabbed a lantern on his way out. On top of his worries about Evvie, he was now afraid half the

Subroom was planning something behind his back.

Once he passed through the Prasadimum barrier, Tristan stood in the dark hallway for several minutes, deliberating. He had no idea where to begin searching; if Evvie was somewhere in the endless maze of tunnels, his chances of finding her were laughably small.

Eventually he set off for Merridy's classroom. If Evvie really was just working off punishment, he might as well figure that out now.

But Merridy's classroom was empty, and when he knocked on her office door, she did not answer. Tristan was fairly certain her bedroom led off her office, which meant she was either asleep or somewhere else.

Not quite sure why he was doing it, he tried the knob—it was unlocked. The office door swung open easily to reveal blazing light and a still-steaming mug beside a pile of final exams. The door to Merridy's bedroom hung ajar, and the room beyond was dark and clearly empty. It looked as though she had been called away on urgent business.

That was very odd.

Maybe Tristan had gotten it all wrong. Was Evvie conspiring not with Eli, but with the professors?

Closing the door carefully—he would be in huge trouble if he were caught snooping in Merridy's office—Tristan crept down the hallway to Alldusk's classroom. Alldusk had asked Tristan to report anything suspicious, after all; if Tristan mentioned Evvie's disappearance, maybe Alldusk would reveal something that would explain why Merridy was also missing.

Except Alldusk's classroom was unlocked and empty as well, his office lit just as brightly as Merridy's.

Heart pounding, Tristan ran silently up the stairs in search of Quinsley. The Lair was eerie at night, with the lights dimmed and no one around. It crossed his mind that maybe Alldusk and Merridy had slipped away for a nighttime tryst—*yeah, and maybe Evvie has run off with Damian*, he thought wryly—but that didn't explain why their offices looked as though they had been abandoned in a hurry.

The kitchen was dark, and it took Tristan three tries to find Quinsley's bedroom; the first two doors he opened led to the storeroom where Leila had slept and a narrow cupboard crammed with brooms, mops, buckets, and other cleaning supplies.

Once again, lights blazed around the walls in Quinsley's bedroom, and the rumpled bedsheets gave Tristan the impression the cook had been asleep before he rushed off.

Was the attacker kidnapping professors now?

No—surely they were powerful enough to fight back.

But where had they all gone? Had Evvie run away, as he had first guessed, and they were out in the fresh snow searching for her? Or had she collapsed with a stroke, and they had rushed her off to some distant hospital?

Closing Quinsley's bedroom door, Tristan crept back the way he had come. When he reached Drakewell's office, he stood motionless for several endless minutes, too scared to do what he knew he must.

At last he knocked.

The sound echoed hollowly in the empty corridors of the Lair. Soon the echoes faded out, replaced by the same heavy, watchful silence.

Tristan was almost relieved to find the headmaster's door locked. He knocked again, louder this time, and again he was met with nothing but silence.

Something was wrong. Evvie had something to do with it, but Tristan couldn't guess why. Maybe her innocence was nothing but a ruse, and she was here to spy on the other students, to report their every move back to the professors. Or maybe they had decided to do away with her, and were burying her body in the frozen earth above the Lair.

Nerves taut, Tristan tiptoed back down the stairs and along the corridor to the Subroom. Though

he usually navigated the tunnel in the dark, one hand tracing the rough wall, this time he held his lantern before him, flinching at every sound. He could not shake the suspicion something lurked in the darkness, ready to attack, and it was with relief that he finally reached the Subroom door and put the Prasadimum barrier between himself and whatever demons hid in the tunnels.

“Did you find Evvie?” Leila asked coldly.

Tristan blinked around the brightly lit room, momentarily disoriented. He had half-expected to find his friends missing as well, but they were just as he had left them, all awake and waiting for him to return.

“What? No, I—” Tristan had forgotten all about the reason he had left the Subroom in the first place, but it no longer mattered in the face of the larger mystery. “Leila, something’s wrong. All of the professors are gone—their rooms are empty, and it looks like they rushed off somewhere.”

Leila’s eyes widened. “What’s going on? Does Evvie know something we don’t?”

“Maybe they’re planning a Christmas surprise,” Rusty said hopefully. “What if they’ve—”

Just then, Evvie walked through the barrier.

Everyone turned to stare at her.

She was white-faced, her hair in disarray.

“What is it?” Tristan asked urgently. “Where have you been?”

“None of your business.” Evvie sounded frightened rather than indignant.

“Don’t give me that crap,” Tristan said, anger rising in him. “I’ve just been looking everywhere for you, and all the teachers are missing—something’s wrong, and you know about it.”

Evvie’s eyes flicked between the watching students. At last she spoke in a small voice.

“Our teachers are doing something tonight, something horrible. People are going to die.”

Chapter 18: Stolen Marbles

The room erupted in shouting.

“I knew it!” Eli yelled. “This is BS!”

“Who told you that?” Leila said loudly.

“Who’s going to die?” Cailyn asked. “Because if it’s a bunch of murderers—”

“I don’t want—”

“Can we go home? I’m scared.”

“Let’s run away now, before—”

“Everyone SHUT UP!” Tristan roared.

The voices subsided.

“What do you know?” Tristan asked Evvie. “Tell us as much as you can. Who’s in danger?”

She shook her head miserably. “I don’t know. No one would tell me. But I hate this place, and I don’t want to be here any longer. We need to do something!”

“Yeah, we do,” Eli said grimly. Pulling on his coat and shoes, he stalked from the Subroom. Before he left, he threw a significant look at Trey.

“Hang on a minute!” Tristan shouted. “You can’t just—”

But Eli had already vanished through the barrier, where no sound would pass through.

“Wait—Trey!”

Though Trey’s dark eyes were troubled, he followed Eli through the barrier without question. Tristan dashed after him.

By the weak light of his lantern, he glimpsed Trey sprinting up the tunnel toward the main hallway. As he raced to catch up, he thought he heard footsteps behind him; when he glanced over his shoulder, he saw nothing but darkness.

Tristan reached the dimly lit marble hallway just in time to see Trey turn down the stairs to the lowest level of the school.

Feet slipping on the polished marble, Tristan hurtled down the hallway. Trey was faster than he was, but there was little chance Tristan would lose him now—he had to be heading for either Delair’s classroom or the mine...

Skidding down the final hallway, Tristan dashed into the mine tunnel. He knew he had chosen correctly when he heard muffled voices, and he slowed, moving quietly now.

Before he caught up with Eli and Trey, Tristan heard something like metal clanking loudly on stone. It happened again; he thought wildly of Delair’s pickaxe and wondered if they were trying to steal Delairium for some reason. But no, the metal was clattering as though rolling along the floor—it sounded more like they were throwing something against the wall which then fell and rolled away.

Then he rounded the corner, and his lantern illuminated a bucket filled to the brim with gold marbles.

Tristan’s heart leapt into his throat.

“What the hell are you planning to do with those?” They had no idea how dangerous it was to hoard magic like that.

Eli picked up a marble and hurled it at the wall.

When Tristan lunged for him, intending to wrestle the bucket of marbles from his grasp, Trey threw him to the ground and pinned him there with his knees. Trey was several inches taller than Tristan, and heavy enough that Tristan couldn’t struggle free.

“We figured out that if you throw marbles enough times, they eventually explode,” Eli said coldly.

He threw another marble, and another.

The next marble exploded when it hit the wall, with a flash of sparks and a bang like a gunshot. Chunks of rock burst from the wall, smashing into Tristan's legs and raining dust through the tunnel. When the debris cleared, he could see a basketball-sized hole in the wall.

"What are you—" Tristan broke off, coughing. "What are you trying to do? Are you planning to kill yourselves?"

Eli froze with a marble in his hand. Slowly he turned and glared at Tristan. "What are you talking about? We're just trying to stop the teachers from whatever messed-up thing they're doing."

"Why here?" Tristan wanted to keep him talking, to distract him long enough to think of a way to get the bucket of marbles away from him.

"Because something is hidden down here," Eli said, "and I bet that's where the teachers have gone. We've been watching it for a month now, and Drakewell keeps disappearing into this exact tunnel. If we can block it up and trap the teachers down there, maybe they'll tell us what they're doing. If not, it'll give us time to escape this madhouse."

"How did you get the marbles?"

Eli laughed coldly. "You're so naïve. It's not hard at all to steal things in class—the teachers are so trusting. Bit stupid, really."

"Someone's coming," Trey snapped.

Tristan heard the footsteps as well, and he twisted where he lay smashed beneath Trey's knees, trying to see who had followed.

"Was that an explosion?" Leila's voice said.

Though he still couldn't see her, Tristan sagged with relief, letting his cheek rest on the cold stone once more.

"Stay back!" Eli shouted. "These marbles explode when you throw them—you don't want to get hurt!" He grabbed a handful from the bucket.

"Why are you squashing Tristan?" Leila asked Trey. "I thought you were more sensible than Eli. Do you want to get us all killed?"

His dark face flushing, Trey removed his weight from Tristan.

Tristan scrambled to his feet and brushed rock dust from his face. Leila stalked up beside him, and they faced off Eli and Trey, sizing each other up. When Leila reached for Tristan's hand, he nearly flinched away, but then he felt the cold, metallic marble she pressed into his palm.

"This must have rolled away while they were distracted," she breathed.

"Thanks," Tristan whispered back.

He wondered if he could use the marble to lend himself the same unnatural strength he had attacked his bully with, back at Juvie.

Holding the marble behind his back, he tried to concentrate on the spell, tried to forget the way his heart pounded in fear.

Just as the marble grew hot and malleable, Eli lifted the bucket and prepared to dump its entire contents into the tunnel leading off Delair's mine.

"Don't do that!" Tristan shouted.

He leapt forward.

As he lunged for the bucket, the still-hot marble slipped from his grasp and clattered into the bucket.

"NO!" Tristan yelled. He ripped the bucket from Eli's hand and flung it down the side passage.

A second later, the whole tunnel exploded with a deafening BOOM.

Tristan was thrown off his feet as fire and rock ricocheted out from the tunnel.

He crashed to the ground, landing painfully on his hip; rocks slammed into him from every direction.

Shielding his eyes from the flying chunks of rock, he could see nothing but flashes of light. The two lanterns flickered out, one by one, and then rocks were raining down on Tristan like the avalanche all over again. Dust saturated the air; every gasp of breath coated his lungs until he couldn't breathe for coughing.

As the rocks settled, Tristan heard someone else coughing, and then Eli choked out, "Trey? Trey! Are you okay?"

Though he was not buried in rocks, at least as far as he could tell in the dark, Tristan could do nothing but lie there. Every inch of him hurt so much he wanted to scream, but when he tried to call out to Leila, the dust in his throat smothered his voice.

What could have been minutes or hours later, many hurried footsteps pounded down the tunnel. Lantern light flickered nearer, and soon a clump of professors tore around the corner.

When they spotted the wreckage, they stopped as one.

Groaning, Tristan tried to push himself up. Eli had crawled over to Trey's side and was dragging rocks off his legs, while Leila lay pinned beneath a large rock, blinking helplessly at the professors.

"What is the meaning of this?" Drakewell bellowed. "Get up! Now! What have you done to our school?"

"They're hurt, Professor," Merridy said, her voice high and panicked. "We need to help them."

"Hurt trying to destroy the academy! Hurt trespassing in the tunnels, where they were explicitly forbidden to go!"

"It's all right," Delair panted from somewhere behind Drakewell. "It's just my mine. Some of the kids have been helping me work down here, so they're allowed in this part."

Striding forward, his face skeletal in the dim light, Drakewell grabbed Tristan by the arm and dragged him to his feet.

Tristan yelped as every battered muscle seized up.

"Fairholm! I should have known you were involved. *Explain.*"

While Drakewell shook Tristan's shoulders, sunken eyes flashing, the other professors hurried over to inspect Leila, Eli, and Trey. Alldusk lifted the boulder off Leila's legs, and Eli clutched Trey's hand while Grindlethorn took his pulse.

"Is he alive?" Eli asked faintly. "Is he g-going to be okay?"

"He's alive," Grindlethorn said gruffly. "No thanks to you lot."

"Fairholm!" Drakewell shouted once again.

Tristan winced. His throat was still caked with rock dust; when he tried to speak, all that came out was a croak.

Swallowing, he tried again. "I'm sorry. It was a—an accident."

Eli gave him a brief, surprised look.

"*What happened?*" Drakewell shouted.

No excuses sprang to mind. They were in a part of the academy forbidden to students, with marbles still littering the floor, and half the tunnel had collapsed in the explosion.

Drakewell threw Tristan aside and rounded on Eli. "What about you, Fritz? What do you have to say for yourself?"

Eli's Adam's apple bobbed as he swallowed; he glanced sideways at Tristan but did not speak.

"I've had enough of you delinquents!" Drakewell shouted. "You're each going to work off three hours of punishment with me every single evening, until you decide to tell us what happened here."

"Headmaster," Grindlethorn muttered, "I really think we ought to take Mr. Patrick here to the hospital room. He needs urgent attention."

"Off with you, then," Drakewell said coldly.

When Grindlethorn and Gracewright carried Trey from the tunnel, Eli moved as if to follow, but Drakewell stopped him with a piercing glare.

“Can’t their punishment wait until after Christmas?” Quinsley asked. “Surely we have more important things to do over the next couple weeks than supervising their work.”

“No,” Drakewell snapped. “Do you want to encourage their criminal behavior? Be grateful I’m not shipping them off to mental hospitals this very minute!”

“But—” Leila said.

“Get out of here!” Drakewell shouted. “To bed, and if I find any other students in the halls tonight, you’ll never see the light of day again. Do you understand?”

Tristan, Leila, and Eli broke into a run as they fled the site of the explosion. Adrenaline and fear overwhelmed Tristan’s pain, and he was turning down the hall toward the Subroom tunnel before he knew it.

“Do you think Trey is going to be okay?” Eli asked in a small voice

“He won’t be if you don’t head straight back to the Subroom,” Tristan said.

Eli winced. “I talked him into it. He didn’t want to cause trouble, but...”

They slowed as they turned down the dark tunnel. Tristan’s lamp had been blasted to pieces in the explosion, so they had to feel their way blindly along the passageway.

“Why didn’t you tell the truth?” Eli asked softly. “You could’ve gotten out of trouble if you told them you were trying to stop us.”

Tristan sighed. “If they’re as evil as Evvie thinks they are, I didn’t know what they would do to you if they decided you were a threat.”

Eli was quiet for a long time. When they reached the Subroom door at last, he paused before stepping through the barrier. “Thanks.”

Chapter 19: Christmas in the Lair

Tristan had hoped the other students would be asleep, so he could just lie down and forget about the mess he was in, but of course they were all waiting to hear what had happened.

“Where did you go?” Evvie asked anxiously.

Rusty’s eyes widened. “Did something attack you?”

“Where’s Trey?” Hayley asked.

Tristan sank onto the sofa by the enchanted fire, pain flaring as his adrenaline subsided. When Leila sat beside him, the others turned their stares to Eli, who shifted on his feet. “Trey and I were trying to keep the teachers from doing—whatever it is they were doing—and Tristan wanted to stop us.” He frowned at Tristan. “Hey—how did you know how dangerous those marbles were?”

“Someone told me,” Tristan said. “And the reason we’re not allowed in the tunnels is because the entire Lair would blow up if we disturbed the wrong place.”

Eli swore. “Why didn’t you say anything?”

“I didn’t know if you were suicidal,” Tristan said shortly. “Maybe you’d go looking for that place and try to kill us all.”

“No way in hell.” Eli grimaced. “What happens now?”

“We need to figure out what’s going on here,” Tristan said. “Why this academy exists, and why they’ve recruited us. But we need to be careful. Drakewell will be watching, and if we make any mistakes, it sounds like we’ll be sent to a mental hospital—or locked up in the tunnels.” He laughed humorlessly. “I don’t know what would be worse.”

“Can’t we just run away?” Evvie asked softly.

“We’d die out there,” Leila said. “Especially since it’s winter. We don’t even know where the nearest town is—it would probably take weeks before we reached civilization.”

Hayley rubbed her eyes with her fist. “I want to go home.” She clutched a blanket tight around her shoulders, her face pinched as though she struggled not to cry.

“You don’t have a home to go to,” Leila said. “None of us do, isn’t that right?” She looked around at the others, waiting for someone to contradict her. “We’re not just criminals; we’re criminals with nowhere to go after Juvie. That’s why they took us.”

No one answered, and for a long moment the Subroom was silent.

“What about Christmas?” Rusty asked. He sounded very young and lost.

Leila smiled sadly. “I haven’t celebrated Christmas in years. Maybe we can wait until the holiday is over to decide what we should do.”

She sighed. “In the meantime, the Subroom is safer than anywhere else in the Lair. The teachers can’t hurt us down here. Gracewright knew what she was doing when she let us plant the Prasadimum in our doorway—it means not all the teachers agree with Drakewell.”

“Then why are they still here?” Tristan asked. “Why stay, if Drakewell is doing horrible things and they don’t support him?”

Leila shook her head. “I have no idea. Once we know why this academy exists, maybe everything will make sense.”

* * *

In the morning, an uneasy silence hung over the Subroom. Eli had long since vanished, likely to visit Trey in the hospital room, but no one seemed willing to venture to the ballroom alone.

At last Tristan rose from his comfortable seat by the fire. “We have to head up sometime,” he said to Leila. “I’d rather work off those hours before dinner.”

Rusty followed them up the quiet tunnel. “What d’you think Drakewell will force you to do?”

“The most unpleasant thing he can come up with, I bet,” Tristan said. He was already imagining hours of manual labor; he was not sure his bruised arms and legs would support much weight.

Drakewell was waiting in the ballroom when Tristan, Leila, and Rusty arrived. Most of the professors were already eating lunch, accompanied by Zeke’s gang, Eli, and—sporting a cut on his forehead but otherwise unharmed—Trey.

A cold smile twisted Drakewell’s mouth when he set eyes on Tristan.

“Ah. Mr. Fairholm.” His voice was quiet and dangerous. “You will be working with me this afternoon. One o’clock on the dot. The rest of you will spend the time assisting Professor Grindlethorn.”

Though he had been hungry a moment before, Tristan could hardly stomach his lunch.

“Why is he singling you out?” Leila whispered as Quinsley brought around sandwiches and minestrone.

“You’ll probably have a turn with him tomorrow.”

“Maybe we should consider running away after all.”

When one o’clock came, Tristan dragged his feet to Drakewell’s office. The headmaster terrified him; though he had never been alone with Drakewell before, the way the other professors acted nervous and jumpy around him said a great deal.

Drakewell’s office was not what Tristan had expected. He had imagined chains bolted to dark stone walls, skulls and evil-looking potions crammed on the bookshelves, but this room was disappointingly ordinary. A plain wooden desk dominated the center of the room, with bookshelves lining the walls; the only things filling the shelves were books and a couple chunks of what looked like Delairium. Aside from that, the room was empty.

“Sit,” Drakewell said. He studied Tristan over the tops of his steepled fingers, his expression unreadable.

Tristan dropped into the chair across from the headmaster and shoved his hands under his knees to prevent himself from fidgeting.

“It appears that you—like everyone else at this academy—finds me *alarming*,” Drakewell said this with a note of polite skepticism.

This sudden change in Drakewell’s demeanor worried Tristan. Was the headmaster trying to win his confidence?

“I don’t usually mind, of course. I find a healthy dose of fear keeps people in line better than any degree of loyalty. Yet it has come to my attention that certain people have been concealing things from me due to this same fear.” His eyes darkened, and a muscle in his cheek twitched dangerously. “And if the security of our school is compromised, I will not tolerate disloyalty.”

“Your actions in particular have concerned me, because they make no sense. The only conclusion I can draw is that you are either an incorrigible delinquent or you are working in cahoots with someone who might or might not be endangering all of our lives.” Now Drakewell’s voice was tight with anger. “The first is highly improbable, given your history, which leads me to believe you have been aiding our attacker in some way.”

Drakewell leaned forward, one bony, claw-like hand curling around the black hourglass that always hung at his neck.

“You have no idea what you’re messing with, Fairholm,” he spat. “It’s not just our lives at risk if this academy is compromised. The future of the entire world hangs in the balance. The next time, before you agree to help someone who is working against us, ask yourself if you want the collapse of civilization on your conscience.”

Tristan would have laughed at what sounded like a wild exaggeration had Drakewell not looked so serious.

“I don’t expect an answer now, but the price of ending your daily punishment is this: you must tell me who you have been helping, who is concealing things from me, and what they have said about our academy. If you decide not to answer my questions, I will extract the information in a different manner. Nothing escapes my notice at the Underground Academy—I am aware that our school has been attacked, and that certain professors are endeavoring to keep that information from me.”

Tristan’s stomach tightened with worry. How much did Drakewell know? Could he read minds, and only pretended ignorance to prolong Tristan’s suffering?

“What do you want me to do?” Tristan asked stiffly.

“Oh, I thought it might be worthwhile to remind you what expulsion from the Underground Academy would look like,” Drakewell said.

He slid a large accordion file toward Tristan. The papers within looked like printed website pages—hundreds upon hundreds of them.

“You will be searching for and highlighting any references to a young man named Tristan Fairholm. If he were to find himself removed from his present situation, he would be detained at a mental institution for several years—for his own safety, of course.” Drakewell allowed himself a cruel smile. “If that came to pass, we would need to amend certain records to plant evidence of mental instability much earlier in life. It would nicely complement the court records that document his insistence on an imaginary earthquake.”

With shaking hands, Tristan pulled out the first stack of papers. It was not long before his own name jumped out at him—a scribbled note that must have come from parent-teacher conferences years ago.

Ask parents about absences early in semester...Tristan usually turns in assignments on time but rarely speaks in class...participation grades are suffering.

“Wait a moment,” Tristan said. “These are my school records from before Juvie. How do you have these?”

“We’ve been keeping tabs on you for a long time, Mr. Fairholm. You are something of an anomaly, just like Miss Ashton. Unlike the other students at the Underground Academy, your magic was likely to emerge without training. We needed to bring you here for your safety and the safety of those around you.”

“But you only take kids from Juvie,” Tristan said slowly. “Did you make sure I ended up in Juvie so you could recruit me?”

“What a childish idea,” Drakewell said with a cruel smile. “We did not force you to steal your neighbor’s car, and it was you alone who drove so fast that you lost control and killed your brother.”

“But the fire,” Tristan said wildly. “Did you—”

“Quiet, Fairholm. I don’t want to hear any more of your whining.”

With a great effort, Tristan bit back his angry retort. It would almost be worth earning more hours if he could goad Drakewell into revealing more, but part of him was afraid of what he might learn.

He bent to his task, pulse racing. How did the professors have so many of his records? Had they raided his dad’s house before the fire?

Most of what he found was dull—lists of grades and essays and doctor’s reports—but there were several long-ago transgressions he was sure Drakewell could twist in his favor. The time he and Marcus had snuck away from school to buy milkshakes before the latest in a line of operations his brother had undergone; the time he had gotten in trouble for forging his mom’s signature because he didn’t want to admit he hadn’t seen her for months after the divorce; the time his dad had moved out and

dragged Tristan with him to a trailer park, leaving his textbooks behind, so he didn't turn in any assignments for weeks.

Near the end of the accordion folder, Tristan reached the transcripts from his trial; mixed among them were notes in his public defender's cursive scrawl. How the hell had Drakewell gotten ahold of those?

Tristan's hand shook as he highlighted page after page of notes. Drakewell didn't need to amend these; he sounded insane as it was. Even to this day, he could not banish a seed of doubt. *Had* he imagined the earthquake? Had his panicked brain manufactured the whole thing?

When Drakewell pushed back his chair with a loud scrape, Tristan flinched.

"Our time is up—for today." He held Tristan's eyes with a piercing stare. "I hope you reconsider your position before tomorrow's little session."

Again Tristan had the feeling Drakewell could read his mind. Heart pounding, he tore his eyes from the headmaster's and fled.

He was too jumpy and troubled to return to the Subroom just yet. Instead he ran up the stairs to the snowy meadow, where he trod a circle around the perimeter, stamping the snow flatter with each pass. Though he did not have his winter coat, he welcomed the biting cold—it seemed to focus his scattered thoughts.

So many answers seemed to dangle just out of reach.

Drakewell insisted the academy's work affected the whole world—but how? Were they fighting off evil forces of magic, unbeknownst to the masses, or was it something more sinister? He recalled a short story he had read in his English class once, where a utopian society depended on one person suffering. Was that why the teachers were killing people—so the rest of the world could live in relative peace and comfort?

And how did Drakewell know about the attacks, if the professors had kept them secret? Or had they only pretended to conceal the truth from Drakewell as some sort of test of Tristan's loyalty?

Had they meddled in his life somehow, to ensure he ended up in Juvie? Yet Drakewell was right—even if the professors had been involved, it had been Tristan's hands on the wheel when the car crashed, Tristan's mistakes that killed Marcus...

It was a while before Tristan realized his firmly-packed circle was filling with snow again. Fat flurries were swirling around him, and he had been so focused on the snow at his feet that he hadn't even noticed. The wind was picking up, plastering the wet flakes to his hair and sending icy water slipping down his forehead; as soon as he registered it, he started shivering violently.

Tucking his chin in his inadequate coat, he ran the last distance to the newly-built longhouse. Delicious smells wafted from the kitchen, filling the warm ballroom; dinner was evidently drawing near.

Everyone except Amber was down in the Subroom when he arrived. Leila dropped her book and hurried to his side, eyebrows drawn together in concern.

"Where have you been? Did Drakewell keep you late?" Leila brushed snow from his hair. "What were you doing outside?"

"I wanted to go for a walk," Tristan muttered. "Get out of the Lair for a bit." He was still shivering.

"What did he make you do?"

"Nothing. Just paperwork." He wasn't sure why he didn't want to tell Leila what had transpired during those hours in Drakewell's office, except that he couldn't work out who was right and wrong. His thoughts were too muddled. Someone was lying to him, but he didn't know who.

* * *

Though uncertainty still hung over the Lair as Christmas approached, Rusty was determined to enjoy the holidays, and he managed to convince most of the others to follow his lead. Tristan dwelled on Drakewell's words whenever he was alone, but Leila took it upon herself to distract him; he was equal parts grateful and irritated when she dragged him along on yet another baking or decorating excursion.

Drakewell was absent more than usual, and he did not oversee any further punishment despite his original threat. Instead, Tristan, Leila, Eli, and Trey spent their daily three hours helping each of the professors in turn, always with one of the least savory tasks possible. They scraped months' worth of burnt residue from Quinsley's two huge convection ovens, hauled away the mountain of stones that had collapsed in Delair's mine, sprinkled horse manure throughout Gracewright's greenhouse and indoor garden, and washed out blood-soaked bandages that Grindlethorn had saved for some inexplicable reason.

After spending so much time together, Tristan began to feel a certain kinship for Eli and Trey—their earlier disagreement had long since been forgotten. Though Trey was usually quiet, he had a way of saying just the right thing to put Eli in his place when his sarcastic remarks got a bit too personal; meanwhile, Eli seemed to have decided the students had no hope of changing their circumstances and might as well comply with the professors' demands until they learned more.

Despite everything, Tristan found himself enjoying the lead-up to Christmas. The halls of the Lair grew brighter and more colorful by the day—wreaths festooned each door, while the walls were draped with pine garlands, and half the enchanted lights had been altered to glow red or green. An enormous Christmas tree dominated the far side of the ballroom, so tall that only the lowest third had been decorated. Even standing on a rickety old ladder, Quinsley couldn't reach any higher.

Tristan watched the teachers closely, but nothing in their behavior suggested guilt or subterfuge. Brikkens sang carols as he shuffled through the halls, his warbling baritone surprisingly melodic, and Gracewright took to wearing a hand-knitted Santa cap. Once or twice, Tristan caught Alldusk's eye and could have sworn his teacher wanted to say something, but each time Alldusk just shook his head and walked away with a reluctant smile.

Every day, the sugary aroma of hundreds of baking cookies wafted through the halls. Leila spent hours helping Quinsley with the baking, often accompanied by Tristan, and when it came time to decorate gingerbread cookies, she invited Rusty along as well.

While he waited for Rusty to put away the stack of paper he had been folding into origami stars for their Christmas tree, Tristan caught sight of Amber, who was curled in a corner with a pile of books. "Amber, you should help us decorate cookies too," he said. He felt sorry for her—she had been trapped inside after a blizzard had practically buried the Lair's entrance.

Amber looked up from her book, eyes wide. "I don't know how."

"Come on." Tristan held out his hand, grinning; after a moment she took it and allowed him to pull her to her feet. "It'll be fun."

She bit her lip as though to hide a smile.

Up in the kitchen, Quinsley was mixing two enormous bowls of golden-brown dough; he was delighted to see Tristan, Leila, Rusty, and Amber, and set them to work at once rolling out dough and pressing cookie-cutter shapes.

Tristan could see why Leila enjoyed spending time in the kitchen—Quinsley's friendly, easygoing manner made it seem as though nothing had changed. He could not believe Quinsley would allow Drakewell to commit evil acts unchallenged; there had to be a reason for the professors' loyalty.

Amber hadn't exaggerated when she had said she didn't know how to bake cookies. She watched Tristan with wide-eyed curiosity as he lifted gooey stars and snowmen from the floured counter, and when he gave her a turn with the spatula, she couldn't pry the shapes free without squashing them.

"Maybe I should do that," Tristan said, grinning. "You press the shapes, and I'll put them in the pan."

Moving aside, Amber handed Tristan the spatula.

“Can’t you just do this with magic?” he asked. “Sometimes I can’t tell where you end and your magic begins.”

Amber ducked her head, cheeks reddening delicately. “Drawing on power is harder inside the Lair. I should leave; I’ll only get in the way.”

Tristan nudged her with his elbow. “I was only teasing. Do any of us look like we’re experts at this?”

Though Amber was silent, her shy smile returned.

Decorating the cookies took most of the day. “We should take some down to the Subroom,” Rusty said when the last of the frosting had run out.

Tristan kicked him—even if Quinsley knew about the Subroom, they shouldn’t refer to it so openly. He never knew when Drakewell might be lurking within earshot.

“Ow!” Rusty yelped. “Have you got a plate we could use, Quinsley?” His fingers were stained bright blue from the dye in the frosting, which he had been sampling as he worked.

“Of course.” Wiping his hands on his apron, Quinsley handed him a metal plate.

Leila was helping stack bowls in the sink. “Open up, Triss,” she said, grinning. When Tristan obeyed, she stuck a frosting-filled spoon into his mouth.

* * *

On the morning of Christmas Eve, the students in the Subroom came to an unspoken understanding—they would pretend nothing was wrong, just for the next two days. Someone had interceded on behalf of Tristan, Leila, Eli, and Trey to ensure they were allowed a two-day break from their punishments; Tristan suspected it was Quinsley.

When Rusty went around the room, wishing everyone a happy Christmas, the others beamed at him; Evvie, who had been ignoring Tristan ever since the night of the explosion, gave him a tentative smile.

Eli remarked that their Christmas tree looked wonderful. Leila and Quinsley had boiled sugar to make hand-pulled candy canes the day before, and these dangled from every branch, interspersed with popcorn balls and mostly identifiable origami. Though Rusty had been eating candy canes off the tree since they appeared, he had a long way to go before he stripped the tree bare.

That night, the school came together for a lavish feast. Each table was lit with red-and-gold candles and piled high with food, from turkey and honeyed yams to steaming zucchini bread and potato-cheddar soup. The students from the Subroom drew their tables together so all nine could sit close, while Zeke and Damian’s gang threw them suspicious, resentful looks.

Even Drakewell and Delair joined the teachers for the occasion; the teachers’ table looked unusually crowded with every seat full. For once, Drakewell’s sunken eyes were fixed on his meal rather than scanning the room in search of students to punish.

“It’s just like Christmas when I was a kid,” Rusty said, beaming around at his friends. “I’m an only child, but I’ve got tons of cousins. We’d all get together for Christmas at my grandma’s place, and the kids would eat around one big table like this.”

“My parents are Jewish,” Trey said, “so I’ve never celebrated Christmas before.”

Eli’s eyebrows flew up. “Why didn’t you mention it sooner? I bet the teachers would’ve done something special for you.”

Trey shook his head. “I don’t want to make extra work for them. Anyway, it’s not like my parents were that serious about it. I never had a bar mitzvah or anything.”

They returned to the Subroom after dinner, cheerful and drowsy, and Tristan and Rusty helped Leila carry down two heaping plates of cookies and eggnog. Everyone brought their blankets and

pillows over to the fire, where they sat on the floor with their backs against the couch and chairs. Rusty extinguished the lamps so the only light came from the enchanted fire's glow.

"We should've gotten stockings," Hayley said, her eyes reflecting the firelight.

Rusty snorted. "You think Santa's gonna dig through a hundred feet of rock to get to our fireplace?"

It was Leila's turn to laugh. "How old are you, again, Rusty?" She reached for a gingerbread snowman and bit off its head. "I know not everyone agrees, but I'm glad to be here. This Subroom is more of a home than I've had in a long time."

Rusty raised his glass of eggnog. "Hear, hear."

At last, when the cookies had been reduced to crumbs, the students began stumbling to bed. Tristan drew the covers over his head and mumbled, "Merry Christmas, guys." He wasn't sure anyone heard.

* * *

In the morning, Tristan woke to excited voices.

"C'mon, guys, we've got presents!" Rusty called across the room. He, Eli, Trey, and Hayley were clustered around the stout Christmas tree, digging through a pile of boxes.

"Did you have to wake us up?" Leila grumbled, rolling out of bed and hugging her blanket over her shoulders.

Tristan smoothed his hair over his scars. "Is there anything from our families?"

"Nah, it's just from teachers and kids," Rusty said. "They'd never let people send stuff here."

"I thought the teachers couldn't get down here," Eli said furiously. "What happened to the Prasadimum keeping people out?"

"Are they going to hurt us?" Evvie asked.

"Calm down," Leila snapped. "Gerry had me drag most of this stuff down here. We're perfectly safe."

Once everyone had gathered around the tree, Rusty passed out presents. Each student received a tin filled with chocolates and cookies from Leila, though Tristan's and Rusty's were rather larger than the others. From Rusty, Tristan got an odd lamp that looked something like a flashlight; Amber gave him a glowing cube of Delairium that she had probably shaped with magic. Cailyn had given each of them a decoration for the room, fashioned from materials she must have scavenged in the forest—wreaths of braided branches, bouquets and framed pictures made from dried flowers, and polished wood bowls.

"Did you make all of these?" Evvie asked, holding up her new vase.

Cailyn nodded happily. "Gracewright helped, though."

"Damn," Eli said, sounding impressed.

As he unwrapped present after present, Tristan wished he had given something in return; he hadn't even wrapped gifts for Leila and Rusty. There were even a few gifts from the teachers mixed in with the rest: knitted scarves and hats from Gracewright, a set of plates and silverware from Quinsley, and new books from Alldusk.

"This is dumb," Eli said, dropping his book by the fire. "If Alldusk wanted to give us homework, he could've waited another week."

"They don't look like textbooks," Leila said, opening hers to the title page. Most of the books were bound in ancient black leather; hers was larger than the others, and blue rather than black. "Hey, this is neat! Listen—'Simple Spells, Delicious Dishes—A Magical Cookbook'" She laughed and began flipping through the pages. "Now I just need to learn how to use magic."

"Nothing like a good cookbook for motivation," Tristan said, grinning. He looked down at his

own book, which was titled, *A Beginner's Guide to Magical Theory: The Complete Compendium*.

"Now we really do have a library," Leila said. "This is excellent!"

When Rusty tossed the final present to Leila, she pried open the lid and made a noise of disgust.

"What's wrong?" Tristan asked.

Wordlessly she held up the contents of the small box. It was the chunk of her hair Zeke had cut off, still in a braid and wrapped around the pinecone Amber had covered in stars.

"Who's it from?" Rusty picked up the lid.

"Zeke, obviously," Leila snapped, "unless someone stole this back." She glared at Tristan.

When no one said anything, she flung the pinecone and the braid of hair into the fire, where they sparked and vanished from sight.

Glowering, Leila followed Tristan and the others up to breakfast, all of them still in their pajamas. In the ballroom, they found yet another pile of gifts under the enormous tree. Each student received a bundle of new clothes from Gracewright and Brikkens—all varied and properly fitted, unlike their uniforms—and new school supplies from Alldusk.

At last Quinsley came around with breakfast, wading through the discarded ribbons and wrapping paper.

"Thanks for the dishes," Rusty said. "They're great!"

Quinsley winked at him.

Leila kept glancing over at Zeke's table as she ate. "I just want to hit Zeke," she said, cutting into her pancake so furiously the table shook.

"Aw, where's your Christmas spirit?" Rusty teased.

Tristan leaned forward, elbows on the table. "I think we should tell Zeke's gang what we learned about the teachers," he said in a low voice. "They deserve to know if we're involved in something awful. So don't pick a fight with Zeke, at least until break is over, okay?"

Leila rolled her eyes. "Good luck getting the others to agree to that."

It wasn't long before Leila had a chance to take out her anger on Zeke. After the students from the Subroom carried down their new clothes and school supplies, they pulled on the hats and scarves from Gracewright, intending to enjoy the fresh layer of snow. Someone must have told Zeke's gang what they were planning, because as soon as Tristan and Leila reached the longhouse doors, they were bombarded with snowballs.

"Ha!" Leila yelled. She ducked sideways and scooped up a fistful of snow.

Tristan threw his arms over his face and ran for cover, dodging behind a tree.

The new snow was wet and heavy, and Tristan's boots sank knee-deep in drifts as he packed snowballs. Once his arms were full of ammunition, he dashed away from the tree and began hurling snowballs at Zeke's friends. He aimed at grim, hulking Ryan Riggs but missed; his next snowball walloped Damian on the back of the head.

"Damn you!" Damian shouted. Dropping the snowball he'd been shaping, Damian seized a long, crooked icicle from the branch of a nearby pine and hurled it at Tristan, who sprinted out of reach.

From the shelter of the forest, Tristan noticed Amber watching him from a distance, hovering like a shadow between two dark pines.

"Come join us," he called, though he knew Amber would do nothing of the sort.

To his surprise, Amber called back, "You and the others are always fighting. You should come walk with me instead."

Shrugging, Tristan brushed slush from his gloves and tramped through the snow to where she stood. "It's probably a good thing you dragged me away from that. Leila and Zeke are going to murder each other."

Amber blinked at him. Then she turned and began walking away from the school, stepping delicately so her feet didn't break through the surface of the snow. Tristan tried to do the same, but

his feet kept sinking in—the snow’s crust was brittle and thin.

Finally he gave up and asked, “Is that a spell, what you’re doing?”

Slowing, Amber let her feet sink through the snow. “Not a *spell*, precisely. I am using magic, though.”

“But you’re not using a marble, are you?” Tristan asked. “Delair said that skilled magicians can fuel their spells with their own energy. Is that what you’re doing?”

Amber shook her head. “That’s too tiring. But before I knew about the marbles, I discovered I could channel magic directly from the auras all around me.”

“Without destroying anything? Why haven’t the teachers told us about that? The marbles take so much time to collect.”

“I think they’ve forgotten how.” Amber studied Tristan, her head cocked sideways. “Or perhaps they haven’t yet discovered it.”

Tristan was taken aback. “Who *are* you?”

This time Amber did not respond. He was afraid he’d upset her.

“Drakewell said something the other day,” he ventured. “He said the two of us are anomalies—that we would have learned to use magic even without coming here. You figured it out ages ago, didn’t you?”

Amber nodded slowly. “There’s something I wanted to tell you.” She knelt in the snow and scooped up a handful of powder in her bare hand. For a moment she let the snow rest there—then, in a heartbeat, it all melted and ran through her fingers. “I saw Eli sneaking into Delair’s mine tunnel the other night. I think he’s still working against the teachers.”

Chapter 20: The Natural Order

Tristan swore.

Who should he side with now—the professors or his friends? If he reported Eli, Drakewell would be livid—he might even attack Eli—but if he said nothing, the whole academy was at risk.

“Sorry,” Amber said softly. “I thought you would want to know.”

“No, it’s not your fault. Goddammit, Eli! He’s determined to get us all killed!” Tristan whacked a pine branch in his frustration, dislodging a clump of snow that fell with a whump. “You won’t say anything to the others, will you?”

Amber’s eyes widened. “Of course not. I never talk to them.”

It was true; Tristan’s anger lessened slightly in a rush of pity. Not knowing what to say, he cleared his throat. “I need to do something. I’ll see you later?”

“Merry Christmas, Tristan.” For a split second Tristan thought he saw his pity reflected back in her smile.

Well, he thought grumpily as he trudged away through the snow, why would anyone want to trade places with him? Half the academy hated him for one reason or another, and it had fallen to him to keep Eli from killing them all.

He skirted around the meadow, not wanting anyone to question him, though his stealth was wasted; the other students were thoroughly distracted by their snowball fight. Walls of snow had appeared on either side of the meadow, behind which each side stockpiled snowballs and sheltered between attacks, and Leila and Rusty were burying a flailing pile of limbs that might have belonged to Zeke beneath a mountain of snow.

The Lair was quiet and empty, though Tristan caught Brikkens’ distant voice singing “Deck the Halls” as he started down the stairs.

Though he had already made his decision, he slowed as he neared Alldusk’s classroom. Everything rested on whether or not he could trust Alldusk; if his favorite professor betrayed him, Eli would be kicked out. And no matter how many stupid decisions Eli made, he did not deserve to waste away at a mental hospital.

Alldusk answered on the first knock. Merridy stood in the doorway of his office, a glass of eggnog in hand; when she spotted Tristan, she muttered something about needing to help Gracewright and slipped from the classroom, though Alldusk kissed her cheek as she passed.

“You enjoying the holidays?” Alldusk asked, his searching gaze belying his would-be casual tone.

“Yeah, it’s great,” Tristan said flatly. “Listen, I want to talk to you about something. In—in private.”

Alldusk nodded quickly. “Of course. Come on through; my office will be more comfortable.” Tristan noticed that he locked the door to his classroom behind him.

When the office door was locked as well, Tristan and Alldusk seated on opposite sides of the professor’s polished wood desk, Alldusk folded his arms and said, “Am I about to learn something about why you keep getting into trouble?”

“Um...” Tristan swallowed. “Will you promise not to say anything to Professor Drakewell? I need your help, but I don’t want anyone getting in trouble.”

Alldusk held Tristan’s eyes for a long time. Tristan raked his hair over his scars, feeling exposed beneath his professor’s stare, but did not look away.

“It depends on what you tell me,” Alldusk said at last. “If others are in danger, I may have no

choice. But if I can avoid involving the headmaster, I will.”

It was the best he could hope for, Tristan supposed. He could not believe Alldusk was evil; there must be a reason why he supported Drakewell.

“Certain students are afraid that what we’re doing here is wrong,” Tristan said carefully. “Because of what we heard the teachers say after the avalanche, and because of something Evvie—Evangeline, I mean—found out. She said there are people dying because of whatever this academy does.”

Though Alldusk’s mouth tightened, he did not interrupt Tristan.

“Some of the students want to fight back—to force you guys to tell us what we’re here for. They’re collecting marbles so they can use them against you.”

“Is that why you were in Delair’s mine when it blew up?” Alldusk asked softly. “Were you trying to stop your friends from attacking us? Why didn’t you say anything to the headmaster?”

Tristan said nothing.

Alldusk let out a breath. “You were protecting your friends. Of course.”

“I don’t think they’ll stop until you tell us why we’re here. Why can’t you? Is it really so awful, whatever the academy is doing?” Tristan broke off—his voice had been rising in anger despite his best efforts.

“That’s Professor Drakewell’s prerogative,” Alldusk said. “I understand—of course I do! It hasn’t been that long since I was a student here myself. But we weren’t told the secrets of the academy until the end of our first year, and I doubt Professor Drakewell will change his policy without good reason.”

“Will you talk to him at least?” Tristan begged. “I don’t want to go back to Juvie, and I don’t want my friends to be sent away either. But I’m worried. Some of the students might not care if they get killed doing what they think is right.”

In the silence that followed Tristan’s words, a clock ticking behind Alldusk’s desk echoed sharply through the office.

“I’ll do what I can,” Alldusk said at last. “Thank you for trusting me with this, Tristan. You’re a very honorable young man.”

Tristan felt anything but as he slunk back to the Subroom, where his friends were changing out of their snow-covered clothes with rosy cheeks and much laughter.

“Where did you go?” Leila asked, tossing her hat at Tristan. “We were nearly slaughtered without you!”

“I just went for a walk with Amber,” he said with a forced smile. He noticed she was not back yet.

“We’ll have a rematch tomorrow,” Eli said. “You’d better be there this time.”

“Of course.” Tristan was unable to meet Eli’s eyes.

* * *

Over the next few days, Tristan tried his best to pretend everything was normal. Though he, Leila, Eli, and Trey resumed their daily punishments, Drakewell said nothing to indicate Alldusk had spoken with him. At least it meant Alldusk had not betrayed Tristan’s trust.

Brikkens urged the students to clean their rooms and write lists of resolutions in preparation for the new year, while Rusty, Eli, Trey, Hayley, and Cailyn spent hours building a set of igloos in the meadow with tunnels running from one to the next.

When he wasn’t spending time with Leila or Rusty, Tristan retreated to the Subroom to read the textbook Alldusk had given him, more as an excuse to avoid talking than anything. He was sure Eli continued to stash away marbles, though he had no idea how he got ahold of them while they weren’t attending classes; he just hoped Alldusk would speak to Drakewell before Eli did anything drastic.

Then, on New Year’s Eve, Drakewell summoned the students and teachers to the ballroom

before lunch.

When Tristan caught Alldusk's eye, his professor gave him a tiny nod.

Tristan sat up straighter, fear and anticipation racing through him.

What if the academy really was evil? Was he brave enough to face an asylum—to live out the rest of his life as a criminal—if the alternative was participating in something unforgivable?

He wasn't sure.

Drakewell paced back and forth before the dining platform, hands clasped behind his back.

"It has come to my attention," he began, voice ringing out in the silence, "that certain students are so desperate to know why this academy exists that they are willing to risk their lives to force the information from us."

Though Drakewell kept his eyes fixed on the wall, not singling out any students, Eli shifted in his chair.

"When you know the truth, you will understand why we withheld it for so long. Our work is crucial, but the reality is unpleasant. There are not many who would be willing to set aside their own beliefs in pursuit of a more important goal, which is why we prefer not to put this burden on you too soon."

Drakewell stopped his pacing abruptly and pivoted to face the dining platform, though his gaze was still fixed on the wall.

"However, we have decided the dangers of keeping you in the dark outweigh the benefits. You see, we are not teaching you magic merely to send you home. We are not hoping to enrich your minds or spread the knowledge of magic to the wider community. Magic is dangerous; once you learn its secrets you must remain here."

"Then what's the point?" Damian asked peevishly.

Drakewell fixed his hollow eyes on Damian. "The reason you were recruited—the reason the Underground Academy exists—is because of something called the 'natural order.' The term refers to the balance of all dualities: civilization and nature, light and dark, life and death.

"The magicians who built our Lair chose the location for its inaccessibility. They knew this valley would never be developed. Magicians knew the value of wild places long before most humans, because magic is derived primarily from nature. Our forebears created a place where magic could be concentrated and used for greater purposes. Here, they planned to maintain the ever-teetering balance between civilization and nature. Here they set the power of nature against humanity."

Leila's mouth opened in surprise. "Do you mean—"

Drakewell touched the black hourglass around his neck. "With the orbs we harvest, we have the power to cause natural disasters. Without our interference, humans march faster and faster toward their own demise—toward tipping the balance so far it cannot be re-stabilized. Using magic, we stir up hurricanes and tornadoes, send tremors through the earth, and set off volcanoes, in hopes that these minor disasters will prevent the total collapse of our planet."

No one spoke.

Tristan felt a strange pressure building against his eardrums. Drakewell spoke so calmly, yet his words were insane. He couldn't possibly be telling the truth.

"The magicians who were here before us sent the shock wave that caused the Great San Francisco Earthquake, and started the drought that led to the Dust Bowl."

"You're joking," Damian said finally, his voice hard.

Drakewell stared at Damian until Damian looked away, muttering something inaudible.

A hazy darkness was gathering at the corners of Tristan's eyes. He breathed in deeply through his nose, trying not to pass out. *The world's gone mad.*

In the midst of his panic, a frightening truth crystalized before him.

His professors had set off the earthquake that destroyed his dad's house. In all likelihood, they

had started the fire as well.

If not for their interference, Marcus would still be alive.

Rage boiled up in him, but before he could speak, the memory of Marcus's smile filled his mind, and his throat closed up.

If he had done anything differently that night, anything at all, his little brother would still be alive.

Now his eyes burned; he wasn't sure if he wanted to attack Drakewell or to cry.

In the end, it still came down to his own damn mistake. His hand on the wheel, his voice reassuring Marcus when he had no business taking his brother's life into his hands.

Others were speaking; Tristan dragged his attention back to the room in time to hear Alldusk saying,

"We're not the only ones trying to manipulate this balance." His voice was very calm, though his face was ashen. "There are others out there, people with no knowledge of magic, who are trying to outsmart nature and tip the balance in their favor. Look at genetic engineers—they are playing with the very foundations of life. And for what reason?"

Alldusk paused, though he did not seem to expect an answer.

"They want wealth. Long life. Health. Power. A few seasons of successful crops in exchange for land stripped bare. They're messing with the natural order because they're selfish. The human race is selfish." Alldusk shook his head. "We have a much harder task here—siding *with* nature, *against* our own race. We maintain the order that is chaos, simply because we must."

Another long silence followed Alldusk's words.

Slowly, reluctantly, Tristan's thoughts were beginning to catch up with him. Right or wrong, his teachers—and hundreds of magicians before them—had been ravaging the earth with disasters for centuries.

He understood now why Drakewell wanted to keep the truth hidden. He wished he could rewind the past hour and forget what he had heard.

"The world holds itself together with magic," Drakewell said. "Allow that to vanish, and everything else will simply crumble. There will be nothing left but dust. Is that what you want?" His cold, challenging gaze flicked around the room.

"What about the disasters that happened before this place existed?" Leila's expression was inscrutable.

"There have always been magicians playing around with the weather," Drakewell said. "The majority of them were causing plagues, floods, droughts, and the like for selfish reasons—war, riches, or mere curiosity. This academy is the first place where those same powers have been directed toward maintaining balance. No one realized magic would be needed for such a grim purpose until human civilization began outpacing the earth's powers of regeneration. Yet now that we have taken on this task, we cannot fail. Too much hangs in the balance."

Drakewell's words made sense, in a twisted sort of way. But who did the academy answer to? If any single person was allowed to decide the fates of so many, that person should rightfully be an angel or a god. And the teachers were far from either.

"You now have a decision to make." Drakewell's voice was low and threatening. "I will not force any of you to remain here against your will—except Fairholm and Ashton. Your powers are too developed for you to return to society without proper training.

"By the end of January, you must each pledge your loyalty to the Underground Academy—or leave us forever. If you leave, you will stay one year in a mental hospital, supervised by one of our former students, in case you decide to spread stories about what you have seen here. After that, you will serve out your original sentence."

Tristan glanced at Amber, who stared unblinking at the stairs leading to the meadow.

Had Drakewell's threats of amending Tristan's records and sending him to a mental asylum been

a ruse, then? What would happen to the two of them if they refused to swear loyalty? Would Drakewell truly lock them in the tunnels for the rest of their lives?

“What about me?” Evvie asked in a quavering voice. “I wouldn’t have to go to jail, would I?”

Drakewell’s eyes narrowed. “You would stay a year in the mental hospital just like anyone else. After that, you would relocate to whichever foster home would be willing to take a mentally unstable teenager.”

Evvie blinked several times, tears pooling in her eyes. Tristan wanted to comfort her, but he was afraid to move.

“What kind of choice is that?” Eli spat. “You’re monsters, all of you.”

“It’s the choice between saving your own soul and preserving the world so your children and grandchildren will have a future,” Alldusk said grimly. “It’s the same choice all of us made, not so many years ago.”

Chapter 21: The Warning

Eventually Quinsley remembered to serve lunch, but no one did more than pick at their food. Eli was the first to throw down his fork and stalk from the ballroom; the rest of the students followed close behind.

Back in the Subroom, they sank into chairs and sofas without speaking. Evvie lay facedown on her mattress, face buried in her pillow and shoulders shaking with silent sobs, while Eli stared blank-faced into the fire. His oddly dyed hair, which was now brown at the roots, flopped into his eyes; he did nothing to brush it aside.

Tristan seized the *Beginner's Guide to Magical Theory* just for something to do with his hands, but the words blurred before his eyes.

Who was he to decide what was right and wrong? He had killed his brother. He was powerless either way; if he fought the professors, they would just find someone else to replace him, and their work would go on. At least if he stayed, maybe he could make a difference someday. And maybe he would eventually understand.

What felt like hours passed before Eli broke the silence. "This sucks," he mumbled.

"I know." Trey's voice was hollow, his eyes reddened.

Silence fell again.

When someone rapped at the Subroom door, Tristan sat bolt upright.

"I thought no one else knew about the Subroom," Cailyn said frantically.

Leila was the first to rouse from her stupor. Approaching the door warily, she slid it open and stuck her head through the barrier. For a moment she looked headless.

Then she pulled her head back into the room.

"It's just Gerry," she said, voice sagging with relief. "He helped us install the fireplace, remember? He's been down here before. He says they're going to have a bonfire up in the meadow for New Year's Eve, and there will be s'mores. And alcohol."

"They're trying to bribe us," Trey said shakily. "What if we just stay down here forever?"

"I could do with a drink." Eli's voice was hoarse. "What the hell. I'm going." He stood and ran a trembling hand through his hair. "Come on." Grabbing Trey's arm, he dragged him to his feet.

"Oh my god," Evvie said. "I can't believe you guys." Her nose was bright red from crying, her cheeks tearstained.

"Maybe we can run away once it gets dark," Hayley whispered. "I bet no one will be paying that much attention..."

"You'd die," Cailyn said. "Is that what you want?"

Hayley shook her head. "I don't know any longer."

Though he wanted to stay down here forever—to hide in the darkness and pretend nothing the professors had said was real—Tristan could understand why his friends rose one by one and followed Leila from the Subroom. They were desperate for something, anything, that would distract them from the dark spiral of their thoughts.

He was the last to rise. Soon only Amber remained in the Subroom, but she did not look eager to join the others.

"Are you coming?" she asked Tristan.

"Are you?"

She shrugged.

"What are you going to do?"

“I’m staying at the academy,” Amber said. “I have nowhere else to go. Drakewell didn’t give us much of a choice, did he?”

Tristan shook his head.

“And you?”

Tristan swallowed. “You have no idea what I’ve done. I hate myself—maybe I deserve to live here.” He did not want to follow this train of thought any farther. Stumbling to his feet, he grabbed his winter layers. “I’m going up. Will you come with me?”

Amber fell into step beside him, silent and ghostlike.

Up in the meadow, he was surprised to find Zeke’s gang waiting around the beginnings of a bonfire, bundled in every layer they owned and stamping their feet in the cold.

Gracewright was adding logs to the fire while Quinsley carried up baskets of marshmallows, graham crackers, and chocolate. Last of all, he hauled up a huge vat of something he called mulled wine, which smelled rich and sweet and spiced.

Once the fire was roaring, Gracewright stood and brushed off her hands. “Keep feeding the fire if it gets low.” She nodded at a pile of wood stacked in the trampled snow. “I’ll be in the greenhouse if you need me.” She stood there for a moment, as though she was on the verge of saying something, but at last she turned and shuffled away.

Quinsley watched the fire for a while, feet planted shoulder-width apart, hands behind his back. “I’m really sorry about this,” he said eventually. “It was forty-five years ago, but I still remember the day I learned the truth. I ran down to the lake and tried to drown myself.” He laughed humorlessly. “But it’s important, what we’re doing, and I realized after a while that someone has to do this job. It might as well be us, seeing as we have no place in regular society either way.

“I know Drakewell can be frightening at times, but the rest of us want this to be a real home for you. We want you to feel safe and comfortable here. If there’s anything I can do—anything you want to talk about—my kitchen is always open.” He smiled wanly. “And please, whatever you do, don’t try to drown yourselves. That lake is frozen solid. It’s not worth the effort.”

Leila threw her arms around Quinsley and buried her face in his coat.

When she stepped back, Quinsley cleared his throat. “Well—I hope you can enjoy your New Year’s bonfire at least a little bit. Don’t tell your parents I gave you alcohol.”

Tossing a new log onto the fire, Quinsley retreated into the Lair.

Silence hung heavy in his wake.

At last Eli said to Zeke’s gang, “Let me guess—you’re up here for the alcohol.”

“Why do the teachers have to ruin all of our holidays?” Rusty asked miserably. “We could’ve had a great time if they’d just waited one more day.”

“This is dumb,” Damian said brusquely. “It’s too cold to be out here. Let’s just grab our drinks and go. I don’t want to hang out with you losers anyway.”

“Wait,” Leila said. “We wanted to talk to you about all of this, even before today. We were starting to worry about what the professors were doing, and we didn’t want to make any decisions without you guys.”

“Seriously?” A mocking smile crept across Zeke’s face. “You guys were too wimpy to stay in the same bunkroom as us, but for some reason you actually want to *talk* to us? Properly, with no snowballs or fists?”

Leila ignored him. “What one of us decides will affect everyone here, so it would be good to know what you’re all thinking.” She knelt beside the basket of marshmallows and chocolate. “And in the meantime, does anyone want a s’more?”

“How are you acting so—so *nonchalant* about all this?” Damian said, his hands curling and uncurling into fists at his sides. “Don’t you *care*? Or are you some sort of psychopath?”

“I’m trying not to think about it,” Leila said, her voice flat. “I’ve already decided I’m staying here

no matter what—no one wants me back home. Maybe I can take over Gerry’s job when he retires and stay away from the mess the other professors are involved in.” She jammed three marshmallows onto a skewer and prodded it into the flames.

“I’m staying too,” Zeke said. “I don’t know what your family was like, Damian, but mine was awful. Most people are probably rotten on the inside, even if they’re good at acting nice. Maybe they deserve what’s coming to them.”

Damian snorted. “Maybe. But whatever I am, I’m not a murderer.”

“We don’t need to make any decisions yet,” Leila said. “Just—don’t do anything that will mess it up for the rest of us. I don’t think anyone likes what’s going on here, but who would choose a mental hospital and Juvie over learning magic?”

“There are other magicians out there too, remember?” Cailyn said. “Not everyone is at the academy causing disasters. Some of them are hunting down rare magical plants, or helping take care of people after the disasters—”

“Which is dumb since they wouldn’t have anything to do if the professors here didn’t mess things up in the first place,” Eli muttered. He had already poured himself a steaming mug of mulled wine and held it to his lips, scowling over the top with red-rimmed eyes.

As Leila started passing around finished s’mores—the first several made with charred marshmallows since there were no embers suitable for slow-roasting them yet—the other students helped themselves to mulled wine and settled on logs around the fire. Only Evvie held back.

The mulled wine was sweet and smooth, made from red wine laced with honey and orange and spices. Tristan had only tried sips of wine from his parents’ glasses before, and had found it acidic and foul-tasting, but this was delicious. As the students sipped at their mugs and bit into the gooey s’mores, they lapsed into silence, most staring deep into the flames.

Tristan felt numb. His whole world had turned upside down, and he no longer knew whether he could live with himself if he stayed at the Underground Academy. He wanted to believe the professors were somehow doing the right thing, that the world truly would not survive without their intervention, because if they were simply causing horrific disasters for some selfish reason, he would lose his mind.

He accepted his third s’more from Leila and bit through the graham crackers without even tasting the chocolate and marshmallow that oozed into his mouth.

The thought that scared him most was that the professors were collecting magic from the disaster sites. What if the whole idea of the “natural order” was an elaborate construct to justify harvesting rare types of magic?

When the last of the marshmallows were gone and the students were left licking their fingers and nursing their mugs of mulled wine, Tristan whispered this fear to Leila.

She stared at him, unblinking, and then drained half her mug before answering.

“I don’t think that’s true,” she said slowly. “If they just wanted to harvest magic, they could choose disaster sites that wouldn’t affect any people. And if they were smart, they would only set off disasters close to the academy, so they would be able to reach the sites easily.”

“True.” A small weight lifted from Tristan’s chest. Raising his eyes to the snowy peaks that were just visible above the trees, he recalled the avalanche they had dug their way out of. With hundreds of miles of wilderness surrounding the school, there was no reason to target cities if the desire for magic was the only reason to start disasters.

Tristan resolved to speak with Alldusk when he next had a chance. Alldusk had trusted and listened to him where no other adult would, and Tristan trusted his judgment and wisdom more than that of anyone else he knew. If Alldusk had found a way to accept what the school did, maybe Tristan would learn to do the same eventually.

For now, he wanted to avoid thinking about it.

As he ladled his mug full of mulled wine for a second time, Tristan’s head was beginning to feel

woozy, and he found it easier and easier to pretend nothing had changed. Instead he focused on smaller things—the sparks and crackling of sap in the fire; Eli staggering into the woods, Trey following with a concerned frown; Zeke prodding at Leila’s boots with a flaming twig; Rusty staring morosely into his mug; Damian’s face growing redder and redder until he finally leaned over and kissed haughtily, beautiful Cassidy, who squeaked and fell off her log.

The sun dropped beneath the hills, deep blue dusk quickly spreading across the meadow.

Amber had long since disappeared into the woods, and when Eli and Trey returned, Eli looked morose, Trey resigned.

Still no one retreated into the Lair. The fire kept them from turning to icicles, though Tristan’s backside was frozen solid.

Stars began emerging in the darkening sky. A faint green haze hung above the mountains; Tristan watched it for a long time, trying to decide whether it was the Northern Lights, an aura, or just his imagination.

By now, Tristan was on his third mug of mulled wine—the world around him seemed to be moving in slow motion, and his throat was coated with honey.

“We’re out of wood,” Leila said suddenly. She was frowning at the dying bonfire as though it were a puzzle she could not solve.

“Maybe—maybe we should go to bed,” Rusty said, slurring his words. “I’m not sure which way it is...”

“My god, Rusty, how much did you drink?” Leila asked.

“Just a li’l bit.”

“You ready to head back in, Triss?”

Tristan blinked blearily up at Leila, who had stood and crossed to his side without him noticing.

“S’pose so.”

He didn’t realize how dizzy he was until Leila dragged him to his feet. The world reeled about him, and he would have faceplanted into the snow if she hadn’t caught him.

“Really!” she scolded. “Have you never had alcohol before?”

“My dad’s an alcoholic,” Tristan mumbled. “I don’t want anything to do with that.”

She squeezed his shoulder. “Sorry. I didn’t know.”

“Should we all go down together?” Hayley asked. “In case...” She didn’t elaborate.

Leila helped Rusty to his feet and put an arm around his and Tristan’s waists. “Come on. Let’s get some rest.”

Tristan was halfway to the longhouse before he remembered. “Wait. Where’s Amber?”

“I’m sure she’s fine,” Leila said. “She practically lives in the woods.”

Tristan couldn’t shake his worry. Turning, he shouted, “AMBER! Come back here or I’ll go looking for you!”

The snow swallowed his voice within moments.

Though Leila sighed and shook her head, she waited until Amber slipped into the meadow, silent and wraithlike as always. She gave Tristan a wide-eyed stare; embarrassed, he shrugged and looked away.

Then, with much stumbling and yawning, the students made their way back into the Lair.

Back in the Subroom, Tristan fell onto the first mattress he collided with, though he wasn’t sure whose it was.

“Where’s Eli?” Leila’s disembodied voice asked as someone went around turning off lamps.

“He’ll come down eventually,” Trey said. “Give him time.”

* * *

Tristan woke the next morning with a headache, his eyes gummed up with sleep. He couldn't understand how his dad could drink so much—this was awful.

When he stumbled up to breakfast, it was a while before he realized something was wrong. The other students were grumbling, hunched over their coffees and teas and hot chocolates, but the professors ate in silence, concern written clearly on their faces, sharing significant looks across their table.

“What is it?” Tristan asked loudly, too hungover to care if he got in trouble. “What’s wrong?”

Alldusk glanced from Gracewright to Quinsley; both nodded resignedly.

“Professor Gracewright found this tacked to the door of the longhouse this morning,” Alldusk said. He rose and handed Tristan a slip of paper typed with blocky, slightly uneven font, as though on a typewriter.

The time for games is over.

The next attack will destroy the Underground Academy.

Close down this academy, cease your work, and send the students and professors away by the end of May—or everyone in these caves will die when the school falls.

“If someone thinks they can destroy our school,” Alldusk said, a slight tremor in his voice, “it means they know where our magic is stored.” He hung his head, dark curtains of hair falling about his face. “It means our attacker is one of us.”

Chapter 22: Loyalty

Tristan's lungs seemed to compress. He could not draw breath.

He was one of the prime suspects—what would Drakewell do if he thought Tristan intended to destroy the academy?

And what if their attacker succeeded?

“Have you told Professor Drakewell?” he asked at last, voice strangled.

“Yes. Professor Gracewright alerted him immediately, and he is currently overseeing additional security measures.” Alldusk sighed. “Never, in all its years of operation, has the Underground Academy come under serious threat. This leads us to believe a student is responsible—a student who knows more than they should.”

He gave Tristan a piercing stare before dropping back into his chair.

Tristan passed the slip of paper wordlessly to Leila, who bent her head to read it alongside Rusty.

“Can't we just leave?” Leila asked. “Relocate until the semester is over?”

Alldusk shook his head. “We can't stop our work. And besides, the Lair would be vulnerable without our protection. Our attacker could send others to continue their work while we were away.”

“Then what are we supposed to do?” Tristan asked.

Again Alldusk fixed his piercing stare on Tristan, as though trying to read his innocence or guilt in the lines of his face. “Professor Drakewell will interrogate each student and teacher over the coming weeks, and we will tighten our security as much as possible.”

“What if it was just a joke?” Eli asked dully. His eyes were red; Tristan had not seen him return the night before. “We were all drunk last night—what if someone just thought it would be a good prank?”

“Are you responsible for this?” Alldusk asked.

“No, no, of course not,” Eli said hurriedly. “It's just—Professor Drakewell won't be sending anyone away until he has proof, right? I mean, he already doesn't trust some of us, so...”

“We will do our best to ensure he treats everyone fairly. And in the meantime, you would be wise to take every possible measure to convince him of your innocence. Stay out of trouble. Don't stray into the tunnels—or the forest.” Alldusk's gaze flicked to Amber. “And most importantly, report anything suspicious you come across. No matter who is involved.”

* * *

The final three days of break passed in a blur. No one could stop talking about the threat to the school, while they skirted around the decision that awaited them at the end of the month.

“What if that note was just a ploy to make us forget about what the school's really doing?” Leila asked more than once. “I wouldn't put it past Drakewell. And why hasn't he started interrogating anyone yet?”

This was true—Drakewell had yet to speak privately with any of the students in the Subroom. Either he was interrogating the teachers first, or he had more important things to worry about. Tristan wondered if something had happened that the teachers weren't letting on.

On the morning classes resumed, Drakewell appeared at breakfast for the first time since he had explained why the academy existed.

“Now that you have completed one semester of training, the time has come to learn practical magic. You must dedicate yourselves to your classes, because any student who fails to use magic by

the end of the year will be sent home. Not everyone with the potential for magic develops the skill to use it—if you cannot grasp the practical side at this point, there is no reason to continue your studies here.”

When Drakewell swept off, he left a storm of whispers in his wake.

“Why does he want us to learn more magic if he thinks we’re attacking the school?” Leila asked softly.

“Maybe you don’t need magic to destroy the Lair.” Tristan was thinking of the hoard of marbles, which he still had not mentioned to Leila or Rusty.

* * *

Brikkens started the day off with a class on creating warmth with magic—each student was tasked with drying out a sodden washcloth by the end of the period. Though Tristan caught Zeke wringing out his cloth beneath the table and pressing it against his stomach to warm it with his body heat, only Amber’s washcloth was dry by the end of the hour.

“Ah, well,” Brikkens said cheerfully. “I hardly expected you to succeed on your first try. Come up, come up.” He beckoned the students to his chair and handed out five marbles to each.

After the recent explosion he had set off in Delair’s mine, Tristan felt guilty taking marbles, though the weight in his pocket was reassuring.

“By the end of the week, I expect each of you to succeed in drying our your washcloth. If you are unable to succeed over the coming days, I suggest re-reading your notes from November.”

“What happens if we fail?” Damian asked.

Brikkens smiled indulgently. “You will take extra lessons with me every night until you succeed.”

A collective groan went around the room.

* * *

Grindlethorn began his class by saying, “In order to stay on track this semester, you will need to work harder than ever. I would advise trying your best to avoid punishment.” His beady eyes lit on Tristan, who had by now worked off more hours than all of the other students combined. “Since the headmaster has requested that I teach healing spells in addition to what I planned, we’ll have to cover twice as much material.”

When Grindlethorn passed back their final exams from the previous semester, Tristan was not alone in shifting his paper to hide a failing grade.

“Hey, Professor,” Zeke said lazily. “Ever heard of something called extra credit?”

“That’s enough, Elwood!” Grindlethorn rapped his knuckles on his desk. “Now that you know what our work entails, you might have guessed that a sizable number of our former students go on to work on medical crews responding to disasters. If you are interested in working outside the academy, a solid medical foundation is essential. From now on, keep in mind that your grades in class will affect which positions are available once you graduate.”

With a yawn, Zeke folded his final exam into a paper airplane. “Now I’m *really* scared.”

The other students did not look so nonchalant. Several shared worried looks with their friends, and Tristan wondered if it was too late to redeem his grades. He had done well enough in medicine until his fifty hours of punishment ate up every spare minute.

* * *

Delair was actually in his classroom when the students filed in, which was surprising in itself; stranger

still, he was in the process of stacking a pile of rocks on each desk.

“Good to see you again.” He beamed at the students, white moustache fluttering as he exhaled. “I hope you had a relaxing break.”

Tristan raised his eyebrows—how oblivious could Delair be?

“The headmaster wishes me to cover practical magic, instead of just the theory of elementals. That means we’re done with lectures!”

That hardly mattered, since Delair had rarely appeared for class the previous semester.

Delair explained that each of the rocks on their desks had a scrap of Delairium buried somewhere near the center, and their task was to extract the element in its entirety. He handed around a set of marbles with no further instructions; he seemed to enjoy watching the students struggle.

Tristan couldn’t figure out how to go about separating the Delairium from the plain granite. Even Amber appeared to struggle; Tristan remembered her saying she found it hard to do magic underground. He wondered if she somehow used the power of the lemon tree in Brikkens’ classroom to work spells there.

When the period ended, Delair told them to look through their textbooks for a description of the appropriate spell. “Bring back your rocks tomorrow—those of you who haven’t managed to separate the Delairium from the granite will write an essay on the matter.”

Tristan groaned and dumped the pile of rocks into his book bag.

On the way up to lunch, he overheard Eli muttering to Hayley, “We shouldn’t have bothered stealing marbles. We’ll have hundreds by the end of the week at this rate.”

Eli and Trey had hardly spoken to one another since the bonfire; Tristan wondered what Trey’s stance was on the academy.

* * *

Alldusk began his class with the same announcement about practical magic, though he said, “I’m afraid we don’t have enough time to concentrate much on spells. Our most important job is collecting orbs; now that your other classes are using them as well, we need to work faster than ever.” He sighed and glanced at the door. “However, I can still teach you how to start fires with magic. That should satisfy Professor Drakewell.”

Although the lesson was interesting enough, groans rose from around the room when Alldusk followed the other teachers’ example and assigned more homework than ever.

“They’re doing this on purpose,” Leila grumbled when they trudged back to the Subroom at the end of Merridy’s class. “They’re trying to distract us from what we’re really doing here, keep us out of trouble.”

Tristan did not mind. If anything, he was grateful—any minute he spent worrying about how to properly mix a healing poultice or start a fire without a match was a minute not spent dwelling on the lives the academy had ruined.

That night, instead of sitting around and talking, the students in the Subroom settled into chairs by the fire or around the clumsily-repaired table from Alldusk’s classroom and began struggling through their homework. Even Trey, who was usually ahead on work, stayed up past midnight along with everyone else. At least Tristan, Leila, Rusty, and Trey had been released from their daily punishments—Alldusk must have had a word about that with Drakewell when he persuaded the headmaster to talk to the students.

* * *

As the days turned into weeks, Tristan allowed himself to get caught up in the work. He always enjoyed

the practical lessons, especially as magic came to him more and more easily. With each passing week, more students successfully used marbles for spells—Zeke was one of the first to catch on after Tristan and Amber, much to Leila’s dismay, while she and Rusty continued to struggle.

“I’ve never had a hard time with schoolwork,” she confided to Tristan and Rusty one evening. “I didn’t try very hard, so I didn’t get the best grades, but I could always figure things out. Maybe I’m not cut out for magic. Maybe I don’t have the right talent.”

“You can see auras, though,” Tristan reminded her. “Most people won’t ever be able to do that. Maybe you’re just going about it the wrong way.”

“Easy for you to say,” she said peevishly.

Though no one mentioned it again, Tristan was sure his fellow students had not forgotten the decision that approached: by the end of January, they would need to pledge their loyalty to the Underground Academy or trade their comfortable lives for an insane asylum.

Even though he had made up his mind, Tristan still dreaded the implications of his decision to stay.

Would he someday be forced to cause disasters himself? Would Drakewell twist him into a monster, one who could weight human lives and deem them expendable?

But he was already a murderer. This was why delinquents were chosen for the Underground Academy, he had come to realize—because criminals had a more flexible moral code. People who could steal or beat up other kids or vandalize things might easily be persuaded that setting off natural disasters was more of the same.

Yet why were Damian and Eli so horrified with the truth, when Tristan could accept it?

Did that make him worse than the meanest of bullies?

Or was he just a coward?

* * *

On the last day of January, Tristan ventured up to breakfast to find the tables gone and the seats arranged in a semicircle. Drakewell sat in the high-backed wood chair from his office, glowering at each student as they arrived, the other teachers ranged on either side of him. Drakewell had yet to interrogate any students, as far as Tristan knew; was he saving it for after they pledged their loyalty?

“Thank you for joining us today,” Drakewell said pointedly, when Cassidy ambled up to the ballroom halfway through the breakfast hour, her makeup and hair done to perfection. The other students had been sitting in silence, waiting for Drakewell to make the first move.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t realize breakfast was a required subject,” she said sarcastically.

Drakewell ignored her.

“As you may remember, today is the deadline for your decision.” Drakewell curled his claw-like fingers around the arms of his chair. “Each one of you will either declare your loyalty to the Underground Academy—in full knowledge of our work here—or return to society, where you will stay at a mental hospital before serving out your remaining sentence.

“Based on reports from your professors, each one of you has shown sufficient aptitude for magic to continue your studies. So if you hoped to drop out at the end of the year, think again. This is no longer an option.”

Ryan Riggs frowned at Drakewell, his knuckles bulging, while Evvie squirmed in her chair.

“However, there are other considerations you must take in mind before taking the oath of loyalty. Our students and graduates are erased from public records, which means we no longer fall under usual laws. If you are caught damaging our work in any way henceforth, you will answer to our justice.”

Tristan shivered at the crazed glint in Drakewell’s eye.

“As promised, I will be interrogating each one of you regarding the little note we received earlier

this year, and if I find one of you is behind it, you might just...*disappear*.” His thin lips curved in a humorless smile. “So if one of you is guilty, I would strongly consider the safety of a detention center over risking your luck here.”

Merridy and Alldusk paled at Drakewell’s threat, though neither spoke up in defense of the students.

“Once you make your pledge, you will be free to collect breakfast from the kitchen and return to your rooms. The only class meeting today will be Environmental Studies, at eleven o’clock—Professor Merridy has another practical test to introduce, and you will spend the remainder of the day preparing with her guidance.”

Merridy nodded, though she looked alarmed at the prospect. Tristan wondered if the test was Drakewell’s idea rather than hers.

“With that out of the way, who would like to pledge their loyalty first?” Drakewell asked.

The students glanced at one another, panicked; no one wanted to make the first move.

At last, Cailyn stood. She looked at Gracewright, who nodded and gave her a reassuring smile.

Not all the teachers are evil, Tristan reminded himself, trying to slow his racing heart. *I won’t necessarily turn into Drakewell just because I stay.*

When Cailyn stopped before Drakewell, he placed a marble into her hand.

“Cailyn Tyler. Do you swear your loyalty to the Underground Academy and the upholding of the Natural Order above all else? Will you relinquish all ties to family and friends and home, and accept the magicians’ law as your new governing power?”

“Yes,” she said, her voice clear and strong. “I will.”

Drakewell held his hand above hers, where she still cupped the marble. Within seconds, the marble dissolved in her palm and a deep blue tattoo of a globe appeared on the inside of her right wrist.

Hayley gasped, and Evvie’s eyes widened.

“I don’t want a tattoo!” Evvie whispered.

Leila glared at her.

Moments later, the globe faded from Cailyn’s skin, though Tristan thought he could still see the faintest traces. He wondered if it was a powerful spell to bind them to the academy, or if was merely symbolic.

“You may collect your breakfast and return to your room,” Drakewell said. “Who is next?”

As Cailyn slipped through the door into the kitchen, Leila rose and took her place.

Zeke followed Leila, and Tristan jumped up as soon as he left. It was agonizing to watch the fear, confusion, and indecision playing across his fellow students’ faces; much better to leave now and learn who had stayed once it was all over.

When Tristan gave his pledge, he was surprised to find the dissolving marble in his palm was merely lukewarm, not painful in the slightest. The tattoo burned for a split second when it appeared, intricate blue lines sharp against his winter-pale skin, and he was almost disappointed when it faded away.

Leila, Zeke, and Cailyn were still in the kitchen when Tristan pushed open the door with a sigh of relief. Leila and Cailyn sat at the counter, tucking into avocado-and-tomato sandwiches, while Zeke leaned against the sink and stirred sugar into his coffee.

“Who got up when you left?” Leila asked at once.

“I didn’t see,” Tristan said.

The four fell silent for a moment, listening, but only Drakewell’s deep monotone sounded from the ballroom.

“Rusty’d better stay,” Leila said darkly. “I only just got used to him hanging around—I don’t want him to leave now.”

“And Eli and Trey,” Cailyn said. “I think Hayley talked to Trey, and he wasn’t planning to leave, but Eli’s a complete wild card. It wouldn’t be the same without him.”

“What about the guys in the bunkroom?” Tristan asked Zeke. “Are they planning to stay?”

“Not that I would mind if most of you left,” Leila said under her breath.

Zeke grinned at Leila. “No luck. I doubt any of us would choose an asylum over this place. Not even Damian, even if he’s randomly decided to develop a conscience years later than he should’ve done.”

The other students continued to arrive in the kitchen one by one—Amber was next, followed by Ryan, Cassidy, Damian, and Stacy. By this point, the kitchen was packed with Damian’s gang, so Tristan, Leila, and Amber retreated to the Subroom rather than spend time with them. Cailyn decided to stay; she was looking more anxious by the minute as her friends failed to appear.

Down in the Subroom, Tristan tried to work on a chart of magical theories for Brikkens’ class, but he kept flinching at every sound, wondering when the others would appear. If all of the other students from the Subroom decided to leave and face whatever waited for them back in the real world, it would be very lonely with only him, Leila, Amber, and Cailyn remaining. The longer the wait stretched, the more he questioned his decision.

Soon Leila half-heartedly suggested a game of cards; Tristan was surprised when Amber agreed to play, though it felt wrong without Eli shuffling expertly and calling for bids.

“Has your tattoo faded?” Amber asked unexpectedly when Leila dove under the table to rescue a stack of cards that had slipped from her grasp.

“Yeah, of course,” Tristan said. “Why?”

She pulled up her sleeve, and Tristan was surprised to see the dark blue globe still stood out stark against her white skin.

“Maybe Drakewell messed up the spell,” Leila said, returning to her seat.

“Or maybe you interfered with whatever he was trying to do,” Tristan said. “I wonder if ours will ever show up again.”

Tristan was about to give up on their game of hearts when the door to the Subroom fell open to admit Rusty, Hayley, Cailyn, and Trey. All were grim and quiet, though Tristan’s heart surged at the sight of them. He felt very fond of them in that moment, even Hayley and Trey, who rarely spoke to him.

“Where’s Eli?” Leila asked at once.

Trey shook his head. “I still don’t know what he’s going to do. Everyone else has sworn the oath except him and Evangeline.”

“I’m surprised everyone else has agreed to stay,” Leila said.

Cailyn shrugged. “I honestly think the professors might be right about things. And even if they’re not, how are we ever going to make a difference if we have a criminal record for the rest of our lives? Living here, we might actually be able to change things. Out there, we’re powerless.”

“That’s not what most of us were thinking about,” Leila said wryly. “I don’t want to go anywhere near juvie again, no matter what it takes.”

No one wanted to play cards any longer, so Tristan tried to focus on his homework, though his mind was still racing. If Evvie decided to leave, what would it mean for the kids she had saved? Would he be responsible for their safety? Or was she trying to work out a way to help them escape before she left?

As Merridy’s lesson approached, Tristan overheard Trey whispering to Hayley and Cailyn, “If he leaves, it’s my fault. I messed up. I promised not to tell anyone, but—”

He looked stricken, and Cailyn was quick to reassure him, though she looked equally worried.

At last eleven o’clock arrived, still with no sign of Eli or Evvie. The students in the Subroom plodded up to Merridy’s classroom with less enthusiasm than usual; Tristan wondered if they would

be allowed to say goodbye to Eli and Evvie before they left. Tristan realized he would miss Evvie if she left. She could be cold, but it was just her loneliness and fear of the other students holding her back. Sometimes she smiled at him in a way that made his stomach flip-flop, though she seemed to catch herself each time, and she looked away before he could return the gesture.

But she was not a criminal. She deserved to return to her old life, to make something of her future where the other students could not.

Then Cailyn pushed open the door to Merridy's classroom and let out a yelp of surprise.

Eli and Evvie were sitting in their usual seats, as though nothing had happened.

Chapter 23: Intralocation

Trey, Cailyn, and Hayley ran across the classroom to hug Eli, who looked sour but flushed at the attention, while Evvie turned away, her eyes red.

“I’m glad you decided to stay,” Tristan said softly.

Evvie gave him a watery smile.

Tristan was very curious how the professors had persuaded the two to stay, against all odds, but he had no time to ask.

“Please take your seats,” Merridy said sharply. “Your upcoming practical test will be dangerous and requires a great deal of preparation. I don’t want anyone getting hurt, so you must pay close attention in the coming weeks.”

While Eli’s friends hurried to their seats, Merridy passed around a stack of ancient, leather-bound textbooks titled *Everyday Alchemy*.

“The aim of this test is simple: to find your way back to the Lair. Each of you will begin ten miles from the school, and this time you will use magic rather than compasses to navigate. The test will begin on a Wednesday and end on a Friday, so you will also need to prepare to camp out in the snow if you are unable to find your way back in one day. Remember that snow makes for slower travel, so most of you will take at least two days to return.”

“Is that it?” Zeke asked. “What’s so dangerous about that?”

“No. The danger is this—Professor Drakewell will be springing minor disasters on each one of you, which you must protect yourselves against. He will not reveal in advance what each will entail, not even to the other professors, so we must prepare you for every eventuality. These can include weather events such as blizzards, hailstorms, downpours, and thick fog or more typical disasters such as avalanches, rockslides, and floods.”

Merridy twisted her hands as she spoke; she seemed afraid of what Drakewell would unleash on them, which did nothing for Tristan’s confidence.

Over the disgruntled muttering that broke out following this announcement, Merridy said, “We will begin the magical component of your training today. You will be navigating your way back to the academy using a spell called Intralocation.”

The students quieted, curious now.

“Intra—within,” she said briskly. “Intralocation is the process of finding places you have seen before and can visualize. Extralocation is its more complex counterpart, which allows you to locate places you’ve never seen. Open your textbooks to page thirty-eight, please, and read the theoretical description of the spell.”

Tristan pried open his new textbook and read the passage, trying not to imagine the brutal ways Drakewell could kill them with this test if he were so inclined.

“How old d’you think this thing is?” Rusty whispered. “Alchemy’s from the middle ages, isn’t it?”

“Maybe the author was trying to be clever,” Leila whispered back. “Now shut up, I’m trying to read.”

Tristan had to reread the passage several times before he thought he understood it. It sounded as though the spell involved holding up a marble and picturing where you wanted to go. That seemed easy enough.

“Any questions?” Merridy asked.

Hayley put her hand in the air. “I don’t understand. What does the spell do?”

“It’s quite simple. Once your marble is enchanted, it will float in the direction you must go,

remaining at a constant distance from your center of gravity. You merely follow it until the magic has run out and the marble dissipates, at which point you enchant a new marble. Any other questions?" Merridy looked around. "Yes, Finley?"

"I thought magic could only modify processes already existing in nature." He sounded uncannily like Brikkens. "How is an instinctive knowledge of directions something that exists in nature?"

"Excellent point," Merridy said. "Magical theoreticians are still debating that question; only a small fraction of magic is understood at present. The best explanation I can give is that the magic takes your own knowledge of two separate locations and links them together like magnets, using your understanding of a destination to draw you along the shortest line to that point."

They spent the rest of the day attempting the spell, with a short break to eat the sandwiches Quinsley brought down. Merridy drew a circle on her chalkboard and designated this as their destination; if the Intralocation spell worked properly, the marbles would lead them directly to the chalkboard.

The desks were shoved to the side, and the classroom quickly descended into chaos. Tristan watched Amber before attempting the spell himself; she managed it on her first try, of course. Her gold marble bobbed in front of her chest while she drifted along behind it, until the marble struck the chalkboard and dissolved. When Merridy congratulated her, Amber returned to her seat and buried her face in her textbook, cheeks pink with embarrassment.

It was difficult to concentrate with so much going on all around. Rusty released marble after marble, hoping they would stay in the air, and cursed when they plummeted to the ground and dissolved. Leila kept flinching—after a moment Tristan realized Zeke was pelting her with marbles. Remembering the large chunks of rock Eli had blasted out of the walls of the mine, Tristan dragged her out of Zeke's range.

"You don't think anything bad will happen if the spell fails, do you?" Tristan asked.

Leila gestured to Rusty. "If he was going to set something on fire, he'd have done it already." She grimaced as Rusty dropped his tenth marble.

"Why do you think Evvie decided to stay?" Tristan asked, still watching Rusty. "She's always hated it here. Do you think Drakewell forced her?"

"Why don't you ask Evvie yourself?" Leila said sharply. "She's right behind you."

Tristan whirled to see Evvie watching him, her cheeks a delicate pink.

"Sorry," he said hurriedly. "It's just—I don't know if I would've stayed if I were you." He lowered his voice and edged away from Leila, so she would not overhear. "Is it because of those kids?"

"Partly," Evvie whispered. Her cheeks were still pink. "The professor who is helping me keep them safe might be able to get me out of here at the end of the year. I couldn't face going to an insane asylum—I don't know how I'd survive it." She rolled her gold marbles around in her palm. "I—realize I never thanked you for helping with the diversion. You did all those hours of punishment for me, and you never gave away my secret."

"Oh, it's no problem," Tristan said airily, though inside he was rejoicing. Helping Evvie had been worth the price after all.

Pressing his hair back over his scars, Tristan gave Evvie a cautious smile before rejoining Leila, who was glaring at the marble in her outstretched hand. Ignoring Leila, Tristan closed his eyes and tried to visualize the circle in the chalkboard. It took a long time to clear his mind, with fifty questions racing through it, and longer still before the marble in his palm began to grow warm, but at last it was too hot to hold.

Wincing, he dropped the marble and shook out his hand.

Then he realized the marble was still hanging in the air where he'd held it. When he took a tentative step forward, the marble floated with him, as though it were an extension of his body.

Five steps later, he reached the front of the classroom.

“Excellent work,” Merridy said when Tristan’s marble collided with the chalkboard. “Are there any pointers you could give your classmates?”

“Um...” Tristan raked at his hair self-consciously. “Not really.”

When Merridy relented and let Tristan rejoin Leila and Rusty, Leila grabbed his sleeve and tugged him to one corner.

“I just realized something,” she hissed. “Remember what Drakewell said this morning? About students *disappearing* if they messed up?”

Tristan nodded, bewildered.

“What if this test is an excuse to get rid of the students who are causing trouble? Drakewell’s the one setting off the disasters; if no one else is watching him, he could easily send something fatal our way.”

Tristan felt a twinge of worry, but he tried to shrug it away. “If Drakewell wanted to get rid of us, he’s had a hundred other chances. Why save it for Merridy’s test?”

“Because the other teachers are trying to protect us from him—don’t you see?” Leila’s voice was low and urgent. “This is the only chance he has to act without anyone stopping him.”

Tristan shoved his hands in his pockets. “Well, if that’s true, what are we supposed to do about it?”

“We need to be extra careful. The two of us are probably his main targets, followed by Eli and Trey. We should tell someone else about this, and if the four of us don’t return from the test by the time most of the students are back, they can get the professors to help us. And Triss—I’m worried what he’s planning for you. You’ve caused more trouble than any of the rest of us combined.”

Though dread settled in the pit of his stomach, Tristan squared his shoulders and said, “I’ll be careful. Don’t worry.”

* * *

That evening, the Subroom buzzed with talk about both the upcoming test and the oath of loyalty they had just sworn. After much prying from Cailyn and Hayley, Eli finally admitted he had been unwilling to leave his friends behind, “and damn the consequences”; Trey gave him a shifty smile. Evvie, meanwhile, sat hunched over her botany textbook and pretended not to hear anyone who questioned her reasons for staying.

There was some talk about the tattoos they had received—Leila suspected they were enchanted in some way, but no one could guess how. Tristan hoped they were not rigged to spy on students or injure anyone who stepped out of line.

While the others talked, Tristan pretended to be absorbed in Grindlethorn’s essay on treating frostbite and hypothermia—now that he knew about Merridy’s upcoming test, he doubted the topic was coincidental—but his mind would not settle.

What if Leila was right, and Drakewell planned to eliminate him in the test? Could he learn enough defensive magic to protect himself from whatever disasters were thrown his way? If he could figure out the cushioning spell that had protected the students in the avalanche, maybe he could use it during their upcoming test.

And what if the attacker took advantage of the relatively empty school to deal a harsher blow than ever?

As long as Drakewell suspected Tristan of attacking the academy, he was unlikely to stumble across whoever was actually guilty. It was up to Tristan to either prove his innocence beyond a doubt or catch the real attacker.

If he failed, he would lose the only home he had left.

As Tristan’s eyes flicked across the page of his medicine textbook for the hundredth time, not

taking in a single word, a plan began to take shape.

First, he would research as many magical means of keeping himself safe during the test as possible, from the air-cushion spell to heating spells that would ward off hypothermia. Then he would use his mastery of Intralocation to hurry back to the Lair as quickly as possible, in hopes of catching the attacker before he had a chance to strike.

And he would watch the students and teachers more carefully from now on, searching for any sign of a hidden agenda. Delair's mine was the first place to keep an eye on—the professors had appeared from a branch off the mine the night Tristan accidentally blew up the bucket of marbles, and Eli had said Drakewell frequently ventured down that same tunnel.

He wasn't sure what he would do if it turned out Eli was guilty. Could he betray a friend?

* * *

By Friday, every student except Hayley and Ryan had managed the Intralocation spell more or less accurately. When Rusty successfully enchanted his marble for the first time, causing it to hang in the air so close to his face that he went cross-eyed, he jumped up and down like a little kid. Even Leila was ecstatic when her spell worked.

"Wow," she breathed. "God, this is amazing! I can't believe—I mean, it's actually real! Wow."

Tristan laughed, though he was secretly relieved—not only was this the first time Leila had successfully used magic, but her mastery of the spell meant she was less likely to fall prey to whatever evil scheme Drakewell planned for the test.

The next week and a half were spent preparing for every possible scenario that might confront them on the test. Tristan could tell other teachers were worried when they abandoned their usual lesson plans in favor of teaching survival techniques.

Gracewright had them tramping through the snowy woods each day, learning to recognize the traces of dangerous animals—moose in particular—and build shelters that would keep them alive through the coldest hours of the night.

Grindlethorn focused on stabilizing injuries using materials available in the wild and recognizing the symptoms of hypothermia before it became too serious.

Alldusk taught them to use magic to dry out sodden wood enough to light a fire—also with magic—and how best to feed it to prolong its warmth.

And Merridy looked increasingly harried with each passing day as she drilled the class on every disaster she could think of, including wildly unlikely ones such as volcanos, switching up her lectures with further Intralocation practice. Even Hayley and Ryan got the hang of it in the end.

The only homework assigned during that time was practicing what they had learned in class. Relieved of his usual essay-writing and note-taking load, Tristan spent his free time looking up spells he might use to protect himself during the test. They had a sizeable library in the Subroom by now, and Tristan was surprised at the number of useful spells he stumbled across.

It took some digging to find the cushioning spell he thought they had used during the avalanche—it was called Air Density Manipulation, and involved increasing or decreasing air pressure to either deflect or attract nearby objects.

Other useful spells included a heating spell that would warm both his body and his immediate surroundings; a sense-enhancing spell that might allow him to hear approaching moose—or the beginnings of an avalanche—long before they reached him; an orientation spell that would tell him which way was north and whether he was walking uphill or downhill if the gradient was subtle; and a spell that would shrivel berries or mushrooms if they contained poison, so he could tell which were safe to eat.

He quickly mastered the heating spell, and after several evenings of practice, he finally got the

hang of the sense-enhancing spell and cushioning spell. The other two were harder to test, as he didn't want to raise suspicion by wandering the forest on his own, and there were no berries or mushrooms visible beneath the deep layer of snow that still covered the valley.

He planned to race back to the Lair and spend the rest of the test watching Delair's mine tunnel, in case the attacker decided to make a move while the professors were distracted.

* * *

At last the Wednesday of the test arrived. The students brought the same rucksacks, supplies, and warm layers they had used for the avalanche test up to breakfast, and Quinsley supplied each with a stash of trail mix and baked trail bars.

Drakewell was absent, as usual; the other professors whispered amongst themselves at their table, all looking concerned.

Though Tristan was nervous, he felt prepared, and dug into the huge breakfast of bacon, eggs, baked beans, toast, and cereal with relish.

At the end of breakfast, Merridy handed a large bag of marbles to each student.

"How is everyone feeling?" she asked, forehead creased in worry. "Does everyone feel confident they've mastered Intralocation?"

Most of the students nodded.

"Remember, you have until five o'clock on Friday evening to return to the academy. After that, we will collect you. We will be monitoring your location throughout the test—if you remain in one place for too long during the day, we will assume you are injured or trapped and will come after you. Any questions?"

"What if we die at night?" Hayley asked anxiously.

"No disasters will strike after sundown, so your main worry is hypothermia. Through the tattoo you received when you swore loyalty to the academy, we are able to measure your vitals at all times; if your pulse or body temperature drops to a dangerous level, we will come check on you."

Tristan rubbed at his wrist where the tattoo lay, invisible. He could have sworn he had glimpsed the faint blue lines a couple nights ago, when he was practicing the cushioning spell, but he might have imagined it.

Just as before, the students piled into the helicopter; this time Quinsley dropped each off at a separate location.

"Be careful," Leila said when Tristan's turn came to leave the warmth of the helicopter for a windswept, snowy hillside just above the treeline. "I would hate if anything happened to you."

"You too," he said. "Are you sure you've got the hang of Intralocation and that cushioning spell?"

She shrugged. "Who knows? But don't worry about me. Drakewell will go after you first."

With these words of encouragement, Tristan jumped the short distance from the helicopter onto the snow, where his boots sank straight through the icy crust.

As soon as the roar of the helicopter faded overhead, Tristan took out his pouch of marbles and pulled out a handful.

Worry for Leila clouded his concentration—she was still so new to using magic that her success was erratic—so he first looked around to gauge his bearings. He was in the upper reaches of the valley, beneath some of the tallest peaks he could see from the school's meadow; if he'd had a map and compass, it would have been a cinch to navigate back from here. The snow lay deeper here, and the cold was already seeping through his layers. The sun had yet to emerge from behind a peak, so the valley lay in cool blue shadow.

Letting out a deep breath that swirled around his face in steam, Tristan turned his attention to the spells he had practiced.

First he set the cushioning spell, which burned through marbles fast but would help him walk through the deep snow faster; then he enhanced his senses. If he took three days to return to the Lair, using spells the whole way, he would need to ration his marbles, so he saved the warmth spell for when he needed it.

Then, at last, he closed his eyes and pictured the entrance to the Lair, which he could imagine in great detail given he had built half of it himself. He pictured the fresh, pale boards of pine already beginning to darken from the snow; the shadowed stairway leading deep into the earth; and the packed dirt floor.

As the marble grew hot, painful against his icy palm, he released it and allowed it to hover in front of his face, the orb shifting minutely as he moved.

Yanking on his gloves, Tristan started off toward the stunted, wind-bent trees, trudging slowly through the deep snow. With his enhanced senses, every crack of ice and crunch of snow underfoot sounded like the start of an avalanche, but the woods were otherwise eerily silent. Momentum tried to carry him faster downhill, but the snow trapped his feet and sent him sprawling in the ice-crusting powder more than once. Still the marble kept pace with him, glinting dully as the sun finally spread through the valley.

Soon he reached the deeper woods, where the snow did not coat the ground as thickly, and his pace increased. He stopped several times to re-set his spells of protection, alarmed at how quickly the cushioning spell burned through marbles.

As the day wore on, Tristan grew more and more jumpy.

No disasters had beset him yet, and he expected something dramatic to descend at any second. Low clouds gathered and obscured the sun, but neither snow nor hail fell where he walked.

Even without disasters to escape from, ten miles was a long way to walk through deep snow, and Tristan was down to his last two marbles by the time the sun dropped below the western ridge. He needed to reach the school fast, or he would be defenseless if a disaster struck.

Though he had been moving fast, the cold was sinking its way deeper into his bones by the minute; soon he would have to resort to a warming spell. When the cushioning spell wore off again, he did not re-set it immediately, saving his marbles for when it mattered.

Where was the school? Surely he should have reached the meadow by now; had he messed up the Intralocation spell?

Tristan's foot caught on a rock hidden beneath the snow, and he crashed forward, sinking deep into the snow on his stomach.

Just then, a loud crack sounded in the distance.

Heart hammering against his ribs, Tristan surged to his feet and took off at a clumsy run through the snow, fumbling for the remaining marbles with one gloved hand.

As he pulled the marbles from his pocket, he tripped and fell once again.

The marbles slipped from his grasp.

Breathing hard, he dug through the snow in search of the marbles, but they were nowhere to be found.

The sky was darker than ever; he couldn't tell whether the clouds were growing thicker or if it was just the disappearing sun.

He couldn't afford to waste any more time. He needed to make it back to the Lair before his most recent Intralocation spell ran out.

Abandoning his search for the last two marbles, he took off through the woods once again, eyes fixed on the marble bobbing before him.

Then it vanished.

Tristan shouted a curse at the darkening sky.

He was lost in the woods, magic-less, and a disaster was sure to hit him at any second.

At least his footsteps showed a clear line through the snow. If he kept going in the direction his marble had been guiding him, he would be able to watch his tracks to make sure he wasn't walking in circles.

Slower now, he trudged on through the forest. The darkness increased twofold as the sense-enhancing spell slipped away, and the night seemed quieter than ever, as though the world around him was muffled. The cold gripped him tight, piercing his many layers and turning his exposed cheeks and nose to ice.

Maybe he should give up and build a shelter for the night. But if it snowed overnight and buried his tracks, he would truly be lost.

No, he had to reach the Lair.

He kept going, legs clumsy from the cold, ice crystals forming where his breath dampened his scarf.

Then, finally, he broke through the trees into the clearing above the Lair.

Tristan stopped, bewildered.

What about the disaster he was supposed to survive?

Something was wrong. Had he hit his head when he fell back in the woods, and hallucinated the past hour? Or did Drakewell want him back earlier than the other students so he could interrogate him without witnesses?

As Tristan stood there, wondering what horrors awaited him in the Lair, the clouds overhead parted to reveal a gibbous moon. The mountains emerged from the clouds, their silver aura radiating off the peaks like soft fragments of light.

Tristan drew his jacket closer about him and tucked his chin into the ice-encrusted folds of his scarf. Despite his worries and confusion, the sight captivated him. The air seemed heavy with magic, permeating the trees and threading across the clearing, so strong Tristan's muscles tinged with the sensation of power. It felt like a dream; again he wondered if he was still lying somewhere back in the woods and hallucinating the whole thing.

Then a ghostlike figure emerged from the trees and walked silently across the clearing toward him—Amber. Tristan tore his eyes from the moon, disoriented, as if he'd been pulled from a trance.

"Is anyone else back?" Amber asked.

"I don't know. I haven't been down yet." With a convulsive shiver, Tristan rubbed his gloved hands over his arms. He hadn't noticed the cold while the sensation of power coursed over him. "Let's go see if the fire is lit."

As he imagined the enchanted fire roaring to life in the Subroom, a sudden thrill of adrenaline surged through him, followed by a burst of heat that blossomed in his hands. At first he thought he was imagining it—maybe it was the hypothermia setting in—but the warmth held, thawing and loosening his stiff fingers.

"What's wrong?" Amber asked.

Tristan blinked and realized she'd been staring at him for the past minute. "Nothing's wrong. But—I think I just did magic. And I don't even know how."

"Oh." Amber's eyes widened in excitement. "Of course you did."

"But I didn't use a marble," Tristan said.

Amber's teeth gleamed in the moonlight as she grinned unexpectedly. "I think you did what I always do! You could feel the magic in the air, couldn't you? That's why you were just standing here."

Tristan nodded warily.

"I just draw on that when I work spells. That's why they never work properly for me underground—I can't use the marbles at all." She followed Tristan's gaze up to the moon, still beaming. "I thought something was wrong with me, but you're the same!"

"That was amazing. Seriously."

Amber's smile widened.

As the heat faded from his hands at last, Tristan crossed the meadow to the longhouse, Amber beside him. When he drew the heavy wooden doors shut and started down the stairs, he felt a sudden absence. The strands of free-flowing magic had been severed.

Chapter 24: The Headmaster's Duty

Down in the ballroom, Merridy and most of the other professors were sitting around their table in silence. Gracewright, Quinsley, and Alldusk looked as though they had recently returned from tramping through the snow themselves—they were red-cheeked and bundled in coats and scarves. Merridy and Grindlethorn, meanwhile, had bags of supplies at the ready in case they needed to hurry to someone's rescue.

"Tristan!" Merridy called. "And Amber! Well done. We didn't expect anyone to return after dark." Her voice was higher than usual. "Come get some hot chocolate and warm up."

"What about everyone else? Is anyone back yet? Are they okay?"

Alldusk gave Tristan a tight-lipped smile. "The headmaster has not reported back to us for several hours. I wish I could give you more information. You're the first to return."

As Tristan and Amber nursed their hot chocolate, Tristan couldn't stop glancing at the stairs. It was like a nervous tic.

He had to admit he was less worried than before, though—while he would not be able to relax until his friends returned, Drakewell would not have spared Tristan if he planned to kill off anyone he suspected of attacking the school.

When Quinsley brought out steaming bread bowls filled with French onion soup, strong cheese melted over the top, Tristan ate ravenously, exhaustion finally catching up with him.

He was nearly drifting off at the table, still hoping one of his friends might appear before he went off to bed, when Drakewell strode into the ballroom.

"Fairholm. Ashton. Come this way, please—I need a word with you."

Tristan's sleepiness vanished as quickly as it had come. Sharing a wary look with Amber, he collected his rucksack and followed Drakewell to his office.

What did the headmaster suspect them of doing now?

Drakewell locked the door to his office behind him, an ominous sign; the room was only partially lit, the rest cloaked in shadows.

"Sit, sit," he said impatiently.

Tristan and Amber dropped hurriedly into the two chairs across from the headmaster.

"You two are very quiet," Drakewell said sourly. "During the day, it's hard to get you kids to shut up." Sighing, he put a hand to his black hourglass. "I have heard from several teachers that you both show a remarkable aptitude for magic."

Tristan blinked, sure he had misheard. Praise was the last thing he expected from Drakewell.

"As you may have guessed, my duties as headmaster involve more than simply running this school. My position is vital to what we do, and must be performed by someone with an excellent understanding of magic."

Something clicked. "*You're* responsible for the disasters," Tristan blurted out. "That's why none of the other teachers are willing to take your job."

Drakewell's eyes narrowed for a moment before he nodded. "Precisely. And when I step down, I will need to leave a fully capable headmaster—or headmistress," he amended, with a nod at Amber, "—in my place. I will therefore train you both for this task, provided you prove yourselves worthy."

Tristan felt as though he had been hit over the head. He sat motionless, dazed, until he finally forced out the words. "What if we don't want to do it?"

Drakewell's hollow eyes narrowed "I'm afraid that is not your decision. You and Miss Ashton have been chosen for this role, and if you refuse to comply, we have no further use for you here. Your

training will not begin until next year, but in the meantime, I will be watching you closely. Any transgressions will be punished severely.”

He held Tristan’s eyes with his unblinking black gaze. “I sincerely hope you are not responsible for attacking our school. I hate to think what might happen if you were.” His lips curved as though he was making a joke at Tristan’s expense.

Then, abruptly, he shifted his piercing stare to Amber. “You’ve been very quiet. Do you understand what I said?”

“Oh!” Amber sounded hurt. “Of course I understand.”

Drakewell gave her a dismissive gesture. “Very well. I need to speak with Mr. Fairholm in private, so you may go. Please report to me tomorrow evening at eight o’clock.”

When Tristan was alone with Drakewell, his palms began itching with sweat. He still wore his scarf, now damp where the ice crystals had melted, and the winter layers were suddenly suffocating.

Drakewell watched Tristan fidget for several minutes, his expression unreadable. At last he said, “I promised I would interrogate each student regarding the threat we received in January. I thought this would be a good opportunity to speak with you, while the school is quiet and empty.”

It sounded like a threat.

“Describe for me, as honestly as possible, what you think about the Underground Academy and your future here. I will know if you are lying.”

Could he read minds? Nervous, Tristan raked the hair over the left side of his face. He was sure Drakewell was trying to trick him into saying something that would implicate him.

“I don’t know about doing your job,” he said at last, speaking too fast, “but I’m glad I’m here. I hated Juvie. I would never attack this place—I don’t have anywhere else to go.”

“And yet you burned down our entryway. Why? Boredom? Rebellion? Making a statement?”

“No, I—” Tristan grimaced. He could not defend himself without giving away Evvie’s secret. “I was just trying out a spell. It got out of hand.”

“I think you’re lying,” Drakewell said. His lips pressed into a thin line. “I’m going to make a deal with you, Mr. Fairholm. What is it you desire most?”

“I want my brother back,” Tristan said without thinking. When he realized what he’d said, his face grew hot.

Drakewell’s nostrils flared in anger. “I cannot raise the dead, idiot boy. You wasted your chance. This is your deal—if you tell me the truth before our vandal attacks, and it turns out you were not involved, you will be forgiven.” His eyes narrowed. “Fail to do so, and your friend Leila Swanson will be punished in your stead.”

“What?” Tristan nearly shouted. “Professor, no, don’t do anything to Leila, I—”

“Would you like to tell me the truth now?”

Tristan’s hands were shaking, but he swallowed back the curses he wanted to shout. Drakewell was horrible, twisted, manipulative.... It was easy to keep Evvie’s secret when he was the only one in danger, but could he hurt Leila? She would never forgive him if he chose Evvie over her, even with the lives of two innocents on the line.

Besides, what would Drakewell do to Leila? Kill her? Torture her?

No, he couldn’t do it.

“Don’t do this, please, Professor, I can’t—”

“Quiet.” Drakewell’s voice was silky and dangerous. “I’ll give you more time to think about your options. If I haven’t heard the truth from you before your final exams are finished, you won’t see your friend again.”

“But you can’t—”

“Enough. Get out of my office.”

Tristan scrambled to his feet and fled. He sprinted back down to the Subroom, as though he

could outrun Drakewell's threats, and only stopped when he nearly collided with Amber just inside the doorway.

Breathing hard, he tried to rein in his temper. He wanted to hit something, to break something, but Amber was just looking at him with bewilderment and hurt in her eyes, and he couldn't explain to her what was wrong.

"Did something happen?" she asked hesitantly.

Tristan shook his head. "No. I just hate Drakewell. He's evil." Tristan took a sharp breath through his nose. "Sorry. We should light the fire, shouldn't we?"

"Quinsley gave me more hot chocolate." Amber handed Tristan a mug. "He made too much. He thought some of the others would get back tonight."

Tristan had to resist the urge to hurl the mug at the fireplace.

Instead he sank onto the couch and stared into the foam, warmth spreading through his fingers.

Amber lit the fire and sank into the chair beside him. Her expression was distant, the firelight reflecting in her eyes. "If Drakewell thinks I'm slow, why does he want to train me to replace him?"

"He doesn't think you're slow," Tristan said, sorrow dampening his anger. "He just...well, he doesn't understand you. You're a hard person to understand."

"I see," Amber said in a very small voice.

"No, I didn't mean it like that! It's like you're some rare magical creature, and no one else is quite as—as special—as you."

Amber's face was growing stonier still.

"Just ignore me," Tristan said, frustrated with himself. "I'm no good at talking. But I think you're amazing. Come on, let's drink this hot chocolate before it gets cold."

They lapsed into silence, each lost in their own miserable thoughts. Before them, the enchanted fire threw flickering shadows across the walls of the empty Subroom.

* * *

Tristan rose early the next morning after a restless night.

Worries had plagued him for hours—where were his friends now? Were they safe, or were they slowly freezing to death in the snowy woods? Why had no one else returned?

And above all, how could he keep Evvie's secret if it meant betraying Leila?

When he stumbled up to the ballroom, leaving Amber still asleep, he heard raised voices—it sounded as though the teachers were arguing. He paused, listening.

"...telling you this was a bad idea!" Alldusk was saying loudly. "The kids don't know enough; we're practically guaranteeing they'll come back in pieces."

"What are you yelling at me for?" Grindlethorn asked in his deep, gravelly voice. "Darla's the one who gave the test."

"Only because Drakewell forced me to," Merridy said. "I tried to argue, but he said he wouldn't let me anywhere near the maps if I refused."

Tristan didn't know what this meant, but it seemed to catch Grindlethorn off guard, because he didn't reply.

"What's he playing at?" Quinsley asked. "He's cutting us out. That's not how this school was supposed to work, but—"

"I can understand why he's worried, if someone inside the academy wants us dead," Alldusk said grimly. "I just hope we can stop whoever it is before it's too late."

Tristan heard footsteps behind him and hurriedly pushed open the ballroom doors.

The professors stopped talking immediately.

"Morning, Tristan," Merridy said with a strained smile.

“How long have you been outside?” Grindlethorn asked.

“I just got here,” Tristan said.

Alldusk gave him a sharp look. He did not have a chance to question Tristan further, as Brikkens strolled around the corner just then, whistling merrily, still in pajamas.

“Out of curiosity,” Alldusk said, “what disaster did you have to face?”

“Nothing,” Tristan said. “I just walked straight back.”

Alldusk raised his eyebrows at Merridy.

“Maybe the headmaster wished you to return quickly so he could speak with you in private,” Grindlethorn said. “Has Miss Ashton discussed her test with you?”

Tristan shook his head. “Has Professor Drakewell told you where any of the others are? Is everyone okay?”

“They’re alive.” Alldusk set his mug down heavily, sloshing coffee onto the back of his hand. “Zeke will make it back by this evening, and Evangeline is heading in the right direction. Rusty appears to be completely lost, and Leila—well, she’s badly injured.”

“Then why didn’t you bring her back?” Tristan demanded.

“Professor Drakewell said she refused.”

“Well, you damn well should’ve brought her back anyway!”

“Sit down,” Alldusk said gently.

Fuming, Tristan stalked across the ballroom and threw himself into his usual chair.

“I’m very sorry about this. But you need to trust us. We are doing everything we can to ensure the safety of your classmates.”

Draining the last of his coffee, Alldusk got to his feet. “I should rejoin Gracewright. See you later, Tristan.” Buttoning his trench coat as he went, he swept up the stairs toward the meadow.

Tristan knew why Leila had refused help, of course. She would never let Zeke beat her if she had the choice, though the teachers should have known better than to indulge her stubbornness, especially if she was injured.

He was torn between his plans to stake out Delair’s mine shaft and his desire to see his friends as soon as they returned.

Eventually he decided there was little point watching the mine if everyone in the Lair was accounted for. Amber disappeared outside as soon as she finished breakfast; many of the teachers followed her, keeping tabs on the students still struggling back toward the Lair; Drakewell was presumably holed away down in the tunnels, creating disasters; Brikkens was in his classroom, tending to his lemon tree; and when Tristan ventured down to Delair’s mine, he heard the unmistakable sound of hammering rising from the depths.

The two children were still hidden in the tunnels as well, but they hadn’t been around when the greenhouse was destroyed. If an attack happened now, the only ones who could be responsible were Drakewell, Brikkens, or Delair. *That would be funny, if Drakewell was responsible and just wanted to scare everyone else by accusing them,* Tristan thought grimly.

* * *

Just as Alldusk had promised, Zeke arrived in the clearing shortly before dinner, his dark hair bedraggled. Tristan had been pacing the meadow, trying to keep warm as he watched the shadows for any sign of movement.

“Where’s your girlfriend, Tristan?” Zeke called out as he crossed the trampled snow. “She’s not back yet, is she? What an idiot.”

“Leave Leila alone,” Tristan said sharply. “She hasn’t done anything to you.”

Zeke snorted. “That’s what you think.”

When Tristan flew at him, Zeke slammed the door in his face.

Amber reappeared halfway through dinner, cheeks pink from the cold, and joined Tristan at one of the smaller tables.

“Someday,” Tristan said, “you should tell me where you keep going when you vanish like that.”

Amber stirred her pumpkin soup idly, watching Tristan. “I like wandering. Why did you spend the day walking in circles? I could see you in the meadow.”

“I was waiting for my friends to get back,” he said quietly, glancing at the half-empty professors’ table. “I’m worried about them.”

Even the teachers were surprised when Evvie appeared at the top of the stairs, disheveled and mud-streaked, before the end of dinner.

“Where is everyone?” she asked as she glanced from Tristan and Amber to Zeke, who sat alone. “I was delayed—isn’t everyone back by now?”

“No, it’s just us,” Tristan said. “You should join us.” He pulled out the chair to his right.

With a suspicious frown, Evvie slid into the chair, the smell of pine smoke rising from her muddy clothes. Despite her bedraggled hair and flushed cheeks, she looked as pretty as always.

For a moment Evvie was quiet, piling lasagna onto her plate and glancing sullenly at Tristan every so often. Then her curiosity must have overcome her annoyance.

“What’s taking people so long? Ten miles isn’t very far, is it?” She took a huge bite of lasagna.

Tristan shook his head. “Some people are lost, and others are injured. Some are probably still trying to escape whatever disasters hit them. Nothing happened to me, which is why I got back so fast.”

“I bet you just cried for help,” Zeke taunted. “You couldn’t even last a single night out there.”

Tristan ignored him. “What happened to you, anyway?” he asked Evvie. “I didn’t know there was any mud out there, with all that snow around.”

She glared at him. “I was trying to cross a frozen river, and suddenly all the ice melted and swept me downstream. It was like spring had suddenly come to that one tiny bit of the forest. When I climbed out, the banks were covered in mud, but the whole river was frozen again by the time I managed to dry out my clothes.”

“What about you?” Tristan asked Zeke, unable to help himself.

“I got stuck in a blizzard. It lasted most of yesterday, which is why I didn’t make it back—it was so cold I couldn’t stay warm even with the spell, so I had to hide out until it died down.”

“I wonder what the others had to face,” Tristan said. “Drakewell definitely wasn’t going easy on you guys.”

Zeke and Evvie shook their heads.

* * *

As he passed the old bunkroom on his way down to the Subroom, Tristan heard a *thunk...thunk...thunk* rising through the open doorway. Pausing, he peered around the corner to see Zeke slouched back in his bed, throwing a gold marble against the wall over and over.

“Quit doing that,” Tristan snapped. “Those things are dangerous.”

“No they’re not,” Zeke said. He threw the marble harder than before.

BANG!

Just as Tristan had expected, the marble exploded, blasting a hole the size of a basketball in the wall. Bits of stone fell away, crumbling into a dusty heap on Zeke’s blankets.

“Nice work,” Tristan said. What was up with Zeke?

Scowling, Zeke brushed the marble dust onto the floor. “You’d better not tell the teachers.”

“I wasn’t going to.” Shaking his head, Tristan left Zeke alone once more.

Down in the Subroom, he dragged his pillow over his head and tried to push away the worries that were crowding in once again. He hoped Leila had found somewhere safe to spend the night.

* * *

Tristan couldn't settle to anything the next day. Amber had vanished once again, and no one else had returned from the test; when Alldusk and Merridy appeared for breakfast, they announced grimly that the remaining students had barely made any progress.

As the morning dragged on, several more students returned: first Cailyn, then Damian, then Hayley and Rusty together.

Leila, Eli, and Trey were still nowhere to be seen.

Tristan's misgivings grew with every passing hour.

Surely it could not be coincidence that Leila, Eli, and Trey had yet to return—they were no worse at magic than the others. It seemed more and more as though Drakewell hoped to eliminate them.

At last, just after lunch, Tristan could wait no longer. Damn Drakewell and his threats. He didn't care how much trouble he got in—he couldn't leave Leila out there to freeze to death.

Rusty had been in the shower for nearly an hour, so Tristan stuck his head into the boys' bathroom and yelled, "I'm going after Leila. Do you want to help?"

"Huh?" Rusty called back. Then, "Wait for me!"

While Rusty got dressed, Tristan raced down to the Subroom to collect as many marbles as he could find. Many of his classmates' schoolbags were overflowing with marbles from their many practical lessons; with a twinge of guilt, he dug through several and loaded up the pockets of his coat.

"Wait, so why are we searching for Leila?" Rusty asked when Tristan rejoined him. "I thought the teachers are gonna collect everyone else at five."

"They're supposed to," Tristan said, "but Leila's afraid Drakewell is trying to do away with the students that are causing him trouble—which means me, Leila, Eli, and Trey."

"But you made it back safe."

Tristan started up toward the top of the school, walking fast. "Yeah, because Drakewell needs me for something. The others..."

Rusty broke into a jog to keep up with Tristan. "I don't think he's *that* evil."

"Maybe not. But Leila's injured and refused to let anyone take her back to the school. I don't want her freezing to death out there."

Rusty raised no further objections.

Outside, a new layer of snow had smoothed out the mess of footprints in the meadow. A weak sun struggled to penetrate the stubborn layer of clouds, though it did nothing to warm the frigid air.

"How're we gonna find her?" Rusty asked with a frown. His shaggy brown hair, still wet from the shower, was already stiffening with ice.

Tristan had been puzzling over this all morning. "I thought we could try the Intralocation spell on her. I don't see why it wouldn't work."

Rusty grimaced. "Ugh, I never got it to work properly when we were trying to find the way back. It's a lot harder when you're trying to go a long way."

"How did you get back, then?"

"Hayley managed it once, so we knew what general direction we were supposed to go."

"Fine, I'll do it." Tristan closed his eyes and tried to imagine Leila. He pictured her ragged black hair—only now touching her shoulders once more—and the scattering of freckles across her nose.

As the marble in his hand grew warm, he released it to hang before him. It was tugging him in the direction of the woods, northeast of the academy, which seemed promising.

"Well, at least we won't get lost on our way back," Tristan said as he trudged into the trees.

Rusty snapped a piece of ice from his frozen hair before falling into pace behind Tristan.

“What happened to you on the test, anyway?” Tristan asked. He wanted to know why Leila was injured—the others who had returned were unhurt.

Rusty grinned. “Me and Hayley got stuck in this massive ice storm. That’s why we got lost—there were huge icicles trying to spear us alive, and we had to run into this creepy old forest.”

“That’s insane,” Tristan said, though he wondered if Rusty was exaggerating. “Zeke got off easy—he just had to wait out a blizzard.”

Over an hour—and three marbles—later, Tristan was getting worried. Rusty made no complaint, but his nose was bright red from the cold and Tristan could hear his teeth chattering whenever they stopped.

Where was Leila?

There was a strong possibility the Intralocation spell did not work on people, but they had gone so far he didn’t want to give up now.

“H-have we walked ten miles yet?” Rusty asked, shivering, when Tristan next stopped to enchant a new marble.

“Two at most,” Tristan said grimly. “The problem is, we don’t know where she got hurt. She might still be nine miles from the school.” He stamped his feet, torn between worry for Leila and fear that Rusty would lose an ear if he stayed out in the cold much longer. “I can try the warming spell, but I only know how to make it work on myself.”

Putting a hand on Rusty’s ice-encrusted hair, Tristan thought of a roaring bonfire. The warmth spread through him even before the marble dissolved—this was the easiest spell he had ever tried. He tried to concentrate most of it into his hands and push the warmth down toward Rusty’s head, but he wasn’t sure it was working.

Rusty started shuddering more than before, and the ice on his hair melted and began to steam. Before long, his hair was dry.

Tristan withdrew his hand, warmth still coursing through him. “Did that help?”

“Y-yeah.” Rusty was still shivering violently. “It only went down t-to about my shoulders, but it’s much better. Only now I can feel the cold again—I’m n-not numb.”

Tristan sighed. “We’ll keep going until this next marble runs out. Then we’ll turn back.”

He kept imagining Leila bleeding to death in some remote stretch of forest, ice creeping through her limbs as her blood stained the snow. Fear had solidified in the pit of his stomach; he had never felt so helpless.

More than anything, he feared Drakewell had lied—according to Alldusk, Leila had refused to be rescued, but what if Drakewell had not actually given her a choice? What if he wanted her to die out there?

“Leila?” he shouted.

The snowy woods quickly swallowed up his voice.

Knowing this marble was his last chance to find her, he walked faster than ever, Rusty struggling to keep up. He had not seen any footprints since they left the meadow; if any of his fellow students had come this way, the snow had long since buried all trace of their passage.

“Leila!” he shouted again. Though he doubted she would hear, he kept calling for her every few steps.

Too soon, his marble faded away.

Tristan stopped, breathing hard, worry pounding at his head.

He should have known it would be useless.

What could he do against the power of trained magicians? Even the other teachers feared to oppose Drakewell—why had Tristan thought he could succeed where they had failed?

Furious at Drakewell—at himself, for failing Leila—he turned back toward the trail of footprints

he and Rusty had packed into the snow.

Then he heard a thin voice crying, "Who's there?"

Tristan broke into a run, following the voice through the trees. "Leila? LEILA!"

"Triss?" The voice was weak.

At last, Tristan and Rusty broke through a clump of bushes to find Leila kneeling in the snow between two scraggly pines. A trail of blood stained the snow behind her, which was packed in a way that made it look as though she had been crawling.

"What the hell happened to you?" Tristan dropped to his knees and tried to see where she was injured.

"I hid out in a cave when a blizzard started, and the roof collapsed that night." Her face was drained of color, whether from pain or cold Tristan could not tell. "A huge rock hit my knee, and it started bleeding everywhere. It took until the next morning before I was strong enough to keep going. I tried bandaging it up myself, but it started bleeding again this morning, and now it hurts like hell."

"Did anyone come check on you?"

Leila shook her head.

"That lying bastard! I knew it."

She frowned at Tristan.

"Alldusk told me Drakewell had gone out to see if you were okay, and Drakewell claimed you refused to be rescued."

Leila's eyes widened. "He *was* trying to get rid of me, then! What about Eli and Trey? Are they safe?"

"No idea," Tristan said. "They're not back yet. We wanted to look for them too, but it's taken most of the day to find you."

Leila cursed. "What happens when we go back, then? Is Drakewell going to find some other way to finish us off?"

"Not with the other teachers around," Tristan said, but he was not as confident as he sounded. "We'll worry about that later. First, we need to get you back."

"I'm not sure I can walk," Leila said grimly.

"We'll c-carry you," Rusty said.

Though Leila looked skeptical, Tristan helped her sit up and lifted her carefully into his arms. She was nearly the same height as him, so he staggered under her weight, but they had no other choice. Now that her leg was no longer buried under the snow, he could see the tear in her pants, the deep gash just above her knee. Her pants were dark with blood.

The walk back was faster than the way out had been, partly because they were able to step in their footprints rather than breaking through the icy crust of snow with each step. Tristan and Rusty traded Leila between them every so often, while she kept trying to persuade them she was fine to walk for a while.

At last they reached the warmth and safety of the Lair. A few students and teachers were hanging out in the ballroom, including Merridy; when she saw Leila, she sprang to her feet.

"Leila. Are you okay? We need to get you down to Professor Grindlethorn immediately."

"I'm fine," she said, though her face was still unnaturally pale.

Tristan, who was carrying her but felt his grip slipping, hurried to the door while Merridy fussed over her.

"Why did you refuse to come back to the Lair? You won't pass the test anyway if you had help getting back. How did you get injured? Did you go somewhere you weren't supposed to? The test wasn't meant to be dangerous."

Leila ignored these questions; from her gritted teeth, Tristan guessed she was fighting not to cry out in pain.

“What do you mean, it wasn’t supposed to be dangerous?” he asked angrily. “We were stuck out in the snow for three days trying to survive natural disasters. How could it not be dangerous?”

“It was supposed to be carefully controlled,” Merridy said. “Professor Drakewell—”

“What?”

She cleared her throat. “I need to have a word with the headmaster. Don’t say anything to the other professors, please.”

Tristan met Leila’s eyes and raised his eyebrows, but she seemed too far gone to register Merridy’s slip.

When they reached Grindlethorn’s hospital and Tristan was able to set Leila down on a bed, he turned to Merridy. “Is everyone else back? How are the others?”

“Eli, Trey, Cassidy, and Ryan have yet to return,” Merridy said. “The others have made it back. There were no new disasters to face today, so the remaining students were able to navigate without distraction.”

Eli and Trey—it was exactly as Leila had feared. “Is anyone else injured?” he asked offhandedly.

“That remains to be seen.”

Grindlethorn bustled into the hospital room with a cart full of medical supplies. “Just finished seeing to Cailyn Tyler. She had the beginnings of frostbite on one finger. What happened to you, Miss Swanson?”

“Got crushed—under a rock,” Leila said in a strangled voice. She was gripping her upper leg with both hands.

“Everyone else, out of my way.” Grindlethorn pushed Rusty away from Leila’s bedside. “She’ll be fine in no time if you let me do my job properly.”

Tristan and Rusty trudged back up to the ballroom, where Quinsley had a huge pot of soup and hot cider ready to warm the returning students. Rusty wrapped his hands around his bowl and hunched over the steam, his eyes sliding closed.

“How long until you pick up everyone else?” Tristan asked Quinsley as he helped himself to soup.

Quinsley checked his watch. “We said five o’clock, didn’t we? Just under an hour now.”

“Have you heard how Eli and Trey are doing?” Tristan asked in a low voice.

“No, Professor Drakewell hasn’t shared any news.” At Tristan’s expression, he hastened to add, “Which means everything should be fine. He has no reason to report back to us unless students need rescuing.”

Though he was dubious, Tristan thanked Quinsley for the soup and joined Rusty.

He planned to wait in the ballroom until Eli and Trey returned, but sitting and doing nothing was agonizing. As soon as he finished his soup, he told Rusty he was heading down to shower.

Instead of turning down the hallway toward the bathrooms and the Subroom, he continued down the final flight of stairs to the lowest level of the school, where Delair’s mine was situated. Alone among the teachers, Delair did not appear to be involved in their test—Tristan could hear the usual sounds of banging echoing from the depths of his mine.

Trying not to imagine what would happen if he were caught, Tristan crept down the mine until he reached the first tunnel branching off to the left. The professors had appeared from a different passageway farther down the mine; if anyone emerged from that passageway now, Tristan would see them.

He retreated just around the first corner, where he would be able to hear footsteps without being seen, and sank to the ground to wait. It was cold down here, but he was still bundled in his winter clothes; more than anything, he struggled to remain still. He wanted to pace the halls of the school, fuming at his own impotence, until Eli and Trey returned safely.

It was nearly five—he was about to abandon his vigil to return to the warmth of the ballroom—when footsteps tapped up the tunnel. Tristan edged around the corner just in time to see Merridy

hurrying back to the main school.

He sagged against the tunnel wall. All that waiting for nothing—of course Merridy would be down in the bowels of the school. She was likely helping Drakewell monitor the progress of the remaining students, however that was accomplished.

Tristan was just leaving the side tunnel to follow Merridy when he heard another set of footsteps approaching, this time quieter.

He ducked back into the tunnel and pressed his back against the wall.

Not a second later, Evvie appeared from the mine tunnel.

Chapter 25: The Secret of the Tunnels

Evvie kept glancing over her shoulder as she crept up the hallway, her expression furtive. Tristan withdrew his head so Evvie would not spot him. For a long time he stood motionless in the dim tunnel, Evvie's footsteps receding in the distance.

What was she doing in the tunnels? Didn't she know how much trouble she would be in if Drakewell caught her?

Was she looking after the children? But why would they be hidden close to the school's stockpile of magic? Surely whichever teacher was taking care of them would know better than to keep them somewhere that would look suspicious.

Was Merridy the teacher Evvie had shared her secret with?

Tristan would not be surprised if that were true, but then why was Evvie sneaking after Merridy as though she did not want to be discovered?

What if Evvie was the attacker? Maybe she had lied about needing the diversion to keep the children safe; maybe Aspen and Drew were long gone, and she just wanted Tristan to cause trouble to draw attention off her.

It seemed unlikely, but if she had known the purpose of the academy before any other students, she might have sought to interrupt their work before anyone else died.

Was Evvie behind the threatening note?

Tristan didn't want to believe it, but he had to find out for sure.

He would use the Intralocation spell to follow Evvie into the tunnels the next time she disappeared.

If it turned out Evvie was endangering the lives of everyone at the academy, Tristan would gladly report her in exchange for Leila's safety. But he would say nothing until he was certain. If he made a mistake, he might be ruining Evvie's life for nothing.

This time Tristan waited until he was certain the tunnel was empty before venturing out once again. Delair's pickaxe still rang out from the depths of the mine, but the rest of the tunnel was quiet.

Up in the ballroom, Evvie was sitting at her usual table as though nothing had happened, while Rusty reported that most of the professors had gone off to retrieve the four remaining students.

Only Brikkens remained behind in the ballroom, and he seemed oblivious to the nervous whispers that punctuated the silence. Each group was missing members, and no one could guess what state their friends would be in when they returned.

The next hour was excruciating.

Brikkens passed around a plate of chocolate chip cookies that Quinsley had baked earlier that day, but only Hayley and Evvie accepted them—Hayley ate mechanically, her eyes fixed on the stairway, while Evvie hunched over her plate and nibbled around the chocolate chips.

At last, Merridy led the way down the stairs. Eli hobbled after her, leaning heavily on Alldusk, while Quinsley carried an unconscious Trey. Apart from an angry scratch down one cheek, Cassidy appeared unhurt, while Ryan had blood crusted on his upper lip—it looked like the remnants of a bloody nose.

"I knew it!" Tristan said under his breath. "Leila was right."

Rusty frowned at him.

"But it didn't work, did it, you evil bastard? They're all still alive." Though, given the state they

had found Leila in, she might not have lasted much longer.

Eli and Trey were whisked down to the hospital room, and Gracewright began serving dinner. Damian's gang rejoiced at the return of their friends, roaring with laughter as they shared stories of what they had faced in the woods, while Hayley and Cailyn whispered and picked at their food, foreheads knitted together in worry.

When dinner was over, Tristan and Hayley loaded several plates with leftovers to bring down to the Subroom for their friends.

It was nearly midnight before Leila, Eli, and Trey joined them. Trey appeared to have recovered fully, while Eli and Leila both hobbled into the Subroom on crutches.

Hayley and Cailyn ran over to hug their friends, and Rusty directed Leila to the long-cooled dinner of soup and kebabs.

"What happened to you guys?" Cailyn asked as soon as Leila, Eli, and Trey were seated.

The others in the Subroom gathered around, listening closely.

"I was in a cave-in," Leila said.

"I got lost in a thick fog the first day," Eli said. "That damn Intralocation spell wasn't working properly. Then, when I was asleep under a tree, there was an earthquake and the whole tree fell on top of me. My ankle's broken—it hurts like hell."

They all turned expectantly to Trey.

"Someone stole most of my marbles, so I started the test with only two."

Eli swore. "Who was it? I'll punch their face in for you."

Trey gave him a fleeting smile. "I have no idea. Anyway, I figured I should climb up a ridge to see where the school was and save my marbles until I was nearly back, but an avalanche nearly buried me. I wasn't hurt too badly, but I must've gotten a concussion, because I was disoriented and couldn't think straight. I started walking in the wrong direction, and used up both of my marbles lighting a fire to keep warm. By the time I got my head on straight again, I had no idea what day it was and had to keep walking so I didn't freeze to death."

Hayley put a hand on his arm, eyes wide.

"I recognized the signs of hypothermia when it started, so I tried lighting one last fire and curled up in a little snow cave I dug under a tree. The flame wouldn't hold, and I must've passed out at some point, because the next thing I knew I was in Grindlethorn's hospital."

"You're lucky you're alive," Eli said.

"I know."

Leila gave Tristan a significant look. "You know what this means, don't you?"

Eli frowned at her.

"Remember how Drakewell talked about students disappearing? I thought maybe he'd use this test to get rid of whoever had caused trouble. But it didn't work—we're all still alive."

"Barely," Eli said.

Leila leaned forward. "That's exactly it. We need to watch ourselves—Drakewell obviously doesn't want the three of us around, so he'll try to kill us off one way or another."

"What about Tristan?" Eli asked. "He's caused more trouble than any of us combined."

"Drakewell wants to train me and Amber up as his replacements. I'm too useful for him to kill." He hoped Eli wouldn't realize the implications of this—if he suspected Tristan of causing disasters, the whole Subroom might turn against Tristan.

Eli's eyebrows raised in surprise. "How the hell are we meant to keep ourselves safe if Drakewell wants to kill us? He can turn New York City to rubble if he wants!"

"We need to start collecting our own marbles again," Tristan said. "Not in a big bucket—that's too dangerous. But now that we know a few spells to keep ourselves safe, we should always have marbles with us just in case."

“You can teach us the spells you were practicing,” Leila said. “The cushioning spell and the warming spell and things.”

“I’ll try,” he said, though he doubted he would have any more success than his professors. He rounded on Eli. “You’d better promise not to blow anything else up, though.”

Eli pointed his kabob skewer at Tristan. “That’s not fair! You were the one who blew up the whole mine tunnel, not me. Anyway, we pledged our loyalty to the academy, didn’t we? We don’t have any choice now.”

* * *

As the weeks passed, everyone in the Subroom began collecting marbles whenever possible. They already received several in each class for practicing spells in the evenings, and any unused marbles went into the piles that now filled every vase, bowl, cup, and basket in the Subroom.

In the meantime, Tristan kept a close watch on Evvie, ready to follow her the next time she vanished. But he did not catch her straying from the main school corridors again. It seemed she was no longer involved in caring for Aspen and Drew; Tristan could think of no likely explanation her foray into the tunnels after Merridy’s test.

As often as possible, he spent the evening hiding in the passageway off Delair’s mine tunnel to see who passed by, but the vast majority of the time it was just Delair and Drakewell. Only rarely did the other teachers venture down so far.

* * *

March began with another snowstorm and a steep drop in temperature. Unable to hold classes in her drafty longhouse, Gracewright carried an armful of fresh cuttings into the Lair and borrowed Brikkens’ classroom for several days. Each subsequent morning, Brikkens spent the class period grumbling about the dirt and leaves Gracewright had left on his enormous round table.

As Easter approached, Brikkens began his usual regimen of decorating the school, this time with little painted eggs dangling from his lemon tree. One day he handed around flowerpots and announced with great pleasure that they would spend the lesson learning to grow wildflowers. “I thought it might brighten up the school! It’s a bit gloomy this time of year, with spring starting so late, don’t you think?”

“Haven’t we seen enough plants in botany?” Damian grumbled. “We’ll probably be doing the same thing in Gracewright’s class.”

The other students didn’t seem to mind, though. By the end of the lesson, most of the flowerpots boasted at least a few blooms, and Brikkens happily doled out extra credit based on how many flowers each student had managed to grow.

* * *

When Tristan stumbled up to breakfast on Easter Sunday, he thought for a moment he had taken a wrong turn. The ballroom was a riot of color—in addition to the fifteen flowerpots from Brikkens’ class, someone had carried down a set of long planters crowded with tulips of every color.

“Happy Easter!” Brikkens called.

“Ooh, maybe we’ll get to do an Easter egg hunt,” Rusty said.

Tristan shook his head in amusement.

After breakfast, Rusty suggested they go sledding, and Zeke’s gang decided to join them. Rusty had never been sledding before, and he was bouncing around in his excitement.

Even Leila was enthusiastic. “Gerry found a couple old sleds when he was helping us put together

stuff for the Subroom. I have no idea what the teachers were doing with them.”

Leila was the first to careen down the hill toward the lake, followed closely by Zeke. They started wrestling in the snow—Tristan took a few steps forward, wondering if he should run down and intervene before things got violent—and then, with a resounding crack, the ice beneath them gave way.

Both Leila and Zeke sank into the lake up to their shoulders.

“I’m going to murder you, Zeke, I swear!” Leila shouted as she dragged herself to her feet and marched back to shore.

When Zeke tried to follow, she shoved him back into the water.

By the time Leila reached the top of the hill, her lips were purple, so Tristan abandoned the sledding to make sure she reached the Subroom safely.

It was only after Leila had stalked off to the showers and left Tristan alone in the Subroom that he realized what he had missed before.

Evvie had not been among the sledders. And she was not in the Subroom either.

Adrenaline raced through him. This could be his chance at last. Evvie didn’t know anyone else was still down here; she might give herself away if she thought she was alone.

Tristan grabbed a marble and hurried back to the main school to hunt her down. Closing his eyes, he tried to picture Evvie. Though he had a clear mental image of her silky blond hair, her dark-lashed hazel eyes, and her delicate lips, the marble refused to grow warm with magic.

Cursing, Tristan leaned against the wall and tried again. Maybe it was worry about Leila that clouded his concentration.

It took two more tries before the spell worked. He followed it to the end of the hall, but it dead-ended, and the marble wanted to lead him downward.

“Damn!” Tristan realized the marble was trying to tug him along the shortest route to reach Evvie—directly through the bedrock surrounding the Lair.

When he turned and retraced his steps, this time following the route he expected Evvie had taken toward Delair’s mine shaft, it bobbed obligingly before him once more.

He was about to turn into the tunnel when Evvie emerged and nearly walked into him.

Recoiling, she stared at him, color draining from her face. “What are you doing here?”

“What are *you* doing?” Tristan snatched the marble from the air.

“I just—I wanted to work off a few hours with Delair,” she said hurriedly.

“Sure,” Tristan said. “You were sneaking around in the tunnels, weren’t you? What are you hiding?”

Evvie’s face grew whiter still. “Stay away from me. It has nothing to do with you.”

Just then, footsteps sounded in the mine tunnel. Stiffening, Evvie stared at Tristan. Then, without explanation, she broke into a run.

Tristan sped after her. He couldn’t afford to be seen lurking where he didn’t belong.

Back in the Subroom, he and Evvie settled into their homework, not looking at one another. Tristan had a hundred questions he wanted to ask, but Evvie was clearly not going to tell him anything. And if she grew too suspicious, she would notice if he tried to follow her again.

What was she doing down in the mine again? Who had those footsteps belonged to?

And why hadn’t the Intralocation spell worked properly?

* * *

It was a long time before Leila returned from her shower, and longer still before the others trudged in from outside, their boots and gloves caked with snow.

“I’m starving,” Rusty said, shaking ice from his scarf as he crossed to the fire. “Is the feast gonna

start soon?”

Leila didn't bother to answer; she was still sulking. "I don't think I'll ever be warm again." Though she wore two sweaters and a scarf, her lips were faintly blue.

"Cheer up," Rusty said. "You've still got all your fingers, haven't you?"

When the rest of the students headed up for a mid-afternoon Easter feast, Tristan held Leila back to tell her what he had seen.

"You don't think she's the one attacking the school, do you?" Leila asked.

"I don't know what to think. But I have to find out before someone destroys the whole place."

"Why didn't the Intralocation spell work? You and Rusty managed to find me with it, so it obviously works on people."

"Maybe it doesn't work properly underground?"

"We need to figure out what's wrong with it." Leila started for the door. "Is there some other way you can—ooof!"

Just as Leila passed through the Prasadimum barrier, she collided with Rusty.

"What were you guys talking about?" Rusty asked.

"Stalking people," Leila said at once.

"Huh? You've gotta tell me what's going on."

Leila threw Tristan an apologetic look, and he shrugged. As they started up toward the ballroom, Leila recounted everything Tristan had told her.

"Maybe we could practice the spell on each other!" Rusty said as soon as she finished. "That way we can figure out why it's not working. It'll be like playing hide and seek."

"That's actually a good idea," Leila said, tugging at the scarf still tightly wound around her neck. "Let's give it a try tonight."

After the feast—which included deviled eggs and cupcakes topped with chocolate Easter bunnies—Tristan, Leila, and Rusty gathered handfuls of marbles and went in search of somewhere to practice.

Leila was the first to hide, while Rusty practiced Intralocation alongside Tristan, with much less success.

For some reason, the spell worked on the first try this time, though Tristan and Rusty still struggled to figure out which way Leila had gone, since the marble attempted to lead them on the most direct route straight through solid rock. Rusty kept dropping marbles and losing his grip on the spell halfway through; Leila didn't help matters when she started moving while they searched for her.

Once Tristan was able to find Leila consistently, she chose more and more difficult hiding places, squeezing herself into supply cabinets or lurking in the girls' bathrooms.

Unwilling to follow her into the bathrooms, Tristan snatched his marble from the air and called to her from the hall. "That's not fair!"

Leila grinned when she emerged. "Scaredy-cat. No one else was even in there." She smoothed her rumpled hair, which had grown nearly long enough to pull into a ponytail.

On the next try, for whatever reason, the spell stopped working.

"What's wrong?" Rusty asked.

"The marble isn't even getting warm. This is what happened when I tried to find Evvie—maybe you should try instead."

"D'you think you're just getting tired?"

"No idea."

Rusty squeezed his eyes shut and held his marble aloft for several minutes, his nose wrinkling as his frustration mounted.

"It's not working at all!" he said at last. "I give up."

Tristan tried several more times, but the marble remained stubbornly cold and metallic in his

hand.

At last he let out his breath in frustration. "It's no use. What are we supposed to do now? Leila's waiting for us somewhere."

"Let's just go back to the Subroom," Rusty said. "I'm sure she'll get bored eventually."

When they reached the Subroom, Tristan stopped short.

Leila was sitting by the fire with a book in her hands, not even attempting to hide. The room was empty apart from her.

She laughed when she saw Tristan and Rusty staring at her. "Took you guys long enough."

"The spell didn't even work." Tristan said. "We just came down here because we figured you'd give up eventually."

Leila's eyes widened. "That's it! I bet the Prasadimum barrier interferes with the spell. So Evvie was hiding somewhere down in the tunnels where a Prasadimum blocks the entrance."

"Excellent. I bet we'll find wherever she's going in no time."

* * *

After that night, Tristan began stuffing his pockets with marbles each time he left the Subroom so he would be ready in case Evvie disappeared into the tunnels again.

He got his first chance to follow her just a week later.

The students were heading downstairs after class when Tristan saw Evvie slip away and take the stairs down to Delair's hallway.

"Did you see that?" Leila whispered.

Tristan nodded. "See you guys later." He handed his book bag to Leila, who slung it over her shoulder.

"Good luck!" Rusty said.

Tristan sprinted down the stairs just in time to see Evvie disappearing into Delair's mine.

He slowed enough to keep his sneakers from slapping against the marble floor. As soon as he reached the entrance to Delair's mine, he stopped and enchanted his marble to hover at arm's length from his face. The dank, musty air from the mine enveloped him as he started down the rough tunnel.

In the dark, the marble glowed faintly, while the light from the passageway behind him quickly faded to nothing.

When the marble directed him down the same tunnel the professors had appeared from the night Tristan had accidentally blown up the mine, his hands grew cold.

This was exactly the part of the school Drakewell had warned him most vehemently to stay clear of. If Tristan was caught here, he was done for.

Evvie must know how dangerous it was to venture into this part of the tunnels, yet she did it anyway. But why?

Clenching a hand around the marbles in one pocket for courage, Tristan started down the tunnel.

The air was colder down here, and he could see nothing but the golden shimmer directly ahead. He was afraid to blink, though his eyes began to ache from staring too intensely at the single point of light. He quickened his pace.

The marble led Tristan deeper and deeper into the earth, turning and winding through side corridors and past rooms with rotting wood doors. He hadn't seen or heard Evvie in ages; his heart pounded faster as he began to worry he had messed up the spell.

Shivering, Tristan folded his arms over his chest to conserve the last of his warmth. He couldn't tell how long he had been there; in the darkness, time seemed to warp and stretch until nothing existed beyond that single dizzying point of light.

Then, abruptly, it winked out.

The spell must have run out—fumbling for a new marble, Tristan tried to start the spell again. It didn't work.

"Damn you, Evvie!" he muttered under his breath. She must have passed through the Prasadimum barrier.

There was no use continuing with nothing to follow. Turning, Tristan started back the way he had come. As he walked in the dark, one hand tracing the wall, he caught sight of a thin streak of silver light in the rocks.

Surprised, Tristan stopped and pressed his fingers to the delicate line, hoping he wasn't hallucinating. Then he realized it was a vein of Delairium, thin and meandering as a thread. While the delicate glow of the ore wasn't enough to shed light on the surrounding walls, it gave his straining eyes something to focus on.

He followed the trailing Delairium until it faded away, at which point he enchanted a new marble to lead him back to the main school.

At the familiar sight of Delair's mine tunnel, he snatched the marble from the air. He had never seen anything as beautiful as the glowing lamps that lined the hallway.

"Well?" Leila whispered when Tristan joined her and Rusty at dinner. "Where did she go?"

Tristan was starving, so he grabbed a baked potato and bit into it whole before answering. "The spell stopped working before I reached wherever she went, but I know what general part of the tunnels it's in. I bet we can find it—there can't be that many rooms with Prasadimums planted over the entrance."

"Perfect." Leila grinned. "Tomorrow we can go exploring and see what we can find." She glanced up at the teachers' table again. "We just need to make sure no one sees us."

Though he was falling behind on his homework, Tristan agreed.

* * *

The following day, as soon as classes were over, he fetched a lantern from the Subroom and joined Leila and Rusty in Delair's hallway. "Ready?"

They nodded.

The tunnels looked much smaller and rougher with their walls illuminated by the lantern; Tristan hardly recognized the dark opening he had turned down the day before. Raising the lantern higher, he beckoned Leila and Rusty to follow him.

"We should look in all the rooms along the way," Leila whispered. "Maybe we'll find something interesting."

"Or they might just be full of old junk, like the Subroom was," Tristan said. He didn't want to linger too close to Delair's mine.

"Look, there's one," Leila said, trying the knob.

Though Tristan sighed, he couldn't help but follow Leila and Rusty into the shadowed room. He was too curious to resist.

From just inside the doorway, he could make out the outline of a lopsided pyramid; as he edged forward, the pyramid began to sparkle in the lamp's soft glow.

"Is that *gold*?" Rusty gaped at the pile.

"It looks like it," Tristan said. The pyramid appeared to comprise thousands upon thousands of gold coins—when Tristan knelt beside it, he realized the gold has simply been melted into slightly irregular discs, blank-faced and gleaming. Tristan picked one up and polished it on his shirt. A tiny dot glowed in the center of the disc where it caught the lamplight.

"No wonder the teachers are so rich," Leila said. "I bet they've been mining this for years, along with the Delairium." She dropped to her knees beside Tristan and ran one hand down the side of the

gold pyramid. Clattering and chinking, a handful of discs slid down and pooled beside Tristan's knee. "I wonder why no one bothered to lock it up." Leila scooped up a handful of gold discs and stared at them. Then she slipped the entire handful into her pocket.

"Hey!" Rusty said. "You can't just steal those."

Leila raised her eyebrows. "Why not? What do you call what we've been doing with those marbles for the past month?" When Rusty continued to look offended, she said, "It's not like I have anything to spend these on."

"Good idea," Tristan said, scooping up a handful of his own. "Hey, you and Eli can use them as poker chips."

Rusty snorted. "Okay, fine, I guess it's all right."

Eventually they left the room with the gold and continued down the tunnel, stopping at each door they came across. There were quite a few, though most were empty or cluttered with ancient junk. Soon Rusty started complaining he was hungry, and Tristan's stomach growled in agreement.

"Just a bit farther," Leila said. "It probably isn't even dinnertime yet." Impatient, she snatched the lantern from Tristan and led the way forward. Tristan dragged his feet, imagining a heaping plate of mashed potatoes drowned in rich gravy.

Leila stopped at the next door and rattled the handle. "I think this one is locked."

Tristan frowned as the taste of gravy faded from his mouth. "Are you sure it's not just stuck?" he asked irritably.

Rusty peered over Leila's shoulder.

"Let me see." Tristan made a grab for the lantern. He'd forgotten this was one of the lanterns that turned on and off at a single tap; when he fumbled with it, he accidentally tapped the metal plate and extinguished the light. The tunnel was plunged into darkness.

"Sorry, I didn't—"

Tristan stopped.

The tunnel wasn't completely dark, because a strange circle of light glowed on the locked door. It was Delairium, of course, but what startled him was the picture it made.

"Triss, what's wrong?" Leila hissed. "Turn the light back on!"

"Wait." Tristan leaned closer to the door; from here, the spidery outlines within the circle were unmistakable.

It was the image of a globe, the same shape that had been branded on their wrists when they swore loyalty to the academy.

This was it—he was certain of it. This was where the marbles were hoarded, where Drakewell worked his disasters.

They should never have come here.

If Drakewell realized Tristan was sneaking around near the marble hoard, he would be livid.

"Oh, come on," Leila snapped. She found Tristan's arm and snatched back the lantern. A second later, light flooded the tunnel once more. "Why the hell are we standing in the dark?"

Tristan was still staring at the door. The Delairium was so faint it had vanished in the light, but he could picture exactly where the outline of the globe was traced into the smooth wood.

"What're you looking at?" Rusty asked, squinting at the door.

Tristan took a step back. "Nothing. Let's get out of here."

When Leila frowned at him, Tristan turned and strode back down the tunnel. His eyes were playing tricks on him; he could have sworn he'd just seen the flicker of approaching lamplight, but it vanished as soon as he looked closer.

"You guys can't come exploring with me again," Tristan said when they reached the safety of the main school at last. If Drakewell had attempted to kill students during Merridy's test, who knew what he would do if he found them snooping around near the school's marble hoard?

“Oh, Triss, you know we don’t—”

“No. I’m not putting you guys in any more danger.”

Chapter 26: Unexcused Absences

As the end of the semester hurtled toward them, the atmosphere in the Lair grew tense and suspicious. No one had discovered who was behind the threatening note, and their window to stop the attacker before the school was destroyed was narrowing. At least they'd had warning—whoever wanted the school to close was not willing to murder everyone in the Lair out of hand.

Twice more Tristan followed Evvie into the tunnels, but he had yet to discover where she kept disappearing. Each time, her route passed the door emblazoned with the globe of Delairium; he could now find it without using a marble.

After classes one day in late May, Tristan sought out Alldusk to ask what the teachers were planning to do if the attacker was not caught by the end of the year. He did not want to mention his suspicion about Evvie until he was certain she was responsible, but if his silence led to the ruin of the Underground Academy, he would never forgive himself.

"If the school is destroyed, our work is finished," Alldusk said tiredly. He sat at his desk, flipping a pen over and over in one hand. "The conduit we use for our spells was built centuries ago; no one knows how to replicate it. We've tried stopping our work several times in the past couple centuries, and each time, the balance quickly gets thrown off. People over-reach themselves and start suffering the consequences—poisoned rivers and barren soil and fast-spreading diseases. As soon as nature loses the upper hand, the magic that holds the world together wears thin."

"What are we going to do, then?" Tristan asked. "We're not going to just sit here and wait to die, are we?"

"Of course not. When the end of the month gets close, we'll relocate to a small mountain town not far from here and seal off every entrance to the Lair. Everyone will be accounted for, so there won't be any way for someone to cause trouble without us knowing."

Tristan nodded, though his stomach twisted at the thought of Aspen and Drew still hidden somewhere deep in the school. If the attacker wasn't among the teachers and students, they could destroy the academy while everyone was away, killing the children in the meantime.

Or—what if the attacker had won the kids to their side? What if Evvie had put her trust in the wrong teacher, and whoever it was had taught Aspen and Drew how to blow up the school as soon as it was empty?

Tristan realized Alldusk was watching him closely, and he hastily rearranged his face into an expression he hoped looked concerned rather than guilty.

"Do you know something you're not telling me, Tristan?" Alldusk asked.

"No. That's the problem—I don't know anything. But I don't want anything to happen to the academy. It's my only home now. If I can figure anything out—"

"Be careful," Alldusk said sharply. "It's not your job to catch the attacker. Just focus on your final exams, and we'll keep you safe."

"I will," Tristan lied. How much did Alldusk know? "I don't want to get in trouble."

* * *

When he wasn't tackling his ever-growing pile of homework, Tristan dwelled on the attacker. He imagined a towering, evil-eyed man lurking in the tunnels, waiting to destroy the school as soon as it was empty—sometimes the man was Drakewell's brother, here to seek revenge against the man who

had ruined his life; other times he was the father of Aspen and Drew, and the children had been murdered by the teacher Evvie had trusted; still other times, he was a stranger Evvie had smuggled into the Lair to do her dirty work for her.

With the exams looming, it seemed most of the students had forgotten about the danger entirely.

After Grindlethorn, Merridy, and Brikkens each spent a lesson going over the format of their exams, Damian interrupted Alldusk's lecture to complain loudly about finals.

"What's the point of tests?" he asked heatedly. "It's not like we'll be applying for colleges, so why the hell should we study? Are we going to be stuck doing punishment for the rest of our lives if we fail?"

Alldusk gave Damian a thin-lipped smile. "There are other reasons to perform well aside from the fear of punishment."

"Sure," Zeke said.

"Though I wouldn't rule it out," Alldusk said sternly. "More importantly, you may have the opportunity to return home this summer, though this privilege will be revoked if you fail more than two classes."

"Go home?" Rusty yelped.

"What the—?" Eli said. "You kept that quiet!"

"You're lying," Damian said. "You're just going to send us straight back to Juvie, right?"

Alldusk held up his hands for silence. "Professor Drakewell will speak with each of you in the next week to discuss your options. This will be your last chance to see your families until you graduate, but we can only arrange a visit if your sentence wasn't too severe. And anyone who doesn't want to spend time at home can remain here over the summer."

The very next day, Drakewell called Tristan to his office.

"Are you prepared to tell me the truth about the day you burned down the entrance to the academy?"

Tristan sat up straight, alarmed. He had expected to discuss his options for the summer, not face renewed interrogation.

As the silence lingered, Drakewell's lip curled. "You won't see Miss Swanson again if I don't hear the truth soon. Is your secret so dangerous that you would sacrifice a friend to keep it?"

Tristan's eyes darted around Drakewell's office as he searched for inspiration.

He had agonized over this a hundred times, trying to think of a way to tell Drakewell just enough to keep him happy without endangering Aspen and Drew, but he couldn't think of anything. If he let on that he had been helping someone, Drakewell would guess someone was hidden in the tunnels beneath the school. And the headmaster would immediately suspect that person to be the attacker—which would implicate Tristan as well.

He needed to figure out what Evvie was up to, and soon. If she was somehow responsible for the attacks, Tristan would not spare her.

"I can't tell you anything yet," he muttered at last.

Drakewell watched him for several more minutes. Eventually he said, "You realize your chance to go home for the summer rests on whether the attacker is caught. Your parents are anxious to see you again."

Tristan stared at him. "I thought they didn't want anything to do with me. They never even visited me in Juvie."

"Your mother would gladly have visited you," Drakewell said with an unpleasant smile. "However, she was advised to keep her distance—for her son's well-being, of course." He paused to let this sink in. "I hope you change your mind soon."

It was a moment before Tristan realized this was a dismissal. As he scrambled to leave, he puzzled over what Drakewell had said. Was the Underground Academy somehow responsible for his isolation

during those long, unbearable months at Juvie? If he could talk to his mom one last time—just to see how she was coping after Marcus’s death, and whether she still cared for the son who had killed him—he might be able to let go of some piece of the pain he carried close to his chest.

At the same time, a visit home seemed irrelevant just now. Until the attacker was caught and the school was safe once more, home meant nothing.

No further attacks had happened since before Christmas; a few times Tristan had wondered if the note was just a joke, and the danger had long since passed.

But until Drakewell had someone to pin the blame on, Leila was not safe. And the end of May was careening toward him at an alarming rate.

* * *

The week before finals, everyone began studying in earnest. No one spoke of the attacker now—the idea of earning a visit home had become an obsession with most of the students.

The ballroom became the main hang-out for students from both bedrooms—a bookshelf stacked with textbooks and reference volumes had appeared along the back wall, and the tables were piled with pens and extra paper. Quinsley kept the students well supplied with treats, appearing every hour or so with cookies and a hot drink.

Unhelpfully, the teachers seemed to think this was a good time to assign every homework project they hadn’t gotten around to yet. Even chubby little Finley Glenn, who always handed in his homework on time and knew the answers in class, could be found scribbling away in the ballroom long past midnight.

When the students weren’t studying in the ballroom, they were hiking extensively to collect magical herbs for Gracewright, examining and recording every variety of rock Delair brought to class, and demonstrating to Grindlethorn the proper methods of treating various injuries by bandaging their own limbs.

“They’re going to kill us,” Rusty grumbled one morning, staring listlessly at his empty plate. Even his unshakeable cheerfulness had been dampened by their workload.

Tristan alone spent the time worrying about the attacker. He was on high alert for Evvie to disappear again, but she spent the days hunched over her textbooks just like everyone else. He had no other leads, so he was counting on her doing something suspicious.

A few times, he snuck back down the tunnel to keep watch outside the room with the globe on the door, but the odds of him being there at the same time as the attacker were slim and the chances of Drakewell catching him were much higher, so he soon abandoned this approach.

Two days before exams, Tristan could put it off no longer. He had to talk to Leila, to apologize for the danger he was putting her in.

He found his chance while they were collecting samples in Gracewright’s class, trudging through woods that had finally lost most of their snow cover. In its absence, the ground felt soggy and fragile, as though the earth wanted to shed its skin to make way for the new life just beginning to emerge from the bed of pine needles.

Tristan wasn’t sure how to broach the subject, but Leila beat him to it.

“What’s wrong, Triss? You keep looking at me oddly.”

His face felt hot; he quickened his pace so Leila could not see his expression. “It’s Drakewell. He...threatened to punish you instead of me if I didn’t tell him why I burned down that longhouse.”

“So you’d choose Evvie over me?” Leila’s voice rose in indignation.

Tristan resisted the urge to glance over his shoulder to see her face. “It’s not that. It’s just—if I tell Drakewell I started the fire to help someone, he’ll figure out there’s someone hiding in the school, and he’ll probably think it’s the attacker. Which means he’ll think I’m helping the attacker.”

At Leila's intake of breath, Tristan turned at last. She did not look angry.

"And if you tell him about the kids?"

"Evvie thinks he'll kill them. Apparently he doesn't like kids very much."

"I'm not surprised."

They stood in silence for a moment, birdsong ringing through the trees all around.

"I don't blame you for keeping that quiet," Leila said at last. "I can't think of anything you could say to Drakewell without making him suspect you."

"If I can't catch the attacker before the end of May, I'll take the blame," Tristan said quickly. "I won't let Drakewell hurt you."

"No, you can't do that. The other teachers won't let him hurt me—it was probably just an empty threat."

Tristan was not so sure about that. "Don't say anything to the professors. I'll handle this. I'm really sorry about—about everything."

Unable to face Leila's sympathy, Tristan hung his head and trudged back toward the meadow. He had not found any of the plants Gracewright had sent them out to track down.

* * *

At dinner that night, Drakewell swept into the ballroom to hand out exam schedules for the following two days.

"As soon as your finals are finished, we will relocate to a nearby town for the final week of May. Unless the attacker is caught at that point, all students and teachers will remain there until the end of summer—we cannot risk sending you away while the danger remains."

He fixed his hollow eyes on Tristan, who tried his best not to blink.

Only two more days before Leila had to face Drakewell's wrath.

Tristan could not sleep that night. He had failed—the school was in as much danger as ever, and Drakewell still suspected him.

He was afraid the attacker would find a way to destroy the Lair even once it was vacated and all entrances sealed off. When they left for the nearby town, it would be the end of the Underground Academy. They would have no home to return to.

And he would never see Leila again.

By morning, he felt sick, his head stuffy and eyes itchy with lack of sleep. He was in no shape to concentrate on his finals, but compared to the threat of losing his home and hurting Leila, he didn't care about exams.

Somewhere in the early hours of the morning, he had made up his mind.

Instead of following his classmates—who looked groggy and miserable as well, though for a very different reason—up to breakfast, Tristan knocked on the door of Drakewell's office and waited, heart in his throat, for the headmaster to emerge.

"Well, well." Drakewell's lip curled. "Am I about to learn the truth?"

Tristan swallowed and nodded. His throat was too tight to speak.

What would Drakewell do to him? Torture him to death? Lock him in the depths of the Lair until he starved?

Drakewell ushered Tristan into his office and closed the door.

For several minutes, they sat across the desk from one another, while Tristan tried to work up the courage to speak. He had thought through what he was going to say last night, but it was much harder to actually do it.

Just as he opened his mouth to start, a knock sounded at the door.

Tristan tensed—was it Leila, trying to stop him from handing himself in?

“Enter,” Drakewell said.

It wasn’t Leila; it was Alldusk, worry creasing his face. He did a double-take when he saw Tristan sitting opposite Drakewell.

“There you are! I thought—” Alldusk cleared his throat. “Professor, have you seen Darla?”

“Is she not at breakfast?”

Alldusk shook his head. “Neither is Evangeline. I thought Tristan might be with them as well, but...”

Tristan jumped to his feet. “Sorry. I have to go.”

Leaving Drakewell and Alldusk gaping at him, Tristan sprinted down the stairs to the lowest level of the academy.

This was it. The attacker was about to carry out their threat.

Did Merridy suspect Evvie, or did they both know something Tristan didn’t?

Fumbling for one of the marbles he always kept in his pocket, Tristan paused at the entrance of Delair’s mine to attempt the Intralocation spell on Evvie. It didn’t work, but no matter—he knew where she was. He tried it again on Merridy, and to his surprise, it held.

The marble bobbed in the direction of the tunnel he had followed Evvie down, and Tristan tore after it, so familiar with the twists and turns that he didn’t need a light to guide his way.

When the marble dissolved and a second marble refused to track Merridy, he tried Evvie again.

No luck.

It didn’t matter—he was not far from the room with the globe on the door. If the attacker wanted to destroy the school, it was here they would make their next move, he was sure of it.

When he reached the door, he swayed to a halt, gasping for air.

All was silent and dark.

Had he been mistaken? Was Evvie simply asking for Merridy’s help on a few last-minute study questions in her office?

No, that couldn’t be right—the marble he had enchanted to follow Merridy had led him this way.

Tristan tried the spell on Merridy once again, and then on Evvie.

To his amazement, it worked this time.

The marble led him deeper into the tunnel, farther than he had ever gone before.

Moving carefully now, trying not to make any sound, he crept after the tiny glowing orb. Minutes passed, the darkness growing more suffocating with each step.

Was he walking into a trap? Would he come face to face with the attacker if he continued any deeper into the school?

Then he turned a corner, and a soft glow appeared at the end of the hallway.

Tristan froze.

He still had time to flee—he could get the other professors to help. If this was the attacker, he wouldn’t be able to defend himself.

A second later, he recognized Evvie’s voice murmuring something indistinct. The voice that replied was young and thin—Drew.

Tristan waited until she was closer before hissing, “Evvie. What are you doing?”

She shrieked.

“It’s just me,” Tristan said impatiently. “What’s going on?”

“What are *you* doing down here?”

“Trying to catch the attacker. It’s not you, is it? The year is almost over—we’re almost out of time.”

In the flickering lamplight, Evvie looked sick. “No, of course it’s not me.”

“Why are you sneaking around here, then?”

Aspen and Drew were both watching her, wide-eyed.

“Professor Merridy told me to get the kids out of here,” Evvie whispered, looking sicker than ever. “I think you’re right. Something bad is about to happen.”

“Why do you keep sneaking down here?”

She handed the lantern to Drew and approached Tristan so she could whisper in his ear. “I don’t trust Merridy. She tried to keep me away from these two, and she’s acting strange. I’ve been trying to find out what she’s doing down here. She knows something, I’m sure of it.”

“And you weren’t going to warn the rest of us? You were just going to let us all die?”

Evvie flushed. “I thought Merridy would look after everyone else. She just told me to take the kids and hide them in the woods until tonight.”

This was no use. Tristan believed Evvie—she wasn’t a good enough liar to come up with a story like that on the spot—but she was just distracting him from the real attacker. He was no closer to figuring out who it was than he’d been when he first saw the ruined greenhouse.

“Well, go on, get out of here,” Tristan said. “I’ll see if I can find the attacker. And could you tell the others to watch out?”

Evvie looked stricken. “I can’t. I have to sneak out without anyone seeing Aspen and Drew.”

Tristan cursed under his breath. “Just go, then. And be careful.” He would have to hurry.

As soon as Evvie and the kids disappeared around the corner, the light fading in their wake, he raced after them. His pulse thundered in his ears—was he too late? He didn’t have time to warn everyone; he had to stop the attack.

He was certain the attacker was inside the locked room with the globe on the door. But how the hell was he supposed to get in?

Sooner than he expected, he reached the locked door. As the glow from Evvie’s lamp faded to blackness, the silver Delairium globe shone brighter than ever.

Chest tight, Tristan crept forward and pressed his ear to the door. He clutched a marble in one hand, the cold, metallic magic digging into his palm.

For a long time he heard nothing.

The globe on the door glowed steadily, stark and thin in the darkness. Eventually Tristan’s racing heart slowed and the cold air began to seep through his clothes.

At last a muffled scraping sounded from within magnified oddly in the space behind the door. The scrape was followed by a hollow clang so loud Tristan didn’t need his ear to the door to hear it properly.

He jumped back, staring wildly down the hall.

The attacker was already at work. He might be minutes away from killing everyone at the Lair.

And Tristan was alone.

CRASH!

Tristan jumped, nearly dropping his marble. Something large had smashed to the ground inside the room, or maybe a piece of the wall had blasted away.

How much time did he have?

Tristan couldn’t decide what to do; he bounced on the balls of his feet, tensed and ready to run.

Then, with a curse, he lurched forward and slammed his fists against the door.

“Help!” he shouted in desperation, though he knew no one was around to hear. “Someone come help!”

A new series of crashes from within the room, loud as an avalanche, drowned out his voice.

Why hadn’t he told the others to get out? Now it was too late.

Again Tristan slammed his fists on the door, this time throwing the weight of his shoulder against the wood.

As he drew back to hurl himself a third time against the glowing outline of Asia, something grabbed his shoulder.

“Argh!” Tristan whirled, ready to strike.

It was Leila.

“Damn it!” he yelled. “What are you doing down here?” When he wrenched Leila’s hand from his shoulder and took a step back, he realized Rusty was there as well, lurking in the shadows behind Leila.

“Alldusk said you’d run down here,” Leila said in a hurried whisper. “He’s getting backup. We know the attacker’s in there. We want to help.”

Tristan cursed and kicked the wall.

“So, how are you planning to get in there?” Rusty asked cheerfully. Leila’s lantern cast an eerie glow on his face.

Tristan rounded on him. “Guys, this is serious! Someone dangerous is in that room, and I’m pretty sure they’re a few seconds from blowing up the Lair!”

“Triss, calm down,” Leila snapped. “You’re completely useless if you can’t concentrate.”

Irritated, Tristan clenched his fist around the marble. It seared his palm—he realized he was about to do a spell without intending to.

Gritting his teeth, he waited for the marble to cool.

“Okay,” he said brusquely. “I’m going to try unlocking this door by magic. You guys should leave. Run as fast as you can; maybe you’ll have time to warn the others.”

Leila and Rusty shared a glance.

“No, we’re gonna stay.”

“There isn’t enough time,” Leila said.

“Fine!” Tristan shouted. “Then get the hell out of my way!”

Another crash echoed inside the chamber, followed by a rushing sound like wind.

Fighting his anger, Tristan closed his eyes. The lock was set in the door handle, which meant he had to figure out a way to twist through the gears.

Where was Evvie now, and how was she going to sneak past the teachers? Did she know a secret entrance to the Lair?

You’re not concentrating, whispered a voice at the back of his head. Tristan opened his eyes and stared at the handle once more.

He wished he knew more about locks. If Eli were here, he’d probably be able to pick it without magic. Tristan was just guessing when he imagined the lock’s innards like a metal labyrinth, the rigid walls ready to slide apart if he exerted pressure in the right place.

“I can’t do this,” he muttered, mostly to himself.

Neither Leila nor Rusty spoke. They watched him nervously, eyes gleaming in the lantern’s glow. It was their trust that spurred Tristan to try again. Frustrated, he pressed his fist to the door and focused every stray thought on the lock.

Please work.

Much more reluctantly this time, the marble began to warm. When he released it, the gold vapor slid down to encase the door handle. Crashes and scrapes continued to echo from within the room, but in the tunnel, all was silent.

As the gold vapor faded, the handle began to glow red. Then...

KABOOM!

The door exploded.

Tristan stumbled backward, throwing his hands over his head.

Fiery light shot out in every direction. Rocks flew from the wall, shattering and bursting in midair.

Tristan’s foot caught on a rock and he crashed to the ground, stones slamming into him.

Blearily he saw the door splinter in two with a resounding crack. The glowing Delairium globe split along the west coast of Africa.

Scrambling to his knees, Tristan tried to crawl away, but a boulder blocked his path.

Leila and Rusty screamed at him from down the hallway, where they were sheltering from the worst of the impact; the words were lost in the tumult.

Then, as abruptly as it had started, everything stopped. The tunnels fell silent once again.

Chapter 27: The Map Room

In the sudden stillness, Tristan realized brilliant light streamed through the gaps in the broken door. Rubble had accumulated around the doorway, and before Tristan could struggle to his feet, Leila and Rusty darted forward and began digging their way through.

“Wait,” he said. “The attacker is in there. They might hurt you.”

“Why were we trying to get through the door in the first place, then?” Leila asked. “Don’t be stupid.”

With a groan, Tristan pulled himself up. The doorway was nearly clear, so he stood back and let Leila and Rusty finish digging a way through.

“Let me go first,” he said when the space was large enough for them to pass.

This time, Leila did not object.

A marble clenched in one hand, Tristan shoved his way through the splintered doorway. As he straightened, he got his first look at the blindingly bright room.

The center of the room was dominated by an enormous sphere, twice as tall as Tristan, its lower half sunk into the ground.

It was unmistakably a globe.

The lights gleamed off the polished stone continents, which were surrounded by an ocean cut from deep blue rock. It sat there, towering over Tristan and his friends, like the heart of the academy. Tristan wasn’t exactly sure what it was, but he knew the faded tattoo on his wrist and the Delirium globe on the door both represented this monstrosity.

Once Tristan’s eyes had adjusted, he was able to look past the globe to the opposite side of the cavernous chamber. The walls were strewn with wreckage—pebbles and slabs of stone that might once have belonged to tables.

Just then, Professor Merridy stepped out from behind the globe.

Tristan took a step back in surprise. “Professor? What are you doing here? Where’s the attacker?”

Merridy’s eyes widened. “What are you doing here?” Her hair was grey with rock dust, and several cuts were visible on her cheeks.

“We heard crashing and banging. We thought the attacker was about to destroy the academy. But Alldusk is on his way, and he’s bringing help.” Tristan edged sideways, trying to see if the attacker hid behind the globe.

“Have you seen Evangeline?” Merridy asked.

Tristan remembered that Merridy had told Evvie to get to safety. “Yeah, she was down here a bit ago.”

Merridy frowned. “Did she have—”

Just then, the sound of running footsteps rang from the tunnel, and Alldusk clambered through the broken door.

“Darla!” Alldusk shouted. “Are you okay?”

Leila grabbed Tristan’s arm and leaned over to whisper in his ear. “Triss. There’s no one else here.”

As Alldusk ran across the room to embrace Merridy, Tristan stared at them, uncomprehending. Then the truth hit him.

When the greenhouse had been attacked last semester, and Tristan had spied on the teachers’

discussion afterward, Merridy had been the first to suggest they should blame a student.

Evvie had suspected Merridy of concealing something from her, and had followed the professor into the tunnels more than once.

And Merridy had warned Evvie to get Aspen and Drew to safety before she blew up the school. Merridy was the attacker.

“Professor Alldusk,” Tristan said, his voice rising. “There’s no one—”

“Have you seen Evangeline?” Merridy asked Alldusk.

Alldusk grabbed Merridy’s shoulders and held her away from him. “What’s wrong?”

“*Have you seen Evangeline?*” Merridy’s voice was urgent this time.

“Yes, I think I saw her heading up to the ballroom. Someone was with her, but I’m not sure who.”

Merridy took a step away from Alldusk. “Then it is time. I apologize, Brinley.” Her voice wavered, though her eyes were hard. “I have always—” she hiccupped “—always loved you.”

Tristan thrust one hand into a pocket and closed his fingers around the cold orbs he’d stashed there. Merridy’s expression was dangerous.

Eyes fixed on Merridy, Tristan began sidling around the back of the globe. Within a few steps, Alldusk and Merridy were no longer visible; three cautious steps later, Rusty and Leila disappeared around the curve of the globe as well.

A dull thud echoed from the opposite side of the room.

Tristan couldn’t see what was happening, so he backed up, away from the globe, hoping to keep an eye on the others without drawing attention to himself.

A heavy thunk rang out, and Leila shrieked.

“You’re crazy!” she yelled at Merridy.

“Darla!” Alldusk shouted, and Tristan heard a series of frantic scrapes and thuds.

He scrambled back two more steps, until the stone wall pressed against his back. From here he could see the ruined door on his left and Merridy and Alldusk on his right. Merridy’s bun had come loose, and she clawed at Alldusk’s face. Tristan could see marbles on the floor beside her.

Alldusk looked as though he was afraid to hurt Merridy—instead of fighting back, he grabbed her wrists and held her struggling fingers away from his face. Panting, he dragged her to her knees before releasing her.

Merridy was back on her feet in seconds. In her left hand, she held a shard of jagged rock like a dagger; with her right, she dug a handful of marbles from one pocket.

When she saw Tristan, her eyes widened. “Get out of my way!”

Something about the way she spoke made Tristan turn. His back had not been pressed against the wall, but against a stone door, solid and unremarkable.

That was where the magic was stored. Tristan was sure of it.

And now that Evvie was safely outside with the children, Tristan was the only one standing between Merridy and her goal.

Merridy advanced on him, raising her handful of marbles.

Without a spell in mind, Tristan drew the fistful of marbles from his pocket and copied Merridy’s gesture.

“Darla!” Alldusk yelled. “Don’t hurt him!”

Merridy ignored Alldusk.

Tristan flexed his arm, ready to hurl a spell at her, but she stopped several paces from him and closed her eyes. Again the dust drifted to the floor, leaving behind a sulfuric smell.

Tristan’s hand stiffened.

No one seemed to breathe. Merridy’s hand twitched almost imperceptibly, and Tristan did not realize at first that she had released a marble.

Then the ground in front of Merridy exploded with a sound like fireworks.

Tristan threw himself to the ground, away from the stone door. A sliver of rock missed his forehead by inches.

Chunks of rock split free and hurtled through the air, dust whirling up from the floor. Pebbles and boulders slammed against the globe's polished surface and bounced off, careening toward Tristan.

He threw his hands over his head, shielding his face from a rain of pebbles.

As the rocks settled, Tristan scrambled to his knees to survey the damage.

Still watching from the doorway, Leila and Rusty had escaped the blast, though cracks now ran across the ceiling of the room. It looked as though it could not withstand another explosion.

As he watched, a stream of pebbles cascaded from the ceiling near where Leila and Rusty stood. A large slab of rock looked as though it was straining to break free.

"Watch out!" Tristan yelled.

He bounded toward them, but he was too far.

Just as the stone let out a resounding CRACK, a wave of dense air crashed through the room, ringing in Tristan's ears like a silent thunderclap.

Everything went still.

The entire room might have been plunged underwater. The ceiling stilled and seemed to solidify once more, while the chunks of rock crumbling from above slowed and dropped harmlessly to the ground.

As Leila and Rusty shifted, Tristan saw who had cast the spell.

Drakewell stood in the doorway, hands outstretched, face was dark with fury.

Tristan backed away from the headmaster, fear weakening his legs. But instead of confronting the students, Drakewell slumped against the wall, his face crumpling.

Tristan remembered Delair's words—it was incredibly dangerous to use magic without marbles, because it drained the energy from your own body. Drakewell had nearly crippled himself to keep them safe.

As Drakewell staggered toward the towering globe, Tristan realized the headmaster had been accompanied by the most unlikely person imaginable.

Slowly, nervously, Zeke stepped into the room.

"What have you done to the Map Room?" Drakewell asked faintly, failing at his usual icy tone.

The Map Room. That was fitting.

Leila's eyes widened. "Oh my god, where's Merridy?"

Tristan whirled. The stone door behind him now stood ajar—in the momentary confusion, Merridy had slipped through.

Tristan threw himself at the door and wrenched it open. He was still clutching his handful of marbles as though they would shield him from harm.

Just inside, Tristan tripped, his feet sliding out from beneath him. With a painful jolt, he crashed down two stairs. His hands flew open as he caught himself, and he dropped his fistful of marbles. As he jolted to a halt, the marbles continued to clatter down deeper and deeper, echoing eerily.

Heart pounding in his throat, Tristan staggered to his feet. In the light spilling from the Map Room, he could see where he stood: on the third step of a narrow staircase spiraling into darkness.

The stone door ground shut behind him, smothering the light.

Tristan groped for the metal rail and eased his way down the stairs, stagnant air filling his lungs.

Every second could be his last. He felt naked without his handful of marbles.

A soft, metallic clink echoed from the depths of the room, followed by a blossom of light. The lantern light threw Merridy's pale, determined face into relief.

"You can't stop me, you know," she said steadily.

Tristan took a wary step forward. He had nearly reached the foot of the stairs. "Why did you turn

against the school?”

“I’ve always hated the work we did here. But it wasn’t until you and your classmates arrived that I realized we would keep murdering innocent people until the end of time. Unless I did something about it.”

Merridy’s eyes glowed with a fervor that was half madness, half determination.

“So you’re willing to kill us all?”

Her mouth tightened. “That’s what this whole place is about—weighing the balance of lives against bigger things. I decided twenty lives are worth less than the millions I’ll spare once this wretched globe is gone. I thought you’d understand. You’re not really a criminal. Your brother—”

Tristan did not want to hear this. “What about Professor Alldusk?” he asked loudly. “I thought you loved him.”

“That’s why I can’t live like this any longer.” For the first time, Merridy’s voice wavered. “When this place is gone, it will be as though the academy never existed. And the world will be better for it.”

“I’ll be dead,” Tristan said flatly. “And so will Leila and Rusty and Amber. Alldusk too.” He took another step down, his anger building.

Merridy raised her lantern so it cast light on the rest of the room. Behind her, a deep rift in the floor glittered softly. Tristan blinked—the pit was filled with thousands upon thousands of marbles.

“You can still run,” she said. “Save yourself. The whole school might not collapse—I just want to destroy the globe.”

Tristan didn’t believe this, but he said nothing.

“You should hate it here as much as I do. Drakewell set up the whole night you got arrested—he made sure you had no other choice. He arranged it so everyone was away. He left your neighbor’s car unlocked, and he had your parents on the phone so you couldn’t reach them. And we created the earthquake and the fire. But you surely already guessed that.”

Tristan’s hands had gone cold, and he gripped the railing to keep his balance. Though this suspicion had crept into the back of his mind, he had not been willing to consider it.

“Wouldn’t you rather go home and serve the rest of your sentence? Isn’t it easier to put up with three years of Juvie than to spend the rest of your life hating yourself? You weren’t a criminal before, but you’re turning into one.”

Tristan hated himself more than ever in that moment.

But he had made his choice when he moved into the Subroom, when he started caring about people again. Outside of the academy, his life meant nothing.

“This is my home,” he said flatly. “I don’t care if I die protecting it.”

“Then I’m sorry, Tristan.” Merridy’s hand shook slightly, sending rippling shadows across the wall, as she turned to the pool of marbles.

Tristan’s head pounded. He wanted to attack Merridy, to throw her to the ground—he had to protect Leila and Rusty. Even without any marbles, Tristan could feel a dense, furious cloud of magic building within him, rippling with electricity. It swelled with the anger he had suppressed all those endless months at Juvie, with the special loathing he reserved for himself.

He raised an arm.

Too dangerous, a small part of him whispered.

He ignored the voice.

Recklessly, Tristan wrenched a tangle of raging magic from inside him. Then he brought his arm down and hurled the power at Merridy.

For a moment, nothing happened. Merridy was poised to fling her marble into the hoarded magic—her shoulders tightened...

With a roar, an enormous ball of fire exploded to life over the pit of marbles.

Merridy screamed.

Crackling and spitting, the fireball hurtled forward. It slammed against the wall, flared white, and spun back at Merridy, shedding a trail of flames.

Merridy jumped out of the way just in time. Her sleeve caught fire; shrieking, she slapped at the hungry flames.

The fireball billowed larger than ever, consuming the stale air.

Merridy dashed up the spiral stairs. Tristan lurched after her, unable to control his own fireball. The air grew hotter and hotter, until sweat poured down Tristan's forehead. He could hardly breathe.

Just as he reached the top, the fire flared blue and then sputtered out. Though the flames remained seared over Tristan's vision, nothing remained but the smell of charred fabric.

Merridy shoved open the door, and Tristan stumbled into the Map Room just behind her, coughing. The smoke raked at his lungs.

The Map Room was silent.

Merridy came to a halt beside the globe, the others watching, frozen in shock.

Suddenly a white-hot pain lanced through Tristan's head.

He swayed, dizzy and sick, and clutched the wall.

Blearily he saw Leila and Rusty rushing to his side, and he nearly toppled forward when Leila grabbed his elbow to support him. Half-blind, he scratched at his face, fighting the pain, trying to rip its claws from his skull. The raw power was consuming him, crushing him, destroying him.

He wasn't strong enough for this.

Garbled voices drifted from the doorway; Tristan heard them as though listening with his head underwater. It was several long moments before he could recognize words.

"—catch her," Drakewell was saying, his tone sharp but his voice still weak.

"We need to make sure the stockpile is safe first," Alldusk said.

Tristan rubbed at his sightless eyes until the wavering room came back into view.

Just then, something overhead groaned ominously—new cracks threaded across the ceiling, and the rocks began to sag.

"Run!" Alldusk yelled, bounding toward the door.

Tristan tried to push Leila and Rusty away, hoping they would get out of the room while they still had a chance, but he was so weak they didn't seem to notice. Zeke was edging closer rather than fleeing—what was wrong with everyone?

Dust began trickling from the high stone vault.

Gasping, Tristan gripped Leila's arm and staggered toward the doorway. His legs were leaden and sluggish.

Drakewell dragged himself through the doorway, Alldusk and Rusty close behind.

"Triss!" Leila shrieked, yanking at his arm. "Hurry!"

Looking up, Tristan saw a slab of rock directly overhead straining to break free. It was the same chunk of ceiling that had nearly fallen on Leila and Rusty before Drakewell cast his spell. "I can't," he choked. "Go, I—"

Leila gave him a mighty shove forward.

Tristan stumbled and collapsed; his shoulder slammed into the ground and wrenched sideways. He moaned and shifted onto his side just in time to see the ceiling directly over Leila give way.

At the last second, Zeke dove on top of Lela, forcing them both to the ground.

With a roar like thunder, the ceiling crashed down on top of them.

Chapter 28: A Different Home

“Triss?” Someone ran a gentle hand down Tristan’s cheek, followed by a warm rag. Tristan stirred and opened his eyes, feeling very stiff and disoriented. To his surprise, the pain he remembered was almost gone.

“Where’s Merridy?” he asked at once. His mouth was cottony and dry.

Before he could ask for water, a glass was brought to his lips. Gulping gratefully at the cold water, Tristan looked sideways and realized it was Leila who stood beside his bed.

“Merridy got away, didn’t she?” he said. “I couldn’t control that fireball—I should’ve tried something less dramatic, maybe that would’ve—”

“Oh, hush. Alldusk was talking to me while you were unconscious, and he said Merridy would have blown up the entire school if not for you. Honestly, the first thing you think of is apologizing...” Shaking her head, Leila pressed the rag to Tristan’s forehead once more.

With a deep sigh, Tristan sat up and looked around. He was in Grindlethorn’s hospital room; on a bed nearby lay Zeke, fast asleep. Tristan wasn’t sure yet how he felt about everything that had transpired in the Map Room.

“Are you all right?” Tristan asked Leila. The last time he’d seen her, she had been crushed beneath mountain of rocks.

Leila nodded. “I only got bruised a bit,” she said quietly. “Zeke saved me—he took the worst of the impact.”

Tristan blinked. He remembered seeing Zeke dive for Leila, but the whole room had been a bit fuzzy at that point. “Why’d he do that?”

“No idea.”

“What was he doing down there, anyway?”

Leila bit her lip. “I think he followed Alldusk when he saw everyone disappearing, and Drakewell found him lurking in the hallway outside the Map Room.”

They were silent for a moment. Tristan still felt a bit lightheaded.

“I bet Drakewell’s furious at me,” he said at last.

“He can’t really blame you for anything except trespassing in the tunnels, and we’d all be dead if you’d followed his orders.” She reached for Tristan’s hand and pulled him to his feet. “Come on—Rusty’s waiting for us in the ballroom.”

Zeke was the only one absent from dinner when Tristan and Leila arrived, apart from Merridy, of course. A few of the teachers applauded when they saw Tristan, though Drakewell and Alldusk remained silent, faces grim.

Tristan kept his eyes down as he crossed to his usual table. The teachers had a right to be furious with him; he had broken every possible rule down in the Map Room.

“You okay?” Rusty asked when Tristan and Leila joined him.

Tristan nodded, scanning the room for Evvie. For a split second, he was afraid she had left with Merridy and the children, but no—she sat at her usual table, pale and nervous-looking. It came as an even greater surprise when, noticing his gaze, she gave him a faint smile.

“What’s happened?” Eli demanded from his table. “People have been vanishing all day, our tests got pushed back, and now you guys are all bloodied up. The teachers haven’t said any—”

“Settle down,” Drakewell said coldly. As he addressed the room, his features regained their usual hard cast; he no longer appeared tired or weak.

Once the students had muttered themselves into silence, Drakewell began.

“This afternoon, we discovered who was responsible for the destruction of Professor Alldusk’s classroom and Professor Gracewright’s greenhouse, and for the threat we received earlier this year.”

Damian and Cassidy frowned at Tristan.

“Regrettably, the attacker was none other than Darla Merridy, who has fled the school.”

Hayley and Cailyn exchanged shocked glances, and Eli swore under his breath. Evvie twisted her hands in her lap, lips set in a thin line.

“Tristan Fairholm, Leila Swanson, Rusty Lennox, and Brinley Alldusk were injured in their attempts to apprehend Professor Merridy, and Zeke Elwood is currently recovering in the hospital.”

Tristan looked up, startled. He couldn’t believe the headmaster was going to let him off this easily.

“Is Zeke going to be okay?” Damian asked.

When Grindlethorn nodded, Damian’s permanent scowl seemed to lessen somewhat.

* * *

After dinner, Drakewell summoned Tristan to his office.

Leila and Rusty wished him good luck, and he knocked on the door with his heart beating a frantic rhythm in his throat. Had Drakewell merely saved up his punishment for later, in private?

But Drakewell merely seemed tired when Tristan let himself into the headmaster’s office. His hollow eyes looked bruised from exhaustion.

“I wanted to apologize,” Drakewell said heavily. “If you are to take my place someday, we must put our mistrust behind us.”

Tristan swallowed back a nervous laugh. What was Drakewell apologizing for—threatening Leila? Treating him like the attacker? Giving him so many hours of punishment he nearly collapsed?

“Why did you try killing Leila and Eli and Trey, during that last test?” he asked. “Why not me?”

Drakewell’s eyes darkened. “What do you mean?”

“They were all badly hurt. Professor Merridy told us Leila refused to be rescued when you went after her, but she said no one checked on her.”

Drakewell’s knuckles had gone white. “That’s not true. I asked Professor Merridy to send someone after Leila, but I never had a chance to follow up with her.” He stared at Tristan. “She must have thought killing one of you and putting the blame on me would turn the rest of the school against me. She was desperate to have the academy shut down.”

Though Tristan did not want to believe Drakewell, he remembered abruptly that Leila and Eli had been injured at night. The disasters were supposed to stop overnight—presumably Drakewell would have needed sleep, which left the Map Room free for Merridy to sneak into undetected.

“But no one died,” Tristan said. “We didn’t want to say anything, in case...” He swallowed and changed tack. “And the Map Room—that’s where you control the disasters, isn’t it?”

“Of course. You will become much more familiar with it in the coming year.”

Tristan swallowed. He didn’t want to think about this yet. “Professor? Am I allowed to visit my parents this summer?”

“Yes.”

* * *

Despite everything, final exams began the following day.

Though Tristan had not discussed what happened down in the Map Room with anyone except Leila and Rusty, he kept catching sidelong glances from the other students. After the close brush with death, he found himself feeling unexpectedly fond of every student in the Lair—well, except perhaps Damian. They were in this together.

Zeke was back at breakfast that morning, managing to look haughty and confident even on crutches. One of his legs was fully encased in a white cast, and his face was covered in gauze pads and medical tape.

As soon as Leila saw Zeke, she stalked over to his table, hands on her hips. “Why did you save me?” Her voice carried, as did Zeke’s reply.

“Your face is ugly enough without getting all smashed up.”

Leila’s back was to Tristan, so he couldn’t see her expression. “I could steal your crutches, you know.”

Zeke ignored her threat. “I, on the other hand, have such a handsome face that the scars just make me look fierce.” He bared his teeth at her and then grinned.

“All I can see are bandages,” Leila said. “Those are *really* fierce, you know. Awfully attractive, too.”

Zeke just laughed.

Shaking her head, Leila rejoined Tristan and Rusty.

Their final exams were no more difficult than Tristan had feared. The practical tests for Brikkens, Alldusk, and Delair involved performing simple spells, all of which seemed inconsequential compared to the magic Tristan had unleashed in the Map Room. Gracewright and Grindlethorn’s tests were more difficult, and Tristan was sure he’d forgotten most of the terminology; the best thing he could say about those tests was that they were over.

Alldusk had been gloomy and quiet ever since Merridy’s betrayal. Tristan wanted to say something to him, but how was he supposed to bring that sort of thing up with his professor?

Once exams were over, a single week remained before the students went home. The weather was beautiful, so Tristan and his friends spent most of each day outside, swimming in the icy lake, exploring the woods, and telling stories around a bonfire in the clearing.

One evening, as everyone was heading up for dinner, Evvie stopped Tristan and asked to speak to him. When the Subroom was empty aside from the two of them, she said, “I wanted to—er—to thank you.”

“For what?”

“I wasn’t brave enough to stand up to Merridy. If you hadn’t followed me, this school wouldn’t be here any longer.”

Tristan just frowned at her, confused but gratified. “How are the kids—and Merridy? Are they safe?”

Evvie nodded. “They’re heading for Darla’s sister’s house.”

“That’s good.”

“Darla told me she was going to leave a message for Alldusk, but I don’t think she had time.”

They started up the dark tunnel in silence. Though she had nearly killed them all, Tristan was glad Merridy and the children were safe. No one at the Underground Academy was innocent; Merridy had just made a different choice than the others. Maybe she was the better person, or maybe she had been wrong. It wasn’t Tristan’s place to judge.

* * *

The day before they flew home, Leila packed a picnic lunch and joined Tristan and Rusty outside. They walked for a ways, enjoying the warmth of the late spring sun, until they came upon a narrow meadow that hugged the slope of a nearby mountain. The meadow was brilliant green and peppered with delicate alpine blossoms.

“Amber told me about this,” Leila said as she spread out a blanket and set the bag of food in the center.

“I’ll have to thank her,” Tristan said.

Leila sat cross-legged and leaned back, staring at the sky, and Rusty dropped to his knees beside her.

“I’m gonna miss you guys so much. What d’you think you’ll be doing here, Leila?”

She would be staying at the academy over the summer, along with six other students.

“No idea. I bet they’ll have us cleaning up the Map Room, though.”

Tristan didn’t want to talk about summer; every time he thought about seeing his mom again, his stomach fluttered with nerves. He still half-expected her to throw him out as soon as he arrived. “What do we have for lunch?”

“You’re as bad as Rusty,” Leila said. “Quinsley made burritos, and I brought extra guacamole.”

“Excellent.” Rusty dug for one.

At the edge of the clearing, a pair of foxes scampered out of the trees and bounded through the swaying grasses. Tristan unwrapped his burrito and took a bite, refusing to think about anything else. The burrito was still warm, sharp with cilantro and onions; he leaned back on one hand as he took another bite, listening to the distant trill of birdsong.

“I asked Quinsley, you know,” Leila said distractedly. “About how this school was really founded.”

“You mean it wasn’t built by magician princes who wanted to rule Canada?” Rusty was grinning—that was a story Leila had told one night soon after they moved into the Subroom.

She laughed. “No. This place was created by a group of European magicians who came to the Americas in the early seventeenth century. Like Drakewell said, their magic was powered by nature, and at that point Europe was getting so crowded they could only do simple spells. They were afraid the Americas would turn into another Europe, so they built the Map Room to stop people from going too far.”

“I liked your version better,” Tristan said. “More mysterious.”

Rusty sighed happily. “Too bad we can’t spend all our time like this.” He plucked a stray grain of rice from his shirt and flicked it away. “I wish we could send letters over the summer.”

Tristan snorted. “*We* can send each other letters, genius. It’s just Leila who can’t get mail.”

“I’ve got something better for you guys. You won’t miss getting letters, I promise.”

“What is it?” Tristan asked eagerly, peering into the picnic bag. Ever since the fight in the Map Room, Leila had spent her evenings scribbling away at something in a notebook. Tristan hoped this might explain her secrecy.

“Hey!” Leila tugged the bag closed. “You’ll just have to wait and see.”

After eating their fill of watermelon slices and gooey, fudgy brownies, Tristan, Leila, and Rusty lay back on the blanket with their heads together, watching frail white clouds curl across the sky.

“This place is so beautiful.” Leila sighed. “Even if we weren’t forced to stay here, I think I’d want to live up in these mountains forever. I wish I could paint or something.”

Tristan laughed. “That’s what you can do this summer! Then we’ll have something to decorate the Subroom with once we’re back.”

“Yeah, that’d be awesome!”

Leila snorted. “Unlikely. I’m about as artistic as a worm.”

“I’ve met some pretty artistic worms,” Rusty said, his mouth twitching.

At last the sun dropped toward the jagged ridge and the air began to cool; reluctantly they gathered the remains of their lunch and headed back to the Lair.

It took Tristan less than five minutes to shove the entirety of his belongings into his backpack—he was leaving most of his books and school supplies in the Subroom.

He lingered in the doorway before leaving the Subroom for the last time. As much as he wanted to see his parents again, he didn’t know how he would feel when he stepped through the door of his

mother's house. He had been a different person when he arrived at the academy, shattered and empty after Marcus's death. Now he had friends and a place where he truly belonged. He no longer recognized the specter he had become in Juvie.

* * *

The whole school hiked down to the runway together—even Drakewell joined them, as did the seven students remaining behind for the summer.

“Okay, these are for you guys,” Leila said, pulling two notebooks from her bag. “Don’t read them until you get home. And don’t get too excited; they aren’t much.”

Tristan hugged her fiercely. “Don’t forget about us while we’re gone. I’ll miss you.”

“We’ll be back before you notice we’re gone,” Rusty said, hugging Leila as well. “Don’t let those guys bother you.” He nodded at Eli, Amber, Cailyn, Damian, Finley, and Ryan, who would be staying with her over the summer. If Tristan had to guess, he would say Damian and Ryan hadn’t been given a choice.

“Ha,” Leila said. “Don’t worry about me.”

On the tiny plane, Tristan and Rusty fought over the window seat; Rusty won, so Tristan had to stand up to wave goodbye to Leila.

When they landed at Jamestown Airport and the taxi dropped him off before his mother’s house, Tristan stood motionless, watching as the taxi skidded around the corner.

He felt very small and out-of-place. For a long time he could not bring himself to move, scanning the sterile, lifeless street as though searching for something he could not quite put his finger on. The place was so empty, so barren, that Tristan felt as though every ounce of vitality had been dredged from him.

At last he realized what was troubling him.

The bleak concrete expanse was devoid of magic.

Though he had not noticed it while living in the mountains, Tristan had become so aware of the auras permeating the forest that he had come to rely on the presence of magic. It filled him, heightening his senses and expanding his awareness of the world.

Here he could feel nothing. The absence was jarring.

After his complete immersion in the world of magic, he could hardly recognize this city. It was ugly and empty, and Tristan wanted nothing to do with it.

He had left only hours ago, and he already wanted to return to the Lair.

At last, Tristan took a deep breath, squared his shoulders, and walked past the withered lawn to his mom’s front door.

He had to knock several times before she answered. At last he heard footsteps clicking toward the door, and it swung open. There stood his mom, thinner and sterner than he remembered, but achingly familiar.

For a split second, Tristan wondered if she would recognize him. His hair was long, half his face was torn up with scars, and he was almost two years older than he’d been when he last saw her.

Then his mother gasped.

“Oh my god.” Eyes widening, she grabbed Tristan’s shoulders and pulled him into a clumsy embrace. “Tristan, my Tristan. I got the letter saying you’d be coming home, but I didn’t believe it. Where have you been?” She started crying into his shoulder.

Tristan’s eyes stung, and he patted her awkwardly on the back. Had she forgotten what he’d done?

At last he was able to lead her inside and close the door behind him. “Are you okay, Mom?” He guided her to a kitchen stool.

Hiccupping softly, she nodded. “Oh, my baby. I can’t believe you’ve come home.”

“It’s just for the summer,” Tristan warned her, but she didn’t seem to hear.

Eventually his mom calmed down enough to show Tristan where he would be staying. He would sleep in the basement, in the room he and Marcus had shared when they’d stayed with her in the past.

“It’s such a mess, I know—I’ll clean it out just as soon as—”

“It’s fine, Mom. Really. Don’t worry.” Tristan dropped his backpack and moved a dusty box off the bed. “You can go back to whatever you were doing. I’ll be up in a moment.” Right now he wanted to be alone, to have space to think. He was so confused and overwhelmed he didn’t know what to do.

Nodding, his mom hugged him once more and dabbed at her eyes. “I’ll make your favorite lasagna for tonight, okay? We’ll celebrate, you and I.”

Tristan swallowed hard.

Once his mom had left, Tristan closed the door to the tiny, drab basement and sat gingerly on the old bed. Pulling open his backpack, he reached for the notebook Leila had given him. The familiar handwriting was like a balm to his frayed nerves.

It began with a letter. As he flipped through the pages, he realized there was a different letter dated for every third day of the summer. He crossed his legs and began to read.

Dear Triss,

I wrote these letters so you’d have something to do when you’re bored this summer. And so you don’t forget me. You’re only allowed to read one a day, so no looking ahead. I hope you enjoy yourself, though I can imagine it must feel weird to return home after everything that’s happened.

When I think of you, I’ll picture the crazy magician who grew a tree in the middle of our classroom and blew up the door of the Map Room. If I really miss you, though, I’ll just think about how much fun we had decorating Christmas cookies and roasting marshmallows.

Tomorrow I’ll bake a batch of chocolate chip cookies and eat them all myself. Then you’ll wish you hadn’t abandoned me here.

Just kidding.

Anyway, I can’t wait for August. Have a wonderful summer.

Love,

Leila

Smiling, Tristan lay back on his bed and hugged the notebook to his chest. The Lair was still there, hundreds of miles away, waiting for him.

* * *

Two weeks later, when the monotony of summer had set in and the Underground Academy felt like nothing but a distant memory, the phone rang while Tristan’s mom was out at work. He answered it as usual, but was surprised to hear the speaker say, “Could I please speak to Tristan Fairholm?” The voice was oddly familiar.

“Um—yeah? That’s me.”

“Tristan! It’s Gerard Quinsley.”

Tristan’s heart leapt. “I didn’t know we’d be able to call you guys!”

“No, not exactly.” Quinsley cleared his throat. “I’m in the town where I always pick up supplies. Professor Drakewell wanted me to warn you—”

“Is everyone okay?” Tristan asked swiftly.

“Yes, we’re fine, but a landslide just destroyed Zeke’s house. It—seems too unlikely to be a coincidence.”

Tristan froze.

“Either it means someone else is sneaking into the Map Room to cause trouble...or there are other magicians out there. But I doubt that,” Quinsley hastened to add. “I can’t believe anyone else figured out how to build a second globe, not if we haven’t been able to replicate it in centuries.”

Though Quinsley’s words were reassuring, his voice sounded troubled.

“So...”

“You need to be careful,” Quinsley said. “We’re doubling the watch on the Map Room—it could easily have been one of your classmates playing a cruel joke. But keep an eye out. If anything else happens...” He paused. “Listen, I have to go. There’s someone waiting for the phone, and I think he’s trying to eavesdrop. Just promise you’ll look after yourself. Stay out of trouble.”

“Of course,” Tristan said.

Then the phone clicked. Quinsley was gone.

Tristan walked shakily to his room in the basement, suddenly afraid every shadow was a stalker waiting to attack.

Despite what Quinsley said, he had sounded worried.

Had Merridy set up a new conduit to continue her fight against the academy?

Or were there other magicians out there?

Tristan seized Leila’s notebook, seeking comfort in her words, but he could not focus.

Who had destroyed Zeke’s home? He almost wondered if Leila had done it, but she was not that cruel.

Dread coiled in his stomach. The end of summer could not come fast enough.

Rogue Magic

The Underground Academy: Book 2

Chapter 1: Negotiations

Tristan spent two weeks of his summer break on high alert, ready at any moment for a disaster to strike his mother's house. The Underground Academy's chef, Quinsley, had called to warn him that Zeke's house had been hit by a landslide, and it was too much of a coincidence to dismiss.

But as the weeks dragged on, the threat slid to the back of his mind, and Tristan began to grow delusional from boredom. He wondered what his friends were doing—were Leila and Eli and Cailyn spending their days playing cards and lounging about, or were they learning advanced magic without him? What about Amber? Had she wandered farther than ever, enjoying the freedom of the mountains?

Before long, Tristan was so starved for magic—for the soft light of auras and the thrill of collecting raw power—that he started pacing the streets in search of any stray auras he could find. His mother's garden, brown and neglected as it was, did not look promising, so he wandered farther afield, hoping to find a scrap of wiry forest, or at least a patch of marsh.

The next day, the police came knocking to report complaints from neighbors who thought Tristan was still meant to be in Juvie.

That ended the wandering.

And so Tristan was forced to turn his attention to matters closer to home. There were only so many tomes on magic he could read before he grew cross-eyed trying to decipher the tangled text, though his professors would have been impressed by his unprecedented studiousness. Most days, he spent hours sitting at the kitchen counter, gazing out the windows at the dreary world that no longer tolerated his presence. He could see a line of houses, each with a matching picket fence bordering its own square of grass in various stages of decay.

Though the grass in his mother's lawn was so long dead it had mostly been overtaken by dirt, the dandelions flourished. As the summer grew hotter and drier, Tristan began surreptitiously to cultivate the dandelions, leaning out of the kitchen window to dump a glass of water over the nearest patch whenever it was wilting. Then, as soon as evening fell, he crept around the house and collected the largest of the dandelion leaves for his stash. He felt like some nocturnal creature.

Downstairs, he had borrowed a laundry rack and stuffed it into the closet, where he hung his dandelion leaves to dry. Though Tristan could not find any trace of an aura, he could still collect magic when he burned the crackly, dry leaves on his mother's gas stove.

The first time he tried it, Tristan felt like an arsonist about to do his dirty work. Shutting the curtains and locking the front door, he disabled the two smoke detectors. Then he gathered a decent mound of dried leaves into a bowl. He had a pair of mason jars ready to collect the magic, though he did not expect to use them both. If dandelions had been a useful supply of magic, they wouldn't have gone to the bother of searching for such rare plants to burn instead.

As the stove sparked to life and the blue-yellow flame flicked around the burner, Tristan lifted the bowl of dried leaves. He dumped them in a big heap onto the burner; three fell onto the ground, but the rest caught fire almost at once. There it was—a thrill ran through Tristan as he recognized the sheen of pure magic rising from the flames. Grabbing the first mason jar, he held it over the crackling dandelion leaves and scooped up as much of the magic vapor as he could. When the last ember sparked out, he closed the jar and clamped down the lid. Then he doubled over coughing. Clutching at his chest, he dragged back the shades and opened a window, checking to be sure no one was watching. The dandelion smoke smelled foul.

Once he had turned off the stove and waved most of the smoke out the window, Tristan took the mason jar to the dining room and sat at the table, watching the magic swirl into a dense cloud.

By morning, the magic had congealed into a gold marble, cold and heavy in his palm. Tristan rolled the marble back and forth, delighting in the sensation.

It felt like an anchor tying him to the Underground Academy.

When the students had flown home for the summer, Drakewell had searched them for any marbles they might be smuggling out of the Lair. Tristan had been forced to relinquish the usual five marbles he had grown accustomed to carrying in his pockets, and Zeke had produced close to fifty. Until he arrived at his mother's bleak, magic-less home, Tristan had not realized how much he would miss the comforting familiarity of the marbles. They were a backup, an exit strategy, a crutch he had come to rely on at the academy. He would never have dared to lose his way without a marble to track the way home, or confront anyone stronger than him without a bit of magic to catch them off guard.

* * *

Another month passed in a haze of boredom. Tristan started gathering magic orbs whenever his mother was at work, until he had nearly forty piled in a pair of boots under his bed. The house was beginning to reek of smoke, so he started baking cookies and banana bread to hide the smell. Nothing turned out as well as it did when Quinsley and Leila made it, but the food was better than the tasteless canned food his mother produced night after night.

She had been working long hours for several years now; after losing her accountant's job in the recession, she had taken a position at a discount retail chain, a demeaning job that barely paid the bills. Tristan wished he could have done something to help earn money, but no reputable business would hire someone with a criminal record.

Near the end of July, his mother arrived home early and kicked off her shoes, sinking into the couch with a moan of pleasure.

"I thought we might go out tonight," she said, eyes closed. "I have the evening off for once."

"Won't it be too expensive?" Tristan asked. He loved the idea of escaping the house, even if it was just for a few hours.

"Don't worry about it, honey."

Tristan dug up a pair of old black pants and a button-up shirt for the occasion; both were a bit tight, which meant he had grown. He eyed his reflection in the mirror, combing his hair more carefully over his scars. He had given his hair a sloppy trim earlier that summer, leaving it nearly chin-length, and with the scars hidden, he almost looked normal again.

"You look so nice, darling!" his mother said when she joined Tristan at the door.

"You do too." She was wearing a dress for the first time in years, and a pair of strappy heels.

They drove into town in silence. Tristan tried to think of something to say, but every idea led him back to Marcus—*forbidden territory*. Stopping at a fine diner Tristan had never seen before, his mother checked her makeup in the rearview mirror before stepping out.

As soon as they stepped into the restaurant, he realized what the fuss had been about.

His dad was sitting at a booth near the far wall.

He looked up as Tristan entered, trailing in his mother's wake, and waved them over. Tristan froze in the doorway. His father was suntanned and smiling, and had lost weight since Tristan had last seen him. But Tristan

could not forget the way he had thrown a bottle at Marcus just before the car crash, or how he had chased his mother from the house with his fists.

“Oh, don’t be shy,” his mother said, dragging Tristan forward by the shoulder. “Your father and I wanted to discuss our future, and we thought you should join us.”

“God, tell me you’re not getting back together,” Tristan muttered. His mother did not hear him.

“It’s good to see you again.” His dad stood and enveloped Tristan’s mother in a hug. “And you, Tristan. How’ve you been?”

“Just great,” Tristan said sarcastically. His parents both thought he was still living at a juvenile detention center. Did they really expect him to enjoy it?

They chatted about the weather and their new jobs as the waiter brought out water and menus; once they had ordered, Tristan’s mother turned to him with a gentle expression.

“Your father and I have been talking,” she said. “We were both in a bad place when we split up, and everything that’s happened since has made it obvious we messed up in a big way. You should never have been arrested, and your brother—” Her mouth tightened with sorrow. “But I have a stable job now, and your father has stopped drinking.”

“Ever since that car crash, Tristan,” he said quietly. “I blame myself for that. I should have been home that night.”

Tristan shook his head, blinking away mist at the corner of his eyes.

“Now that you’re away,” his mother continued, “we’ve realized how much we had together. Besides, I think you might like coming home to a happy family every summer.”

Tristan fiddled with the drinks menu, not meeting her eyes. He didn’t think he could stand coming home for another summer. “I thought you hated me,” he muttered. “Why didn’t you come visit me at Juvie?”

His mother reached for his hand. “Sweetheart! We would have loved to visit, but the head of the detention center told us it would be painful for you to see us. She advised us strongly to stay away, at least until things had settled down. I wish I hadn’t listened to her now.”

A small warmth burgeoned deep in Tristan’s stomach. Had they forgiven him? How was it possible? He knew who the “head of the detention center” had been—Professor Merridy, who had tried to ruin his life more than once now.

“How’s the place you’re at now?” his father asked bracingly. “What sort of place is it, anyway?”

“It’s much better than Juvie,” Tristan said truthfully. “It’s more of a school than a detention center, though the kids are all criminals. I think they’re doing a rehabilitation experiment with kids who haven’t messed up too badly, though they won’t say if that’s true.”

His mother’s eyes softened. “I’m so happy for you! I visited the Cass Detention Center after you’d left, and it was just awful. I hated imagining you in a place like that, surrounded by horrible kids.”

Tristan just grimaced at the drinks menu. His parents could never imagine what it was like living in Juvie, wretched with guilt, tormented by his inmates and unable to escape the memories.

At last their dinner arrived, saving Tristan from dwelling on that dark time. He ate his spaghetti with great concentration, hoping his parents would not pry more details from him.

“So, Tristan,” his father said eventually, setting aside his fork. “Should we become a family again?”

“If it’s what you guys want,” Tristan said. “Don’t do it for me.”

They finished the meal in silence, and on their way out, his father gave his mother a kiss on the cheek.

“Take care of yourself,” he said. “You too, Tristan.”

“Sure,” Tristan said.

On the drive home, his mother chewed on her lip, clearly thinking hard. After a while she glanced at him and said, “Your father has been volunteering with the Cass Detention Center, you know. I think he feels guilty for—for everything, really. I think I should give him another chance. It’s been hard, living alone.”

“It’s your choice,” Tristan said. He didn’t blame his dad for the car crash, not one bit, but he couldn’t so easily forget the nights he had spent out drinking, not returning home until after Tristan and Marcus had gone to bed. They would have been better off living with their mother, unemployed though she had been.

Tristan lay in bed late that night, staring at the faint sliver of moonlight just barely visible from the top of his basement window. He no longer felt he belonged with his parents. Their lives would affect him so little that he might as well pretend they no longer existed; he could not return next summer, not unless he wanted to go insane, and his life was forever tied to the Underground Academy.

Yet still, he had a hard time forgiving his dad. He had caused Tristan's mother so much heartache. Before the divorce, their arguments had turned violent; Tristan and Marcus had listened to their shouting from the hallway, debating in whispers whether they should be heroic and intervene.

They had never quite gotten up the courage.

Tristan rolled onto his stomach, pressing his face into his pillow. It hurt, remembering Marcus and the way things had been before.

When he still couldn't sleep, he fetched the notebook Leila had given him, which was open to the middle.

Dear Tristan,

You're lucky, you know, that you have parents who still care about you. Mine wouldn't take me back, even if I wanted to go. Even if I begged them. I was too much trouble. But I don't want to go back; I hate them. I tried to help them, and they kicked me out. I slept in an alley one night, did you know that?

But I didn't mean to start blabbing on about myself. I still don't know what you did to land yourself in Juvie, but it can't be that bad if your parents are ready to forgive you. Anyway, I bet you'll probably be bored out of your mind—I know I would be, if I were restricted to the house—but you're still luckier than some of us.

I hope your summer is going well; I'm sure we'll be having a good time back here, what with all the mess in the Map Room to clean up. We'll all be thinking of you.

*Love,
Leila*

He read the letter through several times before returning it under his bed. He missed Leila and Rusty and Amber and Evvie—he wished he could write to them, to complain about how boring everything was here and how resentful he was about his dad returning to his life.

Just as he flopped onto his back once more, eyes still wide open, he smelled something odd.

At first he thought it was just the remnants of smoke from his magic-collection. Then a wave of smoke wafted into the room, and it didn't smell at all like burning dandelion leaves.

Tristan jumped to his feet. Flicking on the light, he tiptoed to the door. For a moment he wondered why the smoke detectors hadn't gone off. Then he remembered they were still disconnected.

Swearing under his breath, Tristan cracked open the door and peered up the stairs.

A strange orange light cavorted across the walls of the living room, accompanied by a burst of heat.

The house was burning.

Chapter 2: Smoke and Flames

Throwing back the door, Tristan dashed up to the living room. The entire kitchen was on fire, and the stairway to his mother's room was beginning to smolder.

Phone first, or find his mother?

Phone.

Grabbing the phone off the counter, Tristan yelled up the stairs, "MOM! FIRE!" Then he dialed 911. It took a long time for anyone to answer, longer than it should have, so he ran up the stairs, staying as far away from the flames as he could. Inside his mother's room, he slammed the door, temporarily cutting out the heat and smoke. A thin trail of smoke curled through the crack above the door, hazy in the lamplight.

His mom was still snoring, blankets wadded up around her stomach.

"MOM!" Tristan yanked her pillow from under her and shook her shoulders. "Get up now! The house is on fire!"

He spoke those last words just as the emergency operator answered.

"There's a fire? Address?"

Tristan quickly recited his home address. "We're inside," he said urgently. "I think we're trapped. Come fast!"

Then he dropped the phone.

"MOM!"

"I'm up," she mumbled. With a groan, she stretched and rubbed her eyes. "What's happening?"

"The house is on fire!"

This time the words seemed to register. She sat up quickly and threw off the blankets. "We have to get out." Barefoot, she crept to the door and put a hand on the wood. "It's too hot. We can't go that way."

Tristan ran to a window and raised the glass. A cool rush of night air flooded in; he hadn't realized how hot it was in the bedroom until just then. He punched the corners of the screen until the panel popped free and fell to the dirt below. When he leaned out of the window, he could see flames in the kitchen, smoke billowing against the glass.

"Is it safe to jump?" he asked.

"Don't ask me!" his mother said shrilly. "I haven't been testing it. But it's certainly not safe to stay in here."

"You first," Tristan said. He knew he could jump the distance; if he had to, he would lower his mother on a bedsheet.

Cautiously approaching the window, his mother grabbed the sill with both hands. Her hair was tangled from sleep, her eyes still bleary. Dropping her feet over the edge, she slowly lowered herself until she was hanging straight down the side of the house. Her fingers had gone white.

"It's not far," Tristan said. "Just let go."

She took a breath, jaw clenched. Then she let go.

Tristan heard the soft thud as her heels hit the dirt. A second later, she straightened. "I'm okay. Your turn now."

The smoke was beginning to leak into the room faster than before, as though the house was a kettle coming to the boil. Coughing, Tristan copied his mother and lowered himself out the window. The plastic sill bit into his hand, leaving a deep indent across his palm.

The flames in the kitchen window flared brighter than ever, roaring hungrily against the glass.

Tristan released his hold and dropped to the ground. His knees buckled, but he caught himself against the side of the house and remained standing. Legs aching dully, he turned and reached for his mother's arm. Together they ran from the yard and into the street just as the flames burst through the kitchen wall and leapt to the roof. The house exhaled a cloud of rancid black smoke.

With a groaning of timbers, the dining room roof crumpled into the inferno.

Sirens wailed in the distance. Across the street, their elderly neighbors had ventured onto the front step to watch the commotion, both in bathrobes and fuzzy slippers.

They paused in front of their neighbor's house to watch the fire. Tristan's mother rubbed his shoulders in a comforting way, though she seemed more shaken than him.

Tristan's first instinct was to flee. If the cops got involved, they would know him from Juvie, and a lot of uncomfortable questions would be asked. Tristan didn't know what story his teachers had fed the detention center; anything he said would be dangerous.

But fleeing would put his mother in danger as well.

As they watched, something in the basement exploded. The walls shattered, and the entire top half of the house sagged into the flames.

The magic Tristan had spent months collecting was gone.

Before he had time to contemplate it further, the first fire truck arrived on the scene. As men spilled from the truck, one paused to ask, "Everyone out of the house?"

Tristan's mother nodded. "It's just us." She was shivering, dressed only in a tank top and shorts. She looked terribly fragile.

While the firefighters rigged up their hose and advanced on the house, a pair of police cars arrived. One parked behind the fire engine, surveying the scene, and the other pulled up beside Tristan and his mother.

"C'mon," the driver said, rolling down his window. "We'll get you warmed up, eh?"

Tristan's mother slid gratefully into the back of the car, and after a moment, Tristan followed.

The cop chatted reassuringly with Tristan's mother as they drove, while Tristan clamped his hands on the seat and tried not to let the memories consume him.

On the night of the car crash, he had lost consciousness, roused by the wail of an approaching siren. It was the police who had cut him from his seat. It was the police who had said, "He's dead."

The voices had floated to Tristan as though in a dream, flickering lights swimming above him, and he had seen his brother's sloppy black hair splayed over the seat, his face pale and empty.

Then Tristan had been hauled off for questioning. Crushed beneath the weight of guilt and self-hatred, he had almost lost the will to live. His memories from that time were all tinged with black. It was only when the reality of a life in prison caught up to him that he attempted to explain the earthquake, and how he had tried to get himself and Marcus to safety.

That was when they started questioning his sanity.

When Tristan had first caught sight of himself in a mirror, had seen the still-bloody gashes gutting the left side of his face, he had nearly disgorged the entire contents of his stomach into the sink. Then he had wept for Marcus, for the brother he had killed, the innocent life he had ended. Once the nausea passed, he had stared at himself until he was accustomed to the sight.

His was the face of a murderer.

The police car pulled up outside the station, and his mother's hand on his shoulder tore Tristan away from his disturbed memories. Feeling weak, he raked his hair over the scars and followed his mother up the steps.

A sleepy-looking man reading the newspaper greeted them at the reception, and the cop who had given them a ride explained the situation in a low voice. He found coffee and blankets for Tristan and his mother, who sank into plastic seats by the far wall.

His heart racing from caffeine and fear, Tristan began for the first time to wonder what had started the fire.

Was it random chance? Had an electrical wire frayed and sparked a flame, or had his mother, sitting up late to contemplate what her ex-husband had proposed, made a cup of tea and forgotten to turn off the stove?

But something told him it was not a coincidence. He had been waiting for this, ever since Quinsley's call.

Maybe someone back at the Lair had decided to have a bit of fun. Damian was there, after all—could he have sneaked into the Map Room and started the fire while the professors were asleep?

Or it could be Merridy. Perhaps she had not given up so easily; perhaps she continued from afar her mission to eliminate the Underground Academy and all magic-workers.

But she had no globe to work from. To start a fire here, in North Dakota, she would have to be lurking

somewhere nearby.

At last the cop at the station desk approached Tristan and his mother and said gently, “We have beds here, if you would like to get some sleep. We’ll try to sort you out in the morning. Do you have any relations who might take you in?”

His mother nodded. “I’ll call Patrick in the morning.”

So she would move in with Tristan’s father again, just like that.

When they were shown to a room at the back of the station—not a cell, though it was outfitted as sparsely as one—his mother said quietly, “Do you think they’ll check your record when they start investigating the fire?”

Tristan nodded, hunching forward. “They won’t let me out of this easily. I’m pretty sure it was a nightmare sending me off to the school I’m at now.”

His mother folded her hands and studied Tristan. “Why don’t you ever talk about school?” she asked cautiously.

Tristan avoided her eyes. “It’s not a normal school. You know we’re not allowed to say anything about it.”

Her mouth tightened. “Well, maybe you could call me sometime this year. I’d love to hear how things are going, honey.”

Tristan sighed. He didn’t want to think about the academy now, not with the police interrogation looming. “We’re not allowed. I would’ve called you last year, if I could’ve. I told you that, remember?”

“I suppose. I just worry about you sometimes. I wish you could stay at home.”

“I can’t.” Criminal record aside, he was miserable here.

“You’ll be here next summer, though, won’t you?”

Tristan folded his arms. “I don’t know.”

* * *

Tristan lay awake that night, certain the nightmares would return as soon as he closed his eyes. When the first light of dawn leaked into the dreary room, he sat up and hugged his knees, blanket draped around his shoulders. The room felt like a refrigerator.

Before long a new cop was pounding on the door. “Coming in!” he bellowed. He was large and ruddy-faced, and he wore a belt strapped with two pistols and a Taser. “Margaret and Tristan Fairholm, is it?”

Tristan’s mother nodded, though she had officially resumed her maiden name after the divorce.

“Tristan Fairholm, I learned something ‘bout you last night. Seems you were in here last year after a car crash, and you were charged with manslaughter, theft, and possible arson. Ring a bell?”

Tristan met his eyes and said nothing.

“We can’t discharge you straightaway. We’ve gotta ask a few questions first. It’s a bit too much of a coincidence, wouldn’t you say, a fire burning down the house of a known delinquent?”

Still Tristan said nothing.

When his mother stood, he reluctantly followed her down the hall to the reception, letting his blanket fall to the floor.

An investigator was waiting for them, and he led them into a side room with a desk and two uncomfortable chairs. He handed them a plate of toast and jam and sat back, nursing his coffee.

“You haven’t been accused of anything yet,” he told Tristan. “This is more of an exploratory questioning.”

Tristan winced. He knew the type, and it wasn’t any better than the accusatory questionings.

“Who discovered the fire first?”

“I did,” Tristan said reluctantly.

“And where were you at the time?”

“Down in the basement, sleeping. I woke up when I smelled the smoke.”

“Where did the fire start?”

“In the kitchen.” Tristan sat up straighter, endeavoring to appear honest and entirely innocent.

“And you escaped?”

“Tristan came and woke me, and we jumped out the window,” his mother said. “If not for him, I would have

slept right through the fire.”

“Any speculation as to its cause? Or evidence that it was accidental?”

Tristan’s mother bit her lip and reached for a piece of toast, clearly stalling. “I was tired that night. I might have left the stove on or something; I’m pretty sure I didn’t, but you never know. Or maybe I put something in the microwave for too long.”

“Had you consumed any alcohol beforehand?”

She shook her head.

“Tristan, could I please have a moment alone with you?”

His mother stood and left the room mechanically. Tristan gripped his hands together, hoping the detective wouldn’t notice how much he was sweating. He couldn’t explain the guilt that wracked him; it was as bad as when he actually had burned the entrance to the Lair. Maybe it was just the way the detective looked at him, as though he was sullied, less than human. He was guilty by way of already being guilty for his brother’s death. No matter what Drakewell had told him about sending the earthquake that scared Tristan into fleeing, he alone felt responsible for Marcus’s death. It had been his idea to take the car, his hands on the wheel that had missed the turn on the dark road, and his foot creeping too close to the ground on the accelerator.

The responsibility was his, and his alone.

“So, Tristan. I see in your file that you have been transferred to a special school for troubled teens. And you were allowed back for summer holiday, is that correct? Provided you complied with the restrictions, of course.”

Tristan nodded, his mouth dry.

“Were you involved in starting this fire in any way? Did you *intentionally* neglect something dangerous?”

“No!” Tristan gripped the desk, trying to keep his temper. “I was asleep. Why would I burn down my mom’s home? She has nowhere else to go!”

“All criminal actions are irrational in the eyes of the innocent, yet crimes are committed every day,” the detective said coldly. “How are you enjoying your time at school? Is it preferable to the detention center?”

Was it a trick question? Tristan cleared his throat. “Um...it’s okay. It’s definitely better than Juvie. I’m very lucky I was invited to go there.”

“Too right you are.” His expression grew stern. “Unfortunately for you, the state is currently reassessing your situation. If the evidence points towards arson, your privileges will be revoked and you will return to the state detention center. Is that understood?”

Tristan swallowed. “Yeah.” The teachers would be able to fix this...wouldn’t they?

“And I’m afraid to say that multiple offenders are treated rather more strictly. Understood?”

Tristan forced himself to meet the man’s eyes. “I know.”

His stomach was twisting itself in knots.

“Let’s get you back to a cell. You have to wait here until we’ve decide what to do with you.”

Tristan stood slowly. If his professors believed the police, they might not want him back. His whole world was crashing down around him.

Out in the lobby, his dad was greeting his mother with more affection than Tristan thought appropriate.

“Are you okay, honey?” his mother asked. “They don’t blame you, do they?”

Tristan’s shoulders sagged. “They haven’t decided yet. I have to stay here for now.”

“No!” his mother cried. She marched up to the reception desk and said, “Let us take Tristan home. Staying here won’t be good for him. We’ll make sure he doesn’t get into trouble.”

“Sorry, ma’am. He’s got to stay. But nothing will happen for a bit yet. You might as well go home and rest.”

Tristan’s mother pulled him into a fierce hug, eyes glistening. Tristan returned the embrace halfheartedly, nearly paralyzed with dread.

The professors wouldn’t let him go back to Juvie.

Would they?

Leaving his parents, Tristan shuffled after the policeman from the reception desk, who led him this time into a small holding cell. He sat on the cot and slumped against the wall, trying not to cry.

What if they can’t get me out? Tristan didn’t know what tricks his professors had used to spring him free of Juvie in the first place—from the sounds of it, they had set up their own legally registered rehabilitation center—but

even they couldn't entirely disregard laws.

Could he get in touch with them somehow? *No, that's stupid.* Besides, maybe his professors would believe the police. Maybe they would be glad for an excuse to be rid of him.

* * *

That night passed, and another day. Tristan started to wonder what had happened in the world outside his cell. Had they forgotten about him?

After a day of pacing and dragging his fingernails along the concrete in frustration, Tristan decided he had no choice but to persuade the police he was innocent. But how? He had no evidence either way. If any detectives went digging around in the ruins and discovered that the smoke detectors had been disabled, they would consider it overwhelming proof of Tristan's guilt.

In between worrying about what would happen to him, Tristan wondered how his parents were faring. Did his mother blame him for the fire, or was she happy to be living with his father again? That house must feel so strange, what with Tristan and Marcus's rooms standing empty...

He was just turning for another pass down the narrow room when the door clanked open.

"Hey, kid." It was a severe-looking policewoman. "Someone's here to talk to you."

Tristan's heart began racing. Was it another detective? What should he say? And if they knew about the smoke detectors, how on earth was he meant to explain that? He fell into step behind the policewoman, hands thrust in his pockets. He knew he looked a mess, his clothes rumpled and his hair greasy—he hadn't showered in four days. More than that, he probably reeked of smoke from the fire.

When they came around the corner, he did a double-take. There was someone familiar standing at the reception desk, someone who did not belong there.

It was Quinsley, the academy's chef.

Chapter 3: Auras in the Dark

Tristan rocked on his heels. What was *Quinsley* doing here?

“You ready to go, Tristan?” Quinsley asked, his tone uncharacteristically strict.

Tristan opened his mouth in surprise. “I—what?”

“We’ve come to reclaim you,” Quinsley said sternly. “It seems you’re a magnet for trouble, and these kind officers don’t want to deal with it any longer.”

Still unable to comprehend what was happening, Tristan stared at the receptionist. The man gave him a quick nod. “I don’t want to see you in here again, understood?”

Tristan blinked at him. “Of course not.”

At last his legs began working again, and he crossed the room to Quinsley’s side.

“Good day,” Quinsley said to the receptionist. “Thank you for everything.”

As soon as they were outside, he turned and beamed at Tristan. “That went rather well, don’t you think?”

Tristan just stared at him. “How did you get me out?”

“We told them we had set up security cameras in your house, and we could see you were asleep when the fire started.”

Tristan’s shoulders slumped in relief. “Thank god. I thought I was going back to Juvie.”

Quinsley opened the door of a taxi and waited for Tristan to climb inside. “You might have, if I hadn’t arrived when I did,” he said darkly, sliding in after him. “We’ll talk once we reach the plane.”

Tristan nodded and leaned his head against the window. His eyes were beginning to ache after the sleepless night

* * *

When Tristan climbed the familiar ladder to the plane, Leila poked her head out of the pilot’s seat and grinned at Tristan. He gave her a fierce hug, noticing as he did that her freckles stood out darker than ever. Her black hair had grown several inches longer, and was back in its customary braid. It was the strangest thing to see Leila and Quinsley here in North Dakota, as though they had appeared out of a dream.

“Hey, Triss. I missed you.” Leila’s voice caught on the last word, though her expression was still light.

Tristan bit the inside of his cheek. “At least you were at the Lair. I’m never going back for the summer again. It was miserable.”

Leila squeezed his shoulder. “Have you been trapped inside the whole time? You’re so pale!”

“Pretty much.”

“You kids want to watch me fly this thing?” Quinsley asked, folding the ladder away and pulling the hatch closed.

“You can have the copilot’s seat, Triss,” Leila said. “I’ve already been watching you for six hours straight. I could probably fly this thing myself.”

Quinsley chuckled. “Are you that eager to take over my coveted position as ‘cook and pilot without a say in anything?’”

“I wouldn’t turn it down.” Leila took the seat behind Quinsley’s, and Tristan ducked into the cockpit.

“Is that why you burned the house down?” Leila whispered. “Because you hated it there?”

“I didn’t!” He couldn’t tell if Leila was teasing him. “I swear, I had nothing to do with it. I was asleep. It was probably Damian who started it, or something.”

Leila studied him for a long time as Quinsley pulled the plane onto the runway and took off. The engine hummed beneath them as they accelerated.

"I believe you," she said at long last. "But I can't think who would have started the fire. None of us know how to use the Map Room yet, and Drakewell watches it pretty carefully. I don't think Damian would have dared sneaking down there."

"I believe you too," Quinsley said, glancing sideways at Tristan. The plane was flying level now, just above a scattered layer of clouds. "But you'll find that the professors won't let you off so easily. You do seem to have a penchant for starting fires."

"That's not fair!" Tristan said. "I'm not some crazy pyromaniac. My mom doesn't have much money, and she doesn't really have anywhere to go now that the house is gone. I would never do that to anyone."

"Try convincing Drakewell of that," Quinsley said drily. "He believes anyone is capable of anything. And I can see where he got the idea—he started his time at the academy as a quiet, awkward teenager who resisted using the Map Room longer than most."

"Really?" Leila asked, just as Tristan said,

"Does everyone resist it?"

Quinsley shook his head. "Of course not. We try to avoid it, but we've taken on some seriously messed-up delinquents. The ones who don't settle down after a while are...relocated. The head of the Map Room usually sees to that." He smiled grimly at Tristan. "It might surprise you to know that your year is better than most. Anyway, we've had all manner of resistance from the students. In fact, I'm pretty sure I nearly decapitated my own professor when he first asked me to cause a disaster. And Gracewright was in my year—she burned every bunk in the original girls' bunkroom when she learned the truth."

"But everyone agrees in the end?" Tristan asked darkly.

"More or less. Your perspective changes when you live out in the Lair, I suppose. Once you're disconnected from all the tiny human dramas that make up normal life, you start to see the big picture. I don't personally agree with everything Drakewell has done, but I see the sense behind our work. That's why I'm just the cook. I don't make decisions."

"So you just..."

"You learn to live with it," Quinsley said. "Because you can't forget, and you can't stop seeing auras and hungering after magic once you've gotten a taste."

This gave Tristan so much to think about that his head hurt. He swallowed the million questions waiting on his tongue and resolved to ask Leila later. Quinsley's words made sense, in a twisted way, but just thinking about it left a nasty taste at the back of his throat. He knew exactly what Quinsley had meant, though—he could not turn his back on the Underground Academy or forget magic, no matter how much he wished to. The school had become everything to him.

* * *

This time the sky was cloudless, and as the plane dropped lower, Tristan could see mountains in every direction. Most were still crowned with snow even though it was nearing the end of August, and a few even boasted pale blue glaciers riddled with crevasses.

Tristan was happy to stretch his legs on the walk around the lake. All of his possessions had been consumed by the fire, yet he mourned the loss of just two: the hoard of marbles and the notebook Leila had given him. He told her about this as they walked, both struggling to keep up with Quinsley.

"Ah, it's okay," she said. "You read most of them anyway, I expect. I hope you don't think I'm a complete idiot."

Tristan elbowed her. "Don't be stupid. I would've gone crazy without that notebook."

Leila ducked her head to hide her smile.

"What have you done all this time, anyway?" he asked. "Have you learned magic the rest of us can only dream of?"

"Yeah, right." Leila bent to pick up an exceptionally flat stone and skipped it across the lake. Without a hint of breeze to stir the water, the mountains and pines bordering the lake made a perfect reflection. "Let's see. We spent a bit of time hiking around with Gracewright, because she knows everything about the area. She showed us

a few hanging lakes and waterfalls, and a meadow so full of flowers you couldn't see the ground.”

“What about the Map Room?”

“So impatient! We didn't do much, honestly. Drakewell had us sweeping the floor for hours on end, picking up every last shard of rock. I'm pretty sure we scraped the top layer off the floor by the end. Oh, and we spent a while polishing the globe once the room was clean. It took me four hours to clean Argentina!”

“And you didn't stir up any disasters in all that time?”

“Maybe there are some Argentinians with extra-clean faces.” Leila snorted. “I have no idea how that thing works. Obviously just touching it doesn't do anything.”

“That's all? You seriously didn't do anything exciting all summer?”

Leila shrugged. “We had a really nice time, but mostly we were on our own. Most of the professors were away for weeks at a time; I have no idea what they got up to.”

“Really?”

She laughed. “Trust me, I asked.”

They arrived at the Lair just in time for dinner. It felt surreal seeing the familiar Native American longhouses again, unchanged aside from the long grass that had grown throughout the meadow. And there was the board Tristan had accidentally put three extra nails through while rebuilding the entrance. Professor Gracewright had been busy—the meadow was encircled with tiny yellow flowers, and one wall of her wooden classroom was covered by a clinging grapevine.

Through the doors of the new longhouse, down a flight of dark stairs, and past the enchanted Prasadimum barrier, Tristan, Leila, and Quinsley reached the real school. The ballroom blazed with light, its colorful floor cleaner than Tristan had ever seen it, and the tables on the far platform were already overflowing with food.

“Welcome back!” All dusk called, getting to his feet. “Sorry we didn't wait—Quinsley expected a bit of a hassle in collecting you.”

“There nearly was,” Quinsley said. “I think they were minutes away from hauling Tristan off to a different police station for more questioning. It was lucky I arrived when I did.”

Drakewell was not present, Tristan noted, for which he was grateful. He was not ready to confront the headmaster just yet. For now he wanted to savor his return.

Two empty chairs were waiting at the table where Amber, Eli, and Cailyn sat; with half of the students still away, only three tables were occupied. Tristan sank into one of the chairs, avoiding the curious stares of his classmates. Eli's looked more hostile than usual.

“You had a good summer?” he asked as Leila began to dish herself pasta salad.

“It's been really nice,” Cailyn said, her cheeks dimpling.

Amber caught Tristan's eyes and gave him a warm, genuine smile. When he returned it, she dropped her eyes quickly, cheeks reddening. Even her deathly pale skin had taken on a blush of color over summer, and she seemed more comfortable around the other students than ever before.

“Even Eli had a good time,” Leila said pointedly.

Eli made a face. “No, I didn't. But I'm not talking about that here.”

“Where's Drakewell?” Tristan whispered.

“Away,” Leila said. “No idea where.”

Some of Tristan's tension drained away, and he let his shoulders slump. At least he would have a few peaceful days before Drakewell confronted him with the inevitable accusations.

The Subroom was exactly as Tristan remembered it, albeit with a few additional flower arrangements and a surprisingly lifelike painting of a fox beside the fireplace. He ran his fingers over the dining table, once cracked in half but now supported by a pair of sturdy metal braces, and crossed to the bookshelf, where he cast a cursory glance at the titles in search of something that might offer an explanation for the disasters.

Who had first begun causing disasters at this school? Had they been sane, or a little twisted? Had they nurtured a deeply abiding hatred for humanity?

“Goodnight,” Leila said. “If you start snoring again, Eli, I'll smother you.”

“Not if I slit your throat first.”

“Goodnight,” Tristan said absently, crawling beneath the covers of his usual mattress. His mind continued

to race, worries he had held at bay all summer now returning with a vengeance.

His teachers certainly weren't insane. They were some of the most intelligent, rational people Tristan knew—with the exception of Drakewell, perhaps, though he was undeniably brilliant. Yet they had presumably come to this school as convicts, just like Tristan and his classmates, so they could have brought with them a disdain for rules and an outsider's perspective on the human race.

That was an interesting thought. What had the professors been arrested for? Had Drakewell been an arsonist or a thief? Was Quinsley capable of murder? Tristan very much doubted that, but he supposed you could never tell. If he hadn't known better, he would have thought his classmates no more than a group of ordinary teenagers. Maybe the chance to start over—and the knowledge of what awaited them if they discarded that opportunity—was enough to make saints of sinners. Or maybe his friends had simply learned to bury their true selves deep beneath a façade of kindness.

People were such mysteries, Tristan reflected, turning over on his stomach and pressing his forehead into his pillow. He wanted to banish these depressing thoughts, to enjoy his return to the Lair without a taint of darkness. But the train of thought continued.

He could see how the professors would easily assume him guilty of arson. In their place, he would think the same. After all, what had he done to earn their trust the previous year? He had sneaked around in the tunnels where he was explicitly forbidden to go, destroyed the door to the Map Room, and burned down the entrance to the Lair. More than any of his classmates, Tristan had acted the criminal.

* * *

They spent the next week airing out the classrooms, putting new sheets on the mattresses that had remained untouched all summer, and escaping the Lair as often as possible. Eli and Cailyn had grown inseparable over the summer, so Amber joined Tristan and Leila on two hikes around the nearby hills. No one mentioned the fire that had destroyed Tristan's house, though the teachers seemed more guarded around him than usual.

All dusk disappeared for a few days, and Gracewright went on a three-day solo hike through the mountains, returning with her pack stuffed with new samples. When Tristan asked her why she was so familiar with the mountains, surprised that a sixty-year-old was so comfortable hiking long distances alone through the uncharted wilderness, she just laughed.

"I've been hiking since the day I learned to walk. When I came here, I put my heart into exploring these mountains. It was what kept me sane. These days I stick with regular hiking, but I used to be a proper mountaineer, going up glaciers with crampons and ice axes and all. When you're a bit older, I'd love to take a group to explore the closest glacier. Before it melts, that is!"

Late one evening, Drakewell stomped down to the ballroom with an unfamiliar woman at his heels. Only three days remained before classes resumed, and Tristan was already mourning the end of summer.

"Tristan. I need to speak with you," Drakewell said, without a word of greeting to the rest of the staff. "You as well, Amber."

Most of the students had stayed in the ballroom long after dinner that night, intent on the poker game Eli had persuaded Gracewright and Quinsley to join in on.

Setting aside his cards, Quinsley pushed away from the table and strode across the room. Without a passing glance at Drakewell, he gave the new arrival a rough hug. "You're getting on okay?" he asked her.

She took Quinsley's shoulders and studied him before grinning. "You haven't aged one bit."

"Kids, this is Natasha Vern," Quinsley said, spinning Natasha to face the students. She was a tall woman, towering over Quinsley by nearly a head, with chocolate-brown skin and corkscrew hair cropped close to her head. Her vivid orange blouse was the brightest thing in the ballroom.

"Nice to meet you," Natasha said, stepping forward. "I'll be your new Environmental Studies teacher. It's been a long time since I've seen the academy; I was a student in Rowan Drakewell's year."

Tristan sat up straighter. "I thought no one from Drakewell's year was left."

Drakewell turned his hollow eyes on Tristan. "And where did you get that idea?" He fingered the hourglass that always hung about his neck.

Tristan swallowed. He hadn't meant to speak so loudly.

"Oh, don't be so difficult," Natasha Vern told Drakewell. "It's perfectly true that no one from your headmaster's year stayed behind to teach. After finishing school, I started traveling worldwide, keeping records of each targeted region before and after the disaster came through. I've also spent some time organizing species rehabilitation efforts."

"I want to do *that*," Tristan overheard Cailyn whisper to Eli.

"Well, Rowan, I'm dead on my feet. Do you mind if I take the bedroom behind the second storeroom?"

Drakewell nodded sharply, still studying Tristan with cold dislike.

Natasha turned back to the students. "By the way, you can call me 'Natasha' or 'Miss Vern.' 'Professor Vern' sounds so old." She winked at Cailyn and made for the ballroom doors, every eye following her.

When Tristan continued watching the door Natasha had vanished through, wondering what sort of things she had seen around the world, Drakewell snapped his fingers with impatience.

"Fairholm. Ashton. Now!"

Tristan and Amber jumped to their feet and hurried after Drakewell into the empty marble hallway.

"Now, I won't bore Miss Ashton with this talk, Fairholm, but you are not getting off so easily after that little performance over the summer. What the hell were you thinking?"

"I didn't burn the house down!" Tristan said heatedly. "I swear! I was asleep."

"We will discuss this later," Drakewell said coldly.

"Fine," Tristan said flippantly, before he could stop himself.

Eyes flashing, Drakewell turned and swept down the hall. Tristan and Amber had to race to keep up.

Even before they descended three flights of stairs and turned into the dark recesses of Delair's mine tunnel, Tristan knew exactly where Drakewell was taking them.

They were bound for the Map Room.

After spending the better part of three months tracking Evvie through the tunnels last year, Tristan could easily remember his way through the twisting, dark passages even without the lantern Drakewell had fetched from Delair's classroom. He recognized the door that led to a room stacked high with gold discs, and another door leading to what must have once been a repository for junk that was too precious to discard.

Before long they came to the familiar entrance to the Map Room, its door intact once more. The map outlined in Delairium was exactly as Tristan remembered it, as though he had never blown the door apart. If he looked closer, he knew he would find evidence of a painstaking repair job.

For the first time since they entered the tunnels, Drakewell spoke. "As reprehensible as your actions have been, Fairholm, it is rather convenient that you and Miss Ashton are both here before classes start." He took out a key ring and unlocked the two bolts on the door, which were definitely new. Tristan must have melted the old ones beyond repair.

When Drakewell tapped the closest lamp, the entire ring of lanterns flared to life, illuminating the high chamber and casting a bright sheen on the globe sunk halfway into the ground.

"You will not speak of this to your classmates. They have yet to prove themselves trustworthy." He studied them, his mouth tightening. "I would rather not trust you either, but I need your assistance." He sighed. "You must help me keep a close eye on the globe whenever we venture down here. Can either of you spot anything unusual there?"

They ventured closer to the vast sphere; Tristan had no idea what he was looking for, so he checked the globe for any signs of damage. He wondered how it worked, though a second later he was disgusted with himself. Did he actually want to learn to cause disasters?

"I expected as much," Drakewell said. With another tap, he extinguished the light. "These maps show more than just the world. Look carefully, and tell me when you can see what I mean."

Her cheeks ghostly in the light of the single lantern, Amber circled around the globe. In the murky darkness, it seemed to hang suspended in nothingness. Tristan followed, squinting at what looked like a blank surface.

"Oh!" Amber said at last. "I see them." She reached up and put a hand on the polished surface of the globe. "How do you turn it?"

"Slide it gently," Drakewell said, joining them before the globe. "It moves easily."

Tristan couldn't tell whether the globe was moving or standing still; it looked as though Amber was trailing her fingers across its surface. Then she let out a breath and stood on her toes.

"I don't see anything." Tristan crossed to Amber's side, squinting at the same point she was examining as though that would improve his night vision.

"Can you see it glowing?" Amber asked softly.

Tristan blinked. Rubbing his eyes, he gave up on trying to see in the dark and instead looked for some sort of light.

There. Just in front of his forehead, the globe was beginning to glow faintly, and when he concentrated on the light he realized it came from a million glowing pinpricks. Some were clustered in bright clumps, while others were scattered like stars.

"Now can you see them?" Drakewell asked.

Tristan nodded, tracing a finger through one of the brightest clusters. "It looks like one of those satellite maps of the world by night."

"Very good," Drakewell said. His voice was almost kind. "That is very close to the truth. However, those are auras, not lights."

"Oh!" Amber's eyes widened.

"So that's how you watched us when we were doing Merridy's tests," Tristan said. He had a feeling this would explain a lot.

"Yes," Drakewell said shortly. "And this is how I know that you surreptitiously collected marbles over summer, which could be the reason your house was incinerated."

Tristan stared at him. "How do you know about that?"

Drakewell took a metal disc from his pocket, something that resembled a miniature hockey puck. "You will see this demonstrated again in a few weeks' time." He placed the disc onto the globe, over a patch of light that must have belonged to a small town of some sort, and it stayed where he left it. Then he beckoned Tristan and Amber over to one of the benches Merridy had destroyed the previous year. It was repaired now, but not quite as smooth as before.

In the lantern-light, Tristan discerned a change in the table, as though the stone itself was rippling. Seconds later, the stone reshaped itself into a rolling section of land dotted with a few houses no larger than an eraser. This larger map was glowing as well; some of the houses shone brighter than others, and Tristan noticed a faint aura moving along the street, hovering a short distance from the stone map.

"Human auras are not the only lights on this map," Drakewell said. "Animals have auras as well, usually proportionate to their size and intelligence. Magical repositories too. As your house grew brighter and brighter, it stood out from its neighbors like a beacon, Fairholm. Not the least bit subtle." There was a rebuke in that final statement.

"Tristan has the brightest aura of any student here," Amber ventured cautiously. "Does that show up on the map as well?"

"You are a lot cleverer than I bargained on," Drakewell said sharply.

Though he couldn't be sure in the dark, Tristan thought Amber reddened.

"And yes, you are absolutely correct. Those people with the greatest potential for magic—though it may never come to fruition—appear as the brightest auras on this map."

"That's how you chose us," Tristan said. "You chose the kids with the brightest auras and—and made sure we were at Juvie?"

"No." Drakewell frowned at Tristan. "You were the exception to the rule. We looked first at the population of each state's juvenile detention system, and selected those delinquents with the greatest potential for magic. Of course, we examined their criminal records to ensure we did not recruit anyone too dangerous. You, however..." Drakewell narrowed his eyes. "Your aura was so bright we could not safely leave you in the community. Every ten years or so there is someone with such a keen awareness of magic that they begin to develop abilities even without guidance. If we cannot recruit these individuals, they must be eliminated." He cleared his throat. "It is regrettable that we had to lead you to commit a crime, but you should consider yourself lucky. If you had been born in the wrong year, you would have met an unsavory end."

Tristan swallowed hard. Was that meant to make him feel better? If he had been given the choice, he would have died in Marcus's place without a second thought. He had always assumed his crime was worse than the others'—he had killed his own brother! But why had the others landed themselves in Juvie? He had never pressed even his closest friends for the stories behind their arrests, knowing he would be questioned in turn, but without answers he couldn't help but imagine all sorts of unforgivable offenses.

"Now, none of that truly matters," Drakewell snapped. "The point is, you both must practice seeing these auras even with the lights on. For the duration of this year, you will help me monitor the globe. If you see anything suspicious, I must know immediately. Anything brighter than usual is a potential danger."

"But the academy isn't on here?" Tristan asked.

"No. It should be eventually, but at the moment this map does not show anything underground. We had nearly completed a separate table showing the Lair before Darla destroyed this room and rendered our efforts useless."

Tristan and Amber looked at one another. Tristan suspected Amber could pinpoint the academy on the map, but he didn't want to ask in front of Drakewell.

"That is all," Drakewell said. "Miss Ashton, you are dismissed. Fairholm, I want a word with you."

Tristan's heart sank as Amber turned and slipped out of the Map Room into the darkness. She had not taken a lamp.

Drakewell raised his lamp and glared at Tristan. In the gloom, his eyes looked as though they belonged to a cadaver. "Now. I hope you did not expect to pull off that mad stunt over the summer with no repercussions? Whether or not you burned down the house to ensure you returned to the academy sooner, you will wish you had stayed home."

"I didn't do it!" Tristan almost shouted. "I was *asleep!*" More than ever before, he felt sullied by the professors' distrust. He had already spent the past week wracked with guilt, even though he knew, with a certainty he would never shake, that he'd had nothing to do with the fire. "I'm not lying, okay?"

At least he had expected Drakewell's lecture. It was Alldusk's wariness that hurt more than anything.

"Please calm yourself," Drakewell said with icy unconcern. "You may not have set the fire intentionally, but you are intelligent enough to remember that a large stockpile of magic can prove volatile and, if disturbed, will combust. It was foolish of you to collect magic without authorization, especially while on parole and monitored by every police officer in the area. And it was downright careless to leave the marbles lying around where anyone could disturb them."

"I don't think it was the marbles, Professor," Tristan muttered. He was afraid Drakewell would be angrier than ever if he tried to object. "The fire started upstairs, and the marbles were downstairs."

"Unless you can produce a witness or a security video proving otherwise, I cannot take you at your word, Fairholm," Drakewell snapped. "You have shown me too often that you are not to be trusted. Now, I believe twelve hours of punishment every day for the next three days, and four hours a day for the first week of classes, will prove adequate." He thrust the lantern at Tristan, who took it, surprised. "Get out of here."

Chapter 4: Forgotten Elementals

Since it was growing late, Tristan assumed his punishment would start the following day. He had nothing to do this evening but mope and feel guilty.

Instead of heading back to the Subroom, Tristan found himself tracing the familiar path up to Alldusk's classroom. He wanted to talk to someone who would listen, someone who would weigh the options and choose what to believe without bias. When he knocked at the classroom door, Alldusk answered almost at once. His usually clean face was rough with stubble, and dark circles ringed his eyes.

"Not here to work off punishment, are you?" Alldusk asked with a half-smile.

"Not yet," Tristan said. "Do you really think I burned down my mom's house?"

Alldusk stepped aside and waited for Tristan to slip into the classroom before closing the door with a click.

"I can't peg you, Tristan," he said grimly. He picked up one of the jars they used for collecting magic and began polishing it with a handkerchief, eyeing the glass instead of meeting Tristan's eyes. "You're a good student and an honest person, but sometimes you do things that just seem...out of character. Has Juvie changed you? Or is there more to this than meets the eye?"

Tristan was at a loss for words. Never had anyone put his life so succinctly into words. He had surprised himself the previous year, when he had burned down the entrance to the Lair, and he felt more a criminal the longer he stayed here. Accepting the Map Room's purpose without a fight was criminal in itself.

But what other choice did he have?

Two years ago, he had just been the quiet kid who sat in the back of the room, always turning in his homework in time but inevitably losing participation points. His father had been a mess, and his mother had been unemployed for what felt like forever, so as a rule he never invited anyone to his house.

He had once gotten in a fight with an arrogant rich kid who teased his little brother, and both had gone to the principal's office and nearly been suspended. His mother had been astounded. For the next week she had treated Tristan like a guest in her house.

Maybe there was something dark lurking within Tristan. Or maybe there was simply something wrong with him.

Just then he realized he had been fiddling with an expensive-looking compass on Alldusk's table; he dropped it surreptitiously behind a stack of papers and cleared his throat.

"I don't know, Professor," he mumbled at last. "But I swear I didn't burn my own house down. I *know* the fire started in the kitchen, and the marbles I'd collected were in the basement, right under my bed. Once we were outside, I saw something explode inside the house, something that brought the roof down. That must've been the marbles. You'll probably never believe me, but it's true."

At last Alldusk met his eyes and scrutinized him for a long time. "I don't know, Tristan. I don't know what to believe." He lowered his eyes again. "If you need to work off punishment, though, I'd be happy to help."

All the way back to the Subroom, Tristan questioned himself. Was he a liar and a felon just masquerading as a regular person? Had Juvie twisted him in ways he couldn't even understand yet? If he ever were to leave the Underground Academy, what would he make of himself?

He had no idea.

Maybe he had forgotten how to live an ordinary life.

Staying here, collecting magic and learning as much as he could, Tristan had chosen to do what was easy. He was free here, and better cared for than he had ever been with his parents.

But it was not right.

Would he ever have the strength to choose otherwise?

When he stumbled into the Subroom, dazed and dreading the mistrust of his fellow students, he was met

with such a loud ruckus that he nearly turned and went back the way he had come. Cailyn had cheated at cards, it transpired, and Eli had retaliated so fiercely that the room had descended into a somewhat violent pillow fight.

Nodding at the explanations with a painful smile, Tristan slouched to the corner and hid behind one of the fattest books on their shelf. Leila joined him before long, peering at the title on the spine before sitting cross-legged on the mattress beside his.

“You don’t look happy,” she said.

“Hah.” Tristan dropped the book on his knees and leaned against the rough rock wall. “I just got back from talking to Drakewell. Since when does that make anyone happy?” When Leila continued to give him a questioning look, he said, “Do you actually think I burned down my mom’s house on purpose?”

“No!” Leila said. “You wouldn’t do something like that.”

Tristan kneaded his fist against his forehead. “You’re the only one who thinks so,” he said gloomily. “Drakewell thinks it was the marbles that exploded, but we have tons of marbles lying around the Subroom and nothing’s ever happened. Even Alldusk doesn’t trust me!”

“Quinsley does,” Leila said. “I bet you it was Damian or someone. Once they figure out who actually burned the place down, everyone will forgive you. For now, maybe you shouldn’t worry so much about it.”

“Great idea,” Tristan said sarcastically. “Let me know when you’ve caught the arsonist, okay?”

* * *

Tristan didn’t realize that the other students were on their way back to the Lair until he emerged from Alldusk’s classroom for lunch and only saw Amber and Leila at his usual table.

“Did Eli and Cailyn go with Quinsley?” he asked.

Leila nodded. “I almost went too, but he said it’s nearly fifteen hours of flying.”

At dinnertime, every one of the professors emerged for the first time since Tristan had returned. Not pausing to greet the teachers, Tristan slumped back in his chair, exhausted. He had been recruited to help Gracewright with some gardening halfway through the afternoon, and his clothes were covered with dirt and tendrils of a clever barbed vine that hooked itself into you whenever you weren’t looking.

Brikkens kept checking his watch as the evening grew later and later, and at last Drakewell ordered Gracewright to bring dinner for the few stragglers not on the plane.

Just as Tristan was soaking up the last of his gazpacho soup with a bread roll, Quinsley appeared from the stairway, followed by the remainder of the students. Brikkens stood and applauded, and a few others joined him halfheartedly.

“Did you lose your way?” Drakewell asked Quinsley sharply as the students began depositing their belongings at the edge of the platform and settling around their usual tables. “We expected you two hours ago.”

“As a matter of fact, we did have a bit of trouble finding Zeke,” Quinsley said, giving Drakewell a sour look. “You told me he’d been staying at the shelter after the mudslide. But he was at a friend’s house. His family was at the shelter, and they weren’t quite sure where he was.”

Tristan glanced at Zeke in surprise; Zeke was busy buttering a roll and acting as though he couldn’t hear Quinsley.

Damian kicked Zeke under the table. “What the hell? Did your house get washed away or something?”

“Yeah,” Zeke said with studied nonchalance. “It was raining for two weeks straight, and the whole hillside washed away. Sucks for my parents, but I thought it looked cool.”

Had none of the other students heard about the landslide when it happened? It seemed very unlikely that the same student had sent disasters after both Tristan and Zeke. Someone else had to be out there.

Tristan was torn from his thoughts as Rusty pulled him to his feet and gave him an exuberant hug.

“How’re you doing, huh?”

Tristan gave him a weak smile. “I’m okay. You?”

“I’m awesome! It’s strange to be back, isn’t it?” Rusty was tanner than Leila, and he had filled in his lanky frame over the summer. Tristan couldn’t help feeling a bit resentful that his classmates had been able to properly enjoy their holidays.

Then Hayley nudged Rusty aside to give Tristan a hug as well, and Evvie smiled at him shyly from across the table. Tristan's face went hot, and he self-consciously pressed his hair back over his scars.

"Who is that?" Rusty asked in a loud whisper, pointing his elbow at Natasha.

Natasha overheard him. Pushing her chair back to face the students, she said, "I'm your new Environmental Studies teacher. You can call me Natasha."

Tristan was not alone in expecting more of an introduction, but Natasha turned back to her dinner and accepted a glass of red wine from Quinsley. She was still an unknown entity—though she seemed friendly, and she would certainly have fantastic stories to tell, you could never tell what sort of teacher she would be until she gave her first assignment.

"Well, I'm off to bed," Brikkens said, stifling a huge yawn with his pudgy hand. "Nighty-night, kids. Same schedule as last year, so I'll see you bright and early tomorrow morning."

Before long the rest of the teachers followed him off to bed, leaving the newly-arrived students to wolf down what food remained. Though Tristan could have dropped dead after his three twelve-hour days, he forced himself to stay awake as his friends swapped stories from the summer. They settled into their usual armchairs and couches around the long-extinct fire, Cailyn wrapped in a blanket and Eli sipping at a mug of hot chocolate, while each of them took turns prying information from one another.

"What did you guys do?" Rusty asked Leila. "I bet you've been studying hard, right? You're probably way better than us now."

"We haven't touched magic once," Leila said. "Well, I've been trying to learn some of those cooking spells with Quinsley, but that's about all. Nothing useful. Finley might have learned a bit, though. Drakewell seems to have taken him on as some sort of secretary."

"He'll get tons of crap about that," Eli said gleefully.

"What about you, Rusty? You look like you've been out building houses or something," Leila said.

Rusty grinned and flexed his arms. "Yup! Actually, it was fences, not houses. I went back to the detention center first, just 'cause, and they've got a new rehab program that's got kids building stuff for charity. It was fun!"

"Why didn't you stay here?" Tristan asked. He would have died rather than return to his detention center.

Rusty shrugged. "I thought my family would wanna see me. Turns out they didn't."

When Leila gave him a sympathetic frown, he just shrugged again.

"I'm not worried. I'm back here now, aren't I?"

* * *

Classes began as usual the following morning. Though Tristan watched Alldusk carefully, the professor treated him as before, without betraying even a hint of mistrust. Had he changed his mind? Alldusk was as adept at hiding his thoughts as Tristan.

No one was truly paying attention until after lunch, when they filed down to Merridy's old classroom for their Environmental Studies class. By the time Natasha appeared, the whole class was sitting up straighter than usual, notebooks and textbooks at the ready.

"Good afternoon, class." Natasha wore a yellow blouse, striking against her dark brown skin, and a broad smile. "You look exhausted. Maybe we can hold lessons in the meadow sometimes; we don't get nearly enough sunlight living down here."

A few of the students glanced at one another. So far, so good.

"I bet that's why Alldusk looks like a vampire," Eli said.

"And why Drakewell's such an old slug," Zeke added.

Natasha clicked her tongue in disapproval. "I'm trying to persuade your headmaster to lighten up a bit. It would help if you didn't give him such a hard time."

Out of the corner of his eye, Tristan saw Leila roll her eyes.

"Now, to business," Natasha said. "Just as before, this class will focus on natural disasters. However, I expect the subject will interest you a great deal more than it did last year." Her expression abruptly grew serious. "Before we begin, I want to make one thing very clear. I will not shelter you. You'll be learning to cause mayhem and

destruction and death. Our work isn't pretty, and I'm not going to pretend it is. I've been monitoring disasters for about twenty years now, and I know exactly what death looks like, in a hundred different forms. It's horrifying. But you need to know what it looks like—you need to *understand* what you're really doing."

Tristan went very still. Ugly memories were flashing through his mind. The only way he could accept what they were doing was to pretend it wasn't true, to act as though the academy was somehow not a part of the real world. He didn't want to hear this.

Natasha paced to Merridy's old desk and folded her arms, towering over the class. "You must also understand *why* we do this. Your teachers are not monsters. They are intelligent, kind, decent people. They just see the world how it truly is.

"We humans are terribly arrogant. We've spent millennia convincing ourselves that we're somehow better than every other form of life on earth. We are the supreme race. God chose us to rule. No other creature can think or feel or love the way we do.

"This is a *lie!*" She slammed her fist on the table.

Hayley gave a little squeak of surprise. When Tristan glanced over at her, he noticed that Cailyn was sitting straighter than ever, her eyes gleaming.

"We have a responsibility to even out the balance just a little. Animals cannot speak for themselves; nor can trees or rivers or mountains. But humans depend on nature, and they will remember it before the end. We want to be sure it's not too late."

When Natasha returned to her chair, she left a buzzing silence in the room. Tristan could tell from the sideways glances that everyone had a thousand questions to ask.

"Of course Drakewell's the right person to decide who gets to die," Zeke said sarcastically. "He's such a reasonable person. Doesn't ever yell or punish people or—"

"The headmaster doesn't make these decisions alone," Natasha said briskly. "The teachers work together, weighing every disaster carefully and spreading the impacts through different areas of the world. And, of course, people such as myself help mitigate the effects of large disasters soon after they hit."

Tristan remembered something Quinsley had said last year—*this school is a democracy*. He wasn't sure whether to be frightened or reassured by that fact.

There were no more complaints after that. Natasha unfurled an enormous map of the world and taped it to the front wall of the classroom. She spent the rest of the lesson drawing arrows to the places she'd visited since leaving the academy, describing each disaster she'd witnessed—vast tsunamis, raging floods, wildfires, hurricanes, and earthquakes. The stories were fascinating.

For homework, she told each of them to come up with one place in the world that they had always wanted to see. Tristan immediately suspected she would ask them to unleash a disaster on that place, and resolved to tell her he had always cherished a dream of visiting Antarctica.

The students were unusually quiet when they filed out of the classroom at the end of the hour. Cailyn nudged Hayley and whispered something in her ear, but apart from that the hall was silent. Tristan and Leila didn't speak until they were sitting at the wood table in the Subroom.

"What did you think of her?" Tristan asked, elbows on the table. Around them, the others were shuffling around as they started on homework.

Leila folded her arms. "She's very...*intense*."

"I thought I was gonna love her," Rusty said with a frown, pausing beside Tristan's chair. "But it's like she doesn't care that lots of people are getting killed."

"I think she cares," Tristan said, staring at Cailyn's painting. "More than the teachers here, even. She's the one cleaning up their messes. I think she's braver than them." Until he said that, Tristan hadn't realized that he admired Natasha. It was true, though—she was much braver than Drakewell or Gracewright or even Alldusk.

* * *

Delair surprised them by showing up for his own Elementals class the following day. "Unfortunately, I have something important to tell you. Otherwise I would be continuing my own work, which, regrettably, is far more

useful than teaching you the vagaries of elemental magic.” His lips twitched. “Now that you know about the Map Room and we no longer have to worry about an attack from within, I can explain something that probably did not mean anything to you before. So far, you’ve been collecting nothing but fire magic. Those are the gold orbs, and as you know from Professor Alldusk’s class, they come from burning things.”

Delair lifted one of the sturdy buckets Tristan recognized from his mine onto the desk. Reaching inside, he held up a fistful of gold marbles. “As you know, fire magic may be used only for influencing processes that already happen in nature. The same is true of earth magic.” He held up a second handful of marbles, this one emerald-green. “Occasionally, I have been able to collect earth magic from smashing rocks in the mine. However, it seems that only certain rocks give off vapor when broken.”

Dropping the green marbles back into the bucket, Delair reached for two more marbles and held them between a finger and thumb of each hand. One was deep blue, the other shimmering silver.

“Air and water,” Delair said quietly. His eyes flickered briefly to Amber. “We found these marbles hidden beneath the Map Room. We have long since lost the art of producing these types of magic. However, I suspect that air and water magic would be able to manipulate things in unnatural ways.”

He spun the marbles in one hand, where they glinted in the lamplight. Closing his hands around the marbles, he lowered them carefully back into the bucket.

“This year we will move beyond what we know. Together we will experiment with earth, air, and water, seeking a reliable way to collect these elusive vapors. You see, Drakewell suspects that all four elementals working together are necessary for the Map Room to function.”

Tristan scratched at the surface of his desk, thinking hard. Who had collected the air and water magic in the first place?

“I know this will come as a complete surprise, but I have to let you out early today.” Delair winked at the class. “I must return to the mine. I believe I’ve made progress towards a reliable method of collecting earth magic. We have managed this before, but mainly as a result of large and messy disasters. If we can perfect the small-scale collection of green marbles, maybe we can do the same with the blue and silver.

“Homework—come up with a theory on the collection of each type of magic. I don’t care how wild it is; points for the most creative theories. We professors have been wracking our brains for years without success. Maybe we need some fresh ideas around here. Now off with you.”

Delair dismissed the class with a wave of his hand and stumped back towards his mine tunnel, brushing dust off his leather apron.

Tristan got slowly to his feet, watching Amber. She sat at the back of the classroom, shuffling her notes together, expression hidden behind her white hair. Once the other students had filed out, talking excitedly, Tristan joined Amber at the back. Only when the babble of discussion had faded down the hall did Amber slide her books slowly into her bag.

“You made those two marbles, didn’t you?” Tristan said. He didn’t need to hear her answer. “You’ve known all along how to use all four types of magic.”

Amber chewed on her lip. “Last year I told you how magic is...different for me. Water and air are more natural than fire, to me at least.” She stood and followed him from the classroom, head hung.

“Why didn’t Delair say you made the marbles for him? Does he know?”

They had reached the stairs leading to the second floor. Amber paused and traced a shape in the marble wall, probably one of the glowing Delairium pictures that Tristan could only make out in the dark.

“I didn’t tell him,” she said at last. “I pretended I had found the marbles in an old drawer, hidden away and forgotten. Air and water magic are dangerous. They can play tricks on your mind, and they can change the very nature of things. Perhaps they were forgotten on purpose. Perhaps we are not meant to know.”

Tristan was silent until they turned down the tunnel towards the Subroom. He was surprised that Amber trusted him enough to admit the truth to him, especially after how little faith the others had in him.

“Someday you’ll have to tell me how you know all of this,” he said. “How you’re so good at magic and everything, without anyone teaching you.”

Amber’s reply drifted to him, bodiless in the darkness. “I might tell you once you tell me where you got those scars.”

Tristan nodded to himself. Now that Amber knew Drakewell had played a role in Tristan's arrest, he might just find the courage to tell her the full story someday. He would do anything to ease the guilt that still gnawed at him.

* * *

That evening, everyone except Amber sat around the table in the Subroom and began brainstorming theories for collecting air, water, and earth magic. Delair had not provided them enough information to work from, such as whether *all* magic was founded on destruction, or if that was unique to fire magic, so they were really just guessing.

Rusty suggested that boiling water should release magic, but Leila pointed out that the water hadn't been destroyed, merely relocated. Eli came up with the interesting notion that earth magic might only come from destroying rocks that had structure that was lost once broken, such as geodes and crystals. And Hayley asked if perhaps decaying radioactive elements might not produce a different magic of their own.

Everyone agreed that Trey's theory sounded most accurate—burning an object changed it *chemically*, not just *physically*. To collect air or water magic, you would have to change the elements into something else. Simply evaporating water would not suffice. Likewise, breaking a rock would do nothing, but you could theoretically collect vapors from a lava flow, provided you didn't boil yourself in the process.

Of course, Cailyn pointed out that this meant you should be able to collect some sort of gooey magic from boiling eggs; Trey admitted grudgingly that his theory didn't hold up well to scrutiny.

In class the next day, Delair was delighted with their ideas. Tristan suspected he had already come up with most of the same ones himself, though he made a show of being impressed. For the last ten minutes, he paired them up and asked them to test some of the less farfetched theories, including the one that involved smashing geodes. No one succeeded, but that did not appear to discourage Delair. He instructed them to spend their free time trying out whichever theories they could test without too much danger—he expressly forbid anyone from trying to melt rock—and sent them on their way with a handful of rocks apiece.

By the end of the week, Tristan was beginning to wonder if the whole arson incident would just blow over if he neglected to mention it. The professors were no longer giving him suspicious sidelong glances—aside from Drakewell, who had never done anything but—and the students were too busy speculating about when they might visit the Map Room for the first time to care what Tristan might or might not have done.

* * *

On Friday, Drakewell was waiting in Delair's classroom at the start of third period.

"I expect you are thrilled to see me," he said dryly. "Take a lantern on your way out, and stay close to me. Two hours' punishment to anyone who gets lost."

Tristan bent to grab a lantern from the metal pail as he followed Eli and Trey into Delair's mine tunnel. A stream of whispering dogged him, the students all fully aware of what was about to transpire. For a while they followed a bobbing trail of lanterns, feet shuffling noisily along the stone. As they descended farther into the mine, the whispering died out, replaced by a silence swollen with anticipation.

When they stopped before the Map Room, Leila gave a yelp. "That's my foot, you idiot!"

"Exactly where I thought it would be," Zeke said from behind her.

Leila turned and sank a fist into Zeke's stomach.

"Oof!" he grunted. "Quit it, will you? I'm fragile."

Drakewell turned, one hand on the door. "If you are not willing to take this seriously, you can turn around and return to Osric's classroom," he snapped. "An hour of punishment each, Swanson, Elwood! Would you like more?"

"No," Leila and Zeke said together.

Lantern held aloft, Drakewell pushed open the door and waited for the students to spill into the dark chamber beyond. "For those of you who have never been down here, this is the Map Room. It is the heart of the academy, and the core of our work here."

At that, he touched the nearest orb and sent light blossoming around the room. Hayley gasped and stepped back, and Trey's eyes went so wide his eyebrows disappeared beneath his hair. Drakewell led the way up to the edge of the map, which gleamed in the light, each continent cut from a different color of stone. When the students had all gathered around Drakewell, he fingered his black hourglass before reaching for the same metal disc he had shown Tristan and Amber the previous week.

"Look there," he said, pointing at one of the round stone tables to their left. Tristan wondered whether Drakewell had six metal discs, one for each of the tables encircling the room. For something medium-sized, like a volcano, would Drakewell use the tables or the globe as a whole?

As before, the table began to ripple as soon as Drakewell placed the disc on the globe, lumps of stone thrust upwards as though the entire surface was boiling. This time the table resolved into a tableau of mountains descending to a rocky coastline, miniature trees hugging the mountainsides.

"Oh my god, it's the ocean!" Cailyn said. "How did you do that?" She leaned over the stone replica, peering at the cliffs as though she might see pin-sized birds nesting in its crannies.

"Damn," Zeke said, pushing Cailyn out of the way so he could get a closer look. "Does it show buildings, too?"

In response, Drakewell shifted the disc several inches south. The table began to bulge again, and this time a row of houses bubbled up beside the water.

"Professor?" Tristan said. "What were you repairing all summer? I mean, that map isn't really *there*, is it? What did Professor Merridy smash when she wrecked this place?"

Drakewell let out a low breath and pried the metal disc from the globe. "Unfortunately, the table maps did exist, at least to a certain extent. The destruction was surprisingly thorough." Rotating the globe backwards with the tips of his fingers, he placed the disc into the middle of Chile, which Tristan knew was dominated by a spine of mountains.

Nothing happened.

"What's wrong?" Rusty leaned forward, squinting at the table.

"We have not finished reconstructing the world," Drakewell said heavily. "The greater parts of North America and Europe are intact, along with the most heavily populated areas in Asia, but it will take us at least another year to finish filling in the remaining continents."

"How do you make disasters, then?" Damian asked, stalking forward and peering at the globe. "Do you use the globe or the table?"

"Both," Drakewell said. "Sometimes together. Small-scale manipulations are obviously better suited to the tables, while hurricanes and earthquakes require the full globe."

"Professor, when you cause a tsunami, do you specifically design it to be a tsunami, or is it merely the unintended aftereffect of an earthquake?" Finley asked, scratching at his elbow.

"Both have occurred," Drakewell said. "The most skilled magicians take care to anticipate all possible consequences of an event. However, the man who controlled this globe before I inherited the role was...occasionally known to be careless." His lip curled.

"Show us something," Damian demanded.

Drakewell closed his eyes. "This room is not a toy. However...yes. Before long you will see something small. Something akin to the challenges Darla arranged for her second test."

"You mean you set that great awful bear on us?" Hayley asked indignantly.

Tristan saw Rusty grinning; no one had believed Rusty's story when he'd first returned from Merridy's test the year before.

"And the cave-in, and the avalanche, and those blizzards?" Leila asked.

Finally Drakewell opened his eyes. "Of course. Disasters of that magnitude are simple and contained, so they do not require much magic or planning. However, we were not responsible for sending a bear your direction, Christiansen. That was just bad luck."

Rusty frowned, looking disappointed.

"How does it work, then?" Leila asked.

Scowling, Eli kicked a pebble across the floor. He was the only one who did not look curious in the slightest.

Drakewell reached in the pocket of his black coat and withdrew what looked like a thick, hollow glass pen. The tip was metallic and split in two, just like an old-fashioned fountain pen, and inside the tube Tristan could see four marbles—green, gold, silver, and blue.

“Disasters are created through a series of motions designed as triggers.” Drakewell turned the pen over to give the class a closer look and then grasped it as though to write. “Spirals are for tornados, jagged lines for earthquake fault-lines, and so on.” As he spoke, he traced a series of brisk shapes in the air. “Ordinarily, fire and earth magic are used to manipulate any natural processes, while air and water are reserved for subtler enchantments. When channeling magic through this globe, however, each type of disaster requires the corresponding variety of power. Earthquakes call upon earth magic, tornados on air, volcanos on fire, and hurricanes on both air and water.”

“Are you saying you can ruin a whole country with just a *fraction of a marble?*” Eli’s eyebrows had drawn together dangerously.

“Of course not,” Drakewell said coldly. It sounded as though he had barely refrained from adding, *an hour of punishment for stupidity*. “Disasters require a huge amount of magical force. This is merely a conduit. Why else did you think you were collecting so many marbles in your chemistry class?”

From where she stood at the back of the class, Amber walked two fingers along the surface of the globe until the continents had dipped southwards again. She stood directly before Canada, eyeing the area near the Lair. Tristan crossed to her side, training his eyes on nothing at all, in search of the elusive auras.

“You can see them, can’t you?” he muttered.

Amber nodded. “There is one here, see? Whoever it is, they are hundreds of miles from civilization.”

“What was that?” Drakewell said brusquely. “Have you spotted someone?”

Amber bit her lip and looked at the floor.

Drakewell joined them before Canada, looming over Tristan in an intimidating way until Tristan ducked out of the way. “I see.” He was looking at the exact point where Amber had seen the aura, though Tristan could not discern any irregularity. “There is a person here,” he explained for the benefit of the class. “Someone who ought not to be. Watch closely.”

Drakewell knelt and retrieved the disc from Chile. Repositioning it on the section of mountains that Amber had discovered, he swept over to the round table once more. Raising the glass fountain pen, Drakewell drew a complicated design onto the stone mountainside on the table, his quill tip rasping against the granite.

From the silence, everyone in the room was holding their breath.

Nothing happened.

After a moment, Drakewell slipped the pen back into his pocket, grimly satisfied. “There. That solves that little problem.”

Though he could see nothing, Tristan knew the aura had winked out. Somewhere in the mountains, an innocent climber had met his doom.

Chapter 5: The Mountaineer

A shiver ran through Tristan, and he hugged his arms across his chest. Did the others know what had just transpired? From their wary, shifting expressions, he assumed they did not.

Rusty was still staring at the mountainside in confusion, and he continued to stare even after Drakewell removed the metal disc and the table resumed its original shape.

“What happened?” asked hulking Ryan Riggs, his thick brows drawn together with uncertainty. Damian shot him a cold look.

“How do you know it worked, Professor?” Cailyn asked softly.

Drakewell turned and frowned at her. “When you use the conduit, you can feel the magic. It is similar to the feel of working with the gold marbles alone—the glass vial heats up and becomes almost weightless until the spell has run its course.”

“The—the person is gone, then,” Hayley said blankly.

Eli had gone ashen, and Zeke’s face was red with anger. No one spoke. After a pause, Drakewell returned the globe to its usual upright position and turned back to the tunnels. The students were quiet as they trailed behind Drakewell; even their footfalls were cautious. At the bunkroom hallway, Evvie brushed past Tristan and hurried for the Subroom, head down. Tristan wanted to follow her, but she wouldn’t want his company just now.

The rest of them traipsed up to the ballroom in a tight group, Drakewell vanishing into his office along the way.

“That wasn’t right,” Trey said in a low voice, glancing at Eli, whose expression was murderous.

Damian, Zeke, Cassidy, Stacy, and Ryan all pulled chairs around Damian’s table, putting their heads together in a whispered conference. Finley sat by himself at his usual table, staring at nothing.

“That’s supposed to be us someday,” Tristan said quietly to Amber. “I can’t do it. I’d shoot myself before I killed someone like that.”

“Did you see how that table grew?” Rusty whispered excitedly. “It was awesome! Do you think we could find my house?”

“I’m sure we could,” Leila said sharply. She stalked to their usual table and sat, eyeing their lunch as though it offended her. “Did that not *bother* you, Rusty?”

“What do you mean?”

Leila sighed. “The mountaineer. Drakewell just murdered him, right in front of us.”

Rusty blanched. “I didn’t realize that’s what he meant. Why’d he do that?”

“Because it was a threat,” Tristan said icily. “And I thought you were interested in the Map Room, Leila.” After he and Amber had gone down with Drakewell at the end of summer, she had interrogated him on every detail of the place.

“I guess,” she said. “But did you see the way Drakewell used it? He didn’t care! Is that what you want? To become as hollow as he is? Because that’s what Drakewell is going to do, Triss. He’ll harden you until you don’t know yourself any longer.”

“I’m not like that,” Tristan whispered. “I—I killed someone before, in a car accident, and I still haven’t forgiven myself.” He mumbled a curse as he felt his eyes stinging. Pouring himself a glass of water, he turned his full attention to choosing the most colorful rolls from the platter of sushi that took up most of their table.

Leila squeezed his knee under the table. “That’s where you got those scars?” she whispered.

Tristan swallowed and did not answer.

At the teachers’ table, Quinsley rose and distributed small platters of pickled ginger and wasabi. “You kids look a bit unsettled,” he remarked, pausing by Tristan’s table. “First proper trip to the Map Room, right? Amazing place, that is.” His tone was definitely sarcastic.

“Do you get to help decide about the disasters?” Leila asked, poking at a sushi roll.

“Theoretically,” Quinsley said. “When the other teachers remember, anyway.”

“Oh.”

Quinsley moved on, and Leila tugged the strip of seaweed until her sushi roll fell apart. Tristan watched her out of the corner of his eye, trying to guess what she was thinking.

“This place is messed up,” Rusty said.

“Aren’t you upset?” Leila asked dully.

“Course I’m upset! But what’re we supposed to do about it? I’m gonna go on pretending everything is fine until you guys come up with a better idea.”

Rusty picked morosely at his food, and Tristan dunked a sushi roll in soy sauce until every grain of rice was stained brown.

Despite his repulsion at Drakewell, Tristan felt an odd disconnect with what had just happened. Drakewell had stood over a rock table and moved a quill. Nothing more. It was even further removed from reality than most video games—you didn’t see the violence or the blood. On the map, the world had been sequestered into a set of tidy circles, this one peppered with houses, that one a barren expanse of farmland. You couldn’t see what inhabited the miniature sets. Tristan wondered if whoever had designed the map had done that on purpose—reduced humans and animals to faint glowing dots, lest the magicians who worked the Map Room grow too invested in preserving life and forget their mission.

* * *

For the first time that year, Hayley lit the enchanted fireplace in the Subroom. The temperature had dropped as the sun set that evening, and Gracewright told them grimly that a solid couple weeks of rain were on the horizon.

At the table, Hayley, Cailyn, Eli, and Trey were unusually focused on writing an essay for Grindlethorn, working from Trey’s impeccable notes. Leila sank into an armchair to read one of the books from their shelf, while Rusty smashed rock after rock with a precise little mallet he had borrowed from Delair. It was nearly midnight before Tristan noticed that Evvie was still missing.

Was she just upset about what Drakewell had done, or was she up to something? Pretending he was off to take a shower, Tristan slipped through the Prasadimum barrier and into the dark tunnel, where he set a marble to track Evvie with his favorite Intralocation spell. To his surprise, the marble led him right instead of left, taking him deep into the tunnel in a direction he had never ventured. But he had barely passed around a bend, stepping carefully in case the ground decided to drop away suddenly, when he heard a sniffing sound from ahead.

“Evvie?” he called softly.

She gave a small yelp. “What are you doing here?” She sounded congested, as though she had been crying.

Still completely blind in the darkness, Tristan leaned against the tunnel wall and slid down until he was sitting near Evvie. “I didn’t know where you’d gone. I was worried.”

Evvie sniffed again. “Sorry. I didn’t think anyone would worry about me.”

“What’s wrong?” Tristan asked gently. “Apart from everything, I mean. It was messed up, what Drakewell did back there.”

Evvie was silent for a long time. At last she said in a small voice, “My father was a mountaineer. He fell into a crevasse on a glacier and died when I was four.” She made a sound like a quiet whimper. “That person Drakewell just killed could have been someone like my father. Someone with a family, a family that’s going to search for them for years until there isn’t even the smallest hope left.” Her voice grew muffled. “Life is already miserable. Why do we have to make it even worse?”

Cautiously, Tristan shuffled closer and reached out to put an arm around Evvie’s shoulders. She leaned against him and pillowed her head on his shoulder, thin body shaking. She was cold, but the weight of her body against his was enough to warm Tristan through.

“Why did they bring you here?” Tristan asked sadly. “You’re not a criminal. Why didn’t they just leave you alone?”

“No idea,” Evvie said dully.

“Do you want to go back?”

Tristan felt her shrug. “It’s not always great, living with a foster family, but it’s not like this.”

He knew what she meant. Back at home, they did not have to face the daily weight of guilt for generations of disasters. But he still couldn’t decide whether he was better off knowing the truth, or if he wanted to return to ignorance. A conviction was beginning to seep into him, a certainty that the Map Room under his and Amber’s guidance would be nothing like it was now. Maybe they were being given this power so they could make something good of it for once.

* * *

The following morning, Tristan was one of the first people up for breakfast. Alldusk was the only one in the ballroom, reading a week-old newspaper that Quinsley must have picked up on his food run, and Tristan sidled up to him with some misgivings.

“Professor?” he asked.

Alldusk set the paper aside and gave Tristan a friendly, quizzical look.

“Why is Evvie here? She hates it, living with a bunch of criminals. Why did you have to do that to her?”

Alldusk turned his chair to face Tristan. “You’re lucky we’re alone here. This is not a conversation we ought to be having, as it reflects badly on several of our number.”

Tristan pressed his lips together and said nothing.

After a long pause, Alldusk sighed and folded his arms. “Drakewell is irrational at times, and often does not take our decisions into account. He was a young criminal just like the rest of us when he started out, and as he grew less and less reasonable, we began to wonder if his job needed a subtler hand. When we recruited your class, most of us—Drakewell didn’t agree, but this time we outvoted him—thought that we should find an innocent teenager to make the most sensitive decisions in the Map Room. We chose Evangeline because she had a strong potential for magic and weak family ties.”

“But Drakewell is training me and Amber,” Tristan said, frowning. “Is he going to change his mind at the last minute?”

“No, I’m afraid not,” Alldusk said. “Evangeline has not lived up to her potential for magic. It happens often enough that we recruit a student who never quite develops an understanding for magic, and when it does, that student is trained to do other hands-on work for us. So we’ve resigned ourselves to leaving another delinquent in charge of the Map Room.”

“Are we really that bad?” Tristan asked, scowling.

Alldusk chuckled. “I question your judgment at times, Tristan, but I’m sure you’ll make a good headmaster someday.”

“Thank you, Professor.” Tristan retreated to his usual table, not sure whether he should be flattered or frightened by this assessment.

As Quinsley emerged from the kitchen with a steaming plate of omelets, Tristan asked, “And Professor Merridy? Where is she?”

Alldusk clasped his hands together, his expression frozen. “I believe she’s staying with her sister in Minnesota. I won’t bother her again.”

“Sorry.” Tristan turned his attention to the plate of omelets, regretting his question. He had not wanted to upset Alldusk.

The students began trickling into the ballroom before long, helping themselves to coffee and hot chocolate and as many omelets as they could eat. Quinsley had stuffed these full of onions and smoked cheddar, which oozed between Tristan’s teeth. As Evvie slipped into her usual seat, Tristan caught her eye; she blushed and ducked her head to her plate. Tristan watched her for a moment, feeling sorry for her yet oddly pleased with himself.

It was a lazy Saturday, and after Gracewright reappeared from her morning rounds in the greenhouse with her clothes soaking and plastered to her brittle frame, no one was eager to wander off and get caught in the storm. Most of the students brought their homework up to the ballroom, where they checked one another’s work and

discussed the answers. Amber was the only student who decided to brave the rain upstairs, and she did not return for hours.

Shortly before noon, Tristan grew restless and fed up with Natasha's homework. They were trying to get their heads around GIS maps of earthquakes, and she had asked them to calculate the impact of an earthquake at various points based on the force at the epicenter. It was not entirely reliable, she told them, but it was an essential part of creating a disaster—calculating all possible outcomes.

With a muttered, "See you in a bit," Tristan abandoned his schoolbooks and made for the Subroom. He had a niggling suspicion that something was wrong, though he could not place it. He heard raised voices as he passed Drakewell's office—Natasha and Drakewell, undoubtedly, as she was the only one who dared stand up to him—and surmised the Map Room was unsupervised.

Without entirely knowing why, Tristan grabbed one of the lanterns that still sat at the entrance to Delair's mine tunnel and followed the familiar path down towards the Map Room. It was unlocked this time, which did not surprise Tristan; lacking the knowledge of how to work the globe, the most damage the students could do was graffiti the walls. He closed the door carefully behind him and crossed to the globe, leaving the room in darkness.

Holding the lantern aloft, he turned the globe towards his feet until he found the outline of North America. The states and countries and provinces were outlined thinly in silver, so he was easily able to find Minnesota. Until he stepped right to stand directly before the state, Tristan hadn't realized why he had come.

He wanted to find Merridy.

Of course, he knew how foolish the idea was. Minnesota probably had a population of several million, and it would take hours of moving the metal disc from one square centimeter of the globe to the next, hunting in vain for a glowing dot that stood out from the rest. And what if Merridy was in a city? He had no hope whatsoever of finding her packed within a dense mass of humanity.

Still, he started with the upper left corner of the state—black and lifeless at this scale—and carefully secured in place the metal disc that Drakewell had left on one of the round tables. It snapped into place like a magnet, and Tristan could almost feel the energy coursing through the globe as the table began to remold itself.

The land was mostly flat, so the only relief came from a row of tall trees forming a border between two fields and a lone farmhouse, home to one of the faintest auras Tristan had ever seen. Maybe it had long since been abandoned, and belonged to a stray cat or a scraggly dog now.

He shifted the disc over, this time waiting to see what the table would reveal before moving away from the globe. When this section was revealed as more of the same farmland, he shifted the disc again, and again.

Soon he stumbled across the first genuine town. The center was small, with a cluster of buildings that mostly looked like stores, but the houses spread for several disc-lengths across the globe. For a moment Tristan thought he saw an especially bright aura in the street, but as he watched, heart pounding, it separated and became two distinct glowing dots.

Hope flagging just a bit, he continued along the state, inch by careful inch. Comparing the auras, he could easily see how some differed from others. When he found a cluster of nearly-invisible auras enclosed by a fence so minuscule it could have been made from fishing wire, he assumed the auras belonged to chickens or some other farmyard animal. And even among crowds of people, he could see that some auras resembled those of the chickens, while others shone just a bit brighter than their fellows. Still, none stood out enough to indicate someone with magical talent.

He had nearly reached the far southern end of the state when the lights flared on. Tristan pressed his back against the globe, terrified, and turned to see Drakewell standing in the doorway.

"What are you doing, Fairholm?" Drakewell asked tiredly.

Tristan hung his head. "I was just looking for someone, Professor. I'm sorry. I won't do it again."

Drakewell heaved a sigh. "Do you have any idea how futile that is? You could spend your entire life searching this globe for someone you have lost. It is enough to drive oneself mad." Holding the door open, Drakewell stepped to the side. "Please leave. I have work to do."

"Sorry, Professor," Tristan said again. Still expecting Drakewell to stop him or give him ten hours of punishment, he ducked through the doorway and into the empty tunnel. He didn't let out his breath until the

lights from the Map Room had faded behind him.

It was only when he reached the deserted Subroom that he realized that Drakewell sounded as though he spoke from experience.

Who had he spent years searching for in vain?

* * *

Though Tristan fully intended to give the Map Room a wide berth from then on, his thoughts kept returning to Merridy and the aura he could not find. Had he missed it? He didn't know how profound the difference between a magical and a non-magical aura would appear, so he could very well have spotted Merridy's aura and failed to recognize it.

Yet he was not satisfied.

Outside, the rain persisted. On Wednesday, Gracewright borrowed Brikkens' classroom after discovering no one could hear her over the hammering of water on the greenhouse glass. Tristan wondered how much rain it would take before water started leaking down the stairs and into the Lair.

On Thursday, Tristan's mind was still spinning with answers from Grindlethorn's pop quiz on burn treatment when he took his seat in Delair's classroom, so at first he didn't realize Delair was standing at the back, holding a whispered conference with Amber. When the professor straightened, the students went silent.

"Thank god for the rain," Delair said, beaming at the class. "I believe I'm close to a breakthrough!"

Damian groaned. "Can't you make it stop?"

"No magician would be foolish enough to waste their magical energy playing around with the weather," Delair said. "If you wanted a week of sun, we'd have to expend a week's worth of magic to divert or dissipate the clouds."

"Some nice sunshine would be better than whatever happened to that poor mountaineer," Eli said sadly.

Delair gave him a confused look. "Ah, but this abysmal weather has given me an excellent chance to study the subtleties of water magic." He certainly looked as though he'd been studying water—his apron and coat were damp and caked with mud, and his white mustache drooped. "You see, I believe we have been working at this from entirely the wrong direction. We thought that the collection of magic required destruction alone—which, in the case of water, would most likely mean evaporation. However, there is more to water than the molecules it is made of. Water is *form* as well—fluid, versatile, ever-changing.

"And?" Leila prompted.

"If you merge destruction and form," Delair said, "you end up with a harvestable vapor."

Tristan doodled absently on his notebook, wondering if he should return to the Map Room after all. He was beginning to suspect that Merridy was not in Minnesota after all; he had an awful feeling she was hiding out somewhere in the forest nearby, waiting to target the academy as soon as it proved vulnerable. She knew all of its secrets—she would know what defensive systems they had in place, if any, and she knew the exact location of the school. If she wanted to stop the professors from passing on their knowledge, what better way than to attack the students over summer, while they were exposed and entirely unsupervised?

It was too much of a coincidence to assume Tristan's and Zeke's houses had both been destroyed entirely by accident within a week of one another.

When Amber spoke from the back of the room, Tristan's attention returned abruptly to class. "Rain is a very temperamental form of water," she said thoughtfully. "It may not respond well to collection."

Tristan had trouble concentrating on the rest of the lesson. When the hour was over, Delair held Amber back to speak with her—he was frowning, his good spirits gone, and Amber looked morose.

Wishing he could stay to eavesdrop, Tristan sidled down the hallway as slowly as he could, pausing to rearrange his books at the foot of the stairs. Leila had run back to the Subroom to fetch a new pencil, so Tristan stopped altogether on the third stair up, waiting for Amber.

She gave a start as she came around the corner not a minute later.

"You okay?" Tristan asked. Her eyes were wider than usual, and she was clutching her books defensively to her chest.

“Delair is angry,” she said in a very small voice. “He knows I am withholding information. He begged me to help point him in the right direction.”

“And you refused?”

Amber nodded, looking at her feet.

“I think you’ve done the right thing,” Tristan said. “If the teachers want more power, they should figure out how to get it for themselves.”

“Perhaps,” Amber said. Slowly she started up the stairs, letting her bag fall to her side. “But maybe they should not search for that power at all. It is more dangerous than they realize. Air magic especially. People’s minds are very fragile.”

As they paused in the hallway, Tristan said, “I want to go to the Map Room tonight. I have to find Merridy. Do you want to come?”

“You think she started the fire at your house,” Amber said. It was not a question. “I would be glad to help.”

Tristan gave her a grim smile. He had a feeling she would be more successful than him.

* * *

When he turned to leave the Subroom that evening, Leila caught up with him in the tunnel and grabbed his arm. Tristan jumped and nearly elbowed her in surprise.

“Don’t do that!” he said.

“Humph.” Leila grabbed his arm again, this time to find him in the darkness. “Where do you keep disappearing off to? I feel like you’re planning something behind my back, and I don’t like it.”

“It has nothing to do with Evvie, if that’s what you’re worried about,” Tristan said.

Leila sighed. “You’ve been really quiet lately. Is it because you still think the teachers blame you for that fire?”

Tristan started down the tunnel again, one hand brushing against the rough wall, the other arm dragging Leila behind him. “Not exactly,” he said. He hadn’t realized how distant he had been acting until just then. After Drakewell had taken him and Amber into the Map Room to see the auras, he had felt disconnected from the rest of the students, almost tainted. “I don’t want to get you mixed up in this. I’m the one who Drakewell’s training, and he expects me and Amber to kill people without thinking about what we’re doing. Maybe I’ll be as bitter as Drakewell in a couple years. You’re better off leaving me alone.”

“You’ll definitely turn into Drakewell if you act like that!” Leila said, turning into the marble hallway. Her expression had lightened a bit. “But where are you sneaking off to?”

Tristan shook his head. “Amber and I were planning to go down to the Map Room and search for Merridy. Her aura should show up brighter than the rest of the auras on the globe, so we should be able to recognize her. I’m worried she’s hiding out in the woods near here and trying to sabotage us.”

“I’ll refrain from calling you paranoid,” Leila said skeptically. “Can I come?”

“As long as you don’t mind getting in trouble if we’re caught.”

“Do you really think I care about that?” Leila grinned. “Come on. It’s been too long since we’ve done something against the rules.”

Just at the top of the stairs, they ran into Rusty, who was hurrying back from the ballroom with the air of someone who didn’t want to get caught.

“What are *you* doing?” Leila asked in surprise.

“Nothing,” he said quickly. “Just—just talking to Quinsley.”

Leila raised an eyebrow. “Since when do you hang out with Quinsley?”

He shuffled from one foot to the other. “I was just asking him something.”

“Can’t you quiz him about it later?” Tristan asked Leila, though he was curious as well. He didn’t want to keep Amber waiting too long.

“Fine.” She gave Rusty a sharp look. “I don’t trust you.”

He shrugged and hurried off before Leila had the chance to interrogate him any further.

“What do you think he’s doing?”

Tristan shook his head. “I have no idea. But I doubt it’s anything bad.”

“Yeah, I don’t think Rusty’s capable of that.”

Amber was waiting outside Delair’s mine, hands clasped behind her back. She gave Tristan a small smile when he greeted her, and shot a questioning look at Leila.

“Leila might be able to help,” Tristan said. “We’ll see if she can spot the auras too.”

Amber nodded. Without taking a lantern, she led the way into the tunnel. Tristan and Leila grabbed a lantern apiece and hurried along after her, nearly losing sight of her in the darkness.

This time they turned on the lights in the Map Room so Amber could find the academy. After scrutinizing the globe for a long time, fingers tracing over its gleaming surface, she pinpointed a whorl of stone somewhere in the empty expanse of Alberta that looked no different than the rest of the globe.

“That’s it?” Tristan asked, handing her the metal disc.

“Somewhere near here.” Amber fixed the disc where her finger had rested a moment before and led the way to the closest stone table. “A bit far north,” she said under her breath. “See? That valley is ours. We can see this peak from the meadow.”

She put a finger on the jagged peak of one of the mountains lying just at the edge of the table.

“Any auras?” Tristan asked.

“A few, but they belong to animals. Nothing very bright.”

“Leila, could you shift the disc down a bit?” Tristan asked.

Looking a bit grumpy that she couldn’t see the auras, Leila nudged the disc a hair south. The table readjusted, and Tristan recognized the valley where the school sat, edged by a steep hill with a lake lying at its foot.

“How did you find that?” he asked, startled. Leila crossed to his side, her eyes widening as she recognized the valley spread out on the table before them.

“I had hours and hours this summer with nothing to do,” Amber said innocently. “I found the valley on one of the contour maps in the Subroom, and from there I figured out its coordinates so I could place it on this map.”

Tristan glanced back at the globe and realized for the first time that it was crisscrossed with faint lines denoting the latitude and longitude.

“What are you guys looking for?” Leila asked impatiently. “I know you’re looking for auras, but what *are* they?”

Tristan tapped the nearest lamp and engulfed the room in darkness. “The auras are tiny glowing dots. It’s easier to see them on the globe; there are millions and millions squished together in the cities.” Lanterns held aloft, he and Leila returned to the globe. “Look carefully. Don’t focus on anything. It looks like those satellite images of the earth at night.”

While Leila continued to stare at the globe, nearly going cross-eyed, Tristan shifted the disc once, twice, three times. Amber studied the landscape on the table, searching every slope and valley for auras that stood out.

As Tristan shifted the disc for the fifth time, Amber hissed, “Stop!”

Tristan bounded over to her side. Even he could make out the auras straight away. There were two moving fractionally along a ridge, one after the other.

“Are they just regular people? Or are they magicians?”

Amber bit her lip. “I can’t say. If I saw them beside another human aura, I would be certain. Only—”

“What?” Tristan insisted.

“I am inclined to say they belong to magicians. Or possibly people with an untrained potential for magic.”

“Are you saying Merridy has magician friends?” Leila asked in alarm.

“Maybe,” Tristan said warily. “They might just be hikers, though. If they’ve spent a lot of time out in the mountains, maybe their auras are brighter than most people’s.” The excuse sounded lame even to him, but he was not eager to see another two innocent people lose their lives in the name of caution.

“Should we tell Drakewell?” Amber asked.

Tristan wanted to say an emphatic “no,” but that would be risky. “We’ll watch them,” he said. “They’re still several valleys away. If they get too close, we’ll tell someone.”

“Okay.” Amber traced the ridge with one finger as though memorizing its shape.

“Let’s leave now, before Drakewell finds us,” Tristan said.

“Agreed,” Leila said quickly.

“Any luck with the auras?”

She shook her head.

“Next time, maybe.”

They were quiet as they slipped from the Map Room and made their way back up the tunnel. Now that he knew there were people in the mountains near the academy, Tristan felt like a conspirator. What was worse—letting Drakewell kill what could be a pair of innocent climbers, or giving Merridy free reign to do her worst?

As always, no easy answer was forthcoming.

Chapter 6: Whitney

A month into the semester, Natasha's class had become one of the students' favorite topics of discussion. Natasha was highly opinionated, so her lessons were the subject of endless debate and speculation. Every student spent the hour hooked on her words, and more than one quoted her in the evenings.

It was near the end of a particularly memorable lesson, when Natasha had recounted the story of the first disaster she had supervised—a hurricane that hit the East Coast and threatened New York City—that Leila asked whether the academy had any magical protections.

"Besides the Prasadimums, of course," she said.

Tristan knew immediately what she was thinking of—the stray auras in the mountains, which could be making their way closer and closer to the academy.

"I bet you can answer that yourself," Natasha said. "The academy is protected by many layers of enchantments, some that we don't understand ourselves. Centuries of powerful magicians have added barriers and wards around these caves to protect them from external threats." She smiled. "What are you worried about? Surely you don't think someone might attack the Lair. It's nearly impossible to find. The native structures don't even show up on the globe."

"Professor Merridy knows exactly where the academy is," Tristan said.

Natasha gave him a sharp look. "You should be worrying about global warming and overpopulation and mass extinction, not the infinitesimally small chance that your former teacher is still out to get us.

"Which reminds me—our first excursion will happen in early November. So you'll have a chance to stretch your legs and see a bit more of the mountains soon enough."

As they began to reshuffle their books, Natasha caught Tristan's eye. "I want to have a word with you," she said.

Sharing a disgruntled look with Leila, Tristan left his bag on his desk and slouched up to the front of the classroom.

"Is there any particular reason you're concerned about an attack from Darla Merridy?" Natasha asked, taking a seat at her desk and looking at him over steepled fingertips.

Tristan cleared his throat. "I—well, I think she burned down my house and washed away Zeke's neighborhood." He glanced over his shoulder, wishing Leila was still there to back him up. "I'm worried that she's somewhere nearby, waiting until she gets a chance to attack us. If we all leave the school, she'll be able to find us too easily."

"Thank you for sharing your concerns," Natasha said. "However, I have heard more than one account of your propensity for fire magic. You may very well have set off the fire without realizing you did it—but I don't blame you at all!"

When Tristan scowled at her, she gave him a stern look.

"Think about it, Tristan. The globe we have beneath us must have taken years to develop. One of the original magicians would have been a very skilled stonemason, because the landmasses are accurate down to the tiniest island. And once the globe was finished, linking the smaller tables would have taken another several years. After five months of work, we have barely patched up North America. Not to mention the time it would take to gather enough magic to give the globe functionality, or the fact that the records of air and water harvesting are long since lost.

"If your former teacher had wanted to send a disaster after both you and Zeke, she would have needed at least twenty years to set herself up with a globe. Ten if she could clone herself. Now, she might have set fire to your house without using a map, but she could not have washed away an entire block of houses without a powerful conduit. I know you want to pass the blame onto someone else, Tristan, but what you suspect simply isn't possible.

I'm sorry.”

Tristan clenched his teeth, irrationally angry at Natasha's logic. “Don't worry, then,” he retorted, trying his best to keep his temper. “Just take us all out into the mountains without any safety precautions whatsoever. It won't matter, because it's impossible that anyone could be out there watching us. It's not like there are any random auras in the mountains, or anything.”

“Is there anything you're not telling me?” Natasha asked quickly.

“No,” he snapped. If he told her about the auras he had seen, she would report them to Drakewell, who would kill them off immediately.

“Tristan...”

He turned on his heel and stalked to the door, almost forgetting his bag. He couldn't believe he had just lost his temper with a teacher.

* * *

As October faded and the aspens turned skeletal, the persistent rain was replaced by low clouds and nightly frosts. For the first time in a month, Tristan ventured into the woods to stretch his legs, the evening deepening around him. Though they had yet to receive their first snow, patches of frost persisted in the shadows of the pines, and a few of the shriveled ferns had caught small handfuls of hail in their centers. Tristan's feet sank into the decaying aspen leaves, and his breath hung in the air before him.

It was a relief to escape the Lair, to breathe the fresh air and feel the feather-light breeze against his cheeks. Stillness had seeped into the woods, laden with anticipation. The night smelled of snow.

On his way back towards the Lair, Gracewright called out to him from the doorway of the long building beside the greenhouse.

“Who's that?”

“Me,” Tristan called back.

Gracewright waved him over, holding up a lantern. “I have about a million pie pumpkins that have just ripened. Would you like to help me bring a few to Quinsley?”

“Sure!” Tristan jogged across the clearing towards the longhouse, the cold air searing his lungs.

Inside, the longhouse had been converted from a garden to a storage shed. Pumpkins in a tall pyramid lined the right-hand wall, along with an assortment of oddly-shaped squashes. There were potatoes as well, most of them still caked with dirt. The lone trace of green belonged to five short rows of carrots, their leafy tops sagging.

“Did you grow all of this?” Tristan asked in surprise. He had thought the school mainly flew its groceries in from the nearest town.

Gracewright gave him a satisfied smile. “It's amazing what you can do in a limited space when the sun shines eighteen hours a day. We don't get more than six hours of darkness at the height of summer. My little pumpkin patch has done me proud.”

Tristan dug through the pile of pumpkins, searching for the most colorful of the lot. There were six huge pumpkins in a separate pile, which he assumed were for carving. Each balancing four pumpkins in their arms, Gracewright and Tristan left the longhouse and made their way back to the Lair, nighttime closing in around them. The clouds hung so low that the world seemed confined to a tiny bubble of trees and clearing, and even that threatened to vanish before long.

Leila and Quinsley greeted them happily in the kitchen, both up to their arms in bread dough.

“We've been working on sourdough bread,” Leila said. “We've had the starter going for months now, and it's finally starting to taste like actual sourdough!”

“What did it taste like before?” Tristan asked, depositing his pumpkins beside the enormous stove.

“Rotten cheese,” Leila said, wrinkling her nose. “I should have believed Gerry when he told me it wasn't ready yet.”

They had creamy broccoli-cheddar soup for dinner that night, served in sourdough bread bowls that rivalled any Tristan had ever tasted. The soup had soaked into every air pocket in the bread, leaving it soft and dripping with flavor. Halloween was fast approaching, so Quinsley supplied them with little chocolate skulls for dessert,

accompanied by hot spiced cider.

After dinner, Natasha surprised them by getting to her feet to make an announcement. As the tallest of the professors, she dominated the room when she stood.

“As you know, our expedition is next week,” she said. “While it will certainly be a grim occasion, we’ll also have time for a bit of fun. After all, we can hardly expect you to pledge yourselves to a lifetime of loyalty to the school if your lives are miserable.”

Alldusk raised his mug of cider in agreement.

“So, we’ll pay a visit to the little village that handles our food shipments. They have a quaint little town center, with a number of shops, and you’ll each get a bit of money and an afternoon to explore.”

This pronouncement was greeted with applause.

“I love her,” Rusty said under his breath.

Tristan glanced at Evvie, who met his eyes and blushed. He already knew how he wanted to spend his money.

“However, there is a catch,” Natasha said. “You have to win the money first.”

* * *

They found out what she meant by that on Halloween. To everyone’s relief, the day was uneventful, filled with pumpkin-carving and baking. After last year, Tristan decided he would give the tunnels a wide berth. It was superstitious of him, he knew, but he was not about to implicate himself in any further trouble.

After dinner that night, Natasha and Brikkens announced a set of competitions where the students could win money for the excursion next week. Damian and Cassidy grumbled a bit at that, but they were as eager for money as the rest. Gracewright began by awarding Cailyn a gold dollar for the best pumpkin carving (she had cut away the silhouette of a wolf prowling before a full moon), and after that they got coins for smashing pumpkins from behind a chalk line. Tristan got two coins when he used a marble to blow his pumpkin to pulpy shreds, even though Zeke insisted he had cheated.

“You’re calling someone out on cheating?” Leila teased. “I don’t think you’ve won anything fair and square in your life.”

Zeke responded by hurling a rock so hard that he smashed two pumpkins at once. “I’m just hiding my true talents so I can spring them on you at the last minute,” he scoffed.

“Sure.”

“You don’t think they have regular bills, do they?” Tristan asked, pocketing his two dollar coins.”

“That’s boring!” Rusty said.

“Besides, they probably minted these out of their secret hoard of gold,” Leila whispered.

When the pumpkins had all been destroyed, they moved on to pie-eating, darts, cookie-decorating, arm-wrestling, and pelting each other with water balloons. This last was the unplanned side-effect of arming fifteen restless students with watery projectiles.

Natasha and the other teachers called out review questions between contests, giving Finley a chance to win coins as well, and Amber earned herself five dollars when she enchanted the puddles of water to swirl into a single pool and splash fountain-like into the mop bucket.

Gracewright and Quinsley joined in the dart-throwing later, more than a little tipsy, and annihilated the competition, while Brikkens cheered everyone on with his booming applause.

It was past midnight when Natasha finally called an end to the games.

“You’ve got more than enough money now, I think,” she said breathlessly. “Off to bed, before the headmaster has us all scrubbing toilets.”

“Thank you, Natasha!” Cailyn called, waving from the doorway.

“Can we do that again?” Eli asked. He had come out of the games with at least twice as much money as Tristan; he was an excellent shot.

“We’ll see. Goodnight.” Smiling, Natasha shooed them out of the ballroom.

“I didn’t know you were so good at darts,” Tristan told Evvie, sidling up to her as they made their way back to the Subroom.

Her cheeks reddened. “I had a dart-board back at home. I used to play with my brother.”

Tristan opened his mouth, intending to ask Evvie to join him for coffee in the supply town, but no words came out. Embarrassed, he mumbled, “Talk to you later,” and hung back until Leila and Rusty caught up with him.

* * *

The following Monday, everyone was in a good mood when they filed into Natasha’s class, including the students who had recently been complaining about her extreme views—which, Tristan decided, had probably been part of the reason behind the Halloween games. They were about to see exactly how dirty this school’s work really was, and Natasha couldn’t delve into something so unpleasant without their support.

“You know what we are about to do,” Natasha said once her class had muttered itself into silence. She looked taller than ever, her dark face solemn. “This week we will destroy a small village, and on Friday we will pay a visit to the remains.”

No one moved.

“The village we will target is called Whitney, located about a hundred miles west of here. We have been monitoring Whitney for almost a year now. Its residents have grown wealthy from the sale of illegally trapped game—bears and wolves and moose and lynx, primarily—and the agency that regulates hunting has been paid to turn a blind eye.”

Tristan’s first thought was that they deserved whatever was coming to them. The bastards needed to be stopped.

Then he felt sick. They were talking about *murder* here, not some abstract form of justice. He was as bad as any of the professors.

Natasha selected a stick of chalk and briefly sketched the outline of a hill. “Here we have the residents’ lodges,” she said, adding a series of white squares all along the hillside. “At the base, the airstrip and fur dealership. Here is a hunting lodge, and a pair of restaurants. Beside them, the general store.”

Leila’s hand was in the air. After adding a roof to the general store, Natasha turned and nodded at her. “Yes?”

“Well, we don’t have to destroy the whole town, do we? Wouldn’t it be enough if we just targeted the houses?”

Natasha shrugged. “There is no correct answer. ‘Enough’ is very subjective. Who are we working for? For ourselves? For the population of wild animals they’ve endangered? Or for an ideal we can never fully achieve?” She set the chalk delicately on her desk. “What do you think, Cailyn?”

Sitting up in surprise, Cailyn twisted her hands in her lap. “Well, I don’t think it’s okay to target the houses and leave the rest of the town. Right? Anyone staying at the hunting lodge is there to buy illegal furs, so they’re just as bad as the hunters.”

“I’m inclined to agree,” Natasha said. “And though she did not say it outright, Cailyn has touched on an important rule we try to follow here. We do not play God. Even though we choose which locations to target, we leave fate to decide who lives and who dies. We are the catalyst, but nature is the judge. Singling out individuals would turn us into tyrants.”

Tristan shivered.

“Now, what disaster should we unleash on Whitney?” Natasha paced across the front of the room, catching each student’s eyes. “What do you think, Zeke? Or you, Hayley?”

No one spoke. Tristan half-expected Natasha to punish the students who refused to answer, but she did not seem troubled.

“Let’s try a different approach. What disasters could possibly befall a small mountain town? Be creative.”

“A forest fire,” Tristan said.

“Wonderful. What else?”

“A flood,” Cailyn said.

“Mudslide,” Leila added.

“Or a rockslide,” Finley said.

“What about a mad bear attack?” Zeke suggested.

“Good,” Natasha said. “That about covers the range of plausible disasters.” She gave Zeke a pointed look. “I personally think a fire would be the most successful of these suggestions, especially since it could target the mansions that these hunters have built from their profits. Now, the question remains of how to start the fire without causing suspicion.”

Natasha began pacing in front of the chalkboard, twirling a ruler in her long fingers. “Towns like these—inaccessible except by air, rarely visited—often make a practice of burning their garbage. If we can find a place where garbage or leaves were recently burned, it won’t be hard to blame a wildfire on the unattended smoldering ashes.”

Cailyn’s hand was in the air. “What if someone wakes up and stops the fire before it spreads, or what if everyone has time to evacuate?”

“Very good. What do you think, Tristan?”

“Wha—oh, I don’t know.” Tristan was alarmed at being called on. “I guess...if we started it at night, the fire could be really big to begin with, and people would just assume it had been spreading for a while before they woke up.”

“Excellent,” Natasha said. “And Tristan, would you stay after class for a few minutes? I want to have a word.”

Tristan froze. Was she going to lecture him again?

“That’s enough for today.” Natasha set the ruler on her desk. “We won’t be meeting during this period tomorrow; instead we will assemble in the ballroom at midnight and proceed down to the Map Room, where you will observe how I start the fire. Get some rest tonight, because tomorrow will be a long day.”

As the rest of the class filed out, whispering urgently, Tristan packed his books and got slowly to his feet.

“What is it?” he asked, crossing to the front of Natasha’s desk. He hoped he wasn’t in trouble.

Natasha clasped her hands at her waist. “Tristan. I can tell that you’re uncomfortable with this whole affair. You have to remember that getting the answers right and making helpful suggestions doesn’t make you a bad person. This excursion is meant for your classmates, not for you, and I sincerely hope that you aren’t turned permanently against the school after seeing what we do.”

“Why isn’t it for me?” Tristan asked, frowning.

“Some of the students here are in danger of taking our work too lightly. Damian, Cassidy, and Ryan, for example, would undoubtedly jump at the opportunity to use the globe for their own amusement. We need to shock them into thinking seriously.” Natasha sighed. “You, on the other hand, weren’t a true criminal before you came here, so—”

“What do you mean, I wasn’t a criminal? I killed my brother!”

“Yes, but it wasn’t your fault,” Natasha said passionately. “No one would blame you.”

Tristan shoved his hands into his pockets. “It was still me who sent the car off the road. It was my fault for driving too fast.”

“The fact that you have accepted the blame for your brother’s death speaks highly of your character,” Natasha said softly, putting a hand on Tristan’s shoulder. “But you were forcibly recruited. Drakewell knew you harbored a true gift for magic, and he has not been disappointed. I only say this because I don’t want anything you see in Whitney to turn you against us. You are one of the most talented magicians I’ve ever seen, but I can’t force you to agree with us. When you take over the Map Room, it will be on your own terms. I want you to decide independently that what we’re doing is right. It’s not pretty, and it’s certainly not easy, but it’s *right*. Humanity would not survive its own inventiveness without nature to impose an upper limit.”

Tristan nodded woodenly, stepping back. Natasha released his shoulder.

“One more thing. I checked the Map Room, and I spotted a set of auras on a mountain ridge two valleys over from ours. Don’t worry,” she said, noticing Tristan’s expression. “I didn’t say anything to Drakewell. However, I’m inclined to give your suspicions more weight than before. Even though I still fail to see how we are in danger, we will take a few precautions—for one, we’ll leave before sunrise when we visit Whitney. No one will expect it. I hope that will ease your fears.”

“Thank you,” Tristan mumbled. He wasn’t sure if he was thanking her for acknowledging his autonomy or for choosing to grant him the smallest sliver of trust.

“I’ll see you tomorrow.”

Nodding again, Tristan turned and walked dazedly from the classroom. He was so intent on his thoughts that he gave a start when he came across Leila and Rusty, who had been waiting for him in the hallway.

“What’s wrong?” Leila asked at once. “Natasha wasn’t mad at you, was she? I thought she loved you.”

They started walking, footsteps echoing off the marble.

“She does,” Tristan said, “but only because I’m as twisted as her.”

“No you’re not,” Rusty said at once. “But what’s wrong with Natasha? I thought you liked her.”

Tristan didn’t know what to say to that. Natasha scared him, but only because everything she said made sense, in a horrible, incontrovertible way.

Chapter 7: The Disaster Reference Manual

Eleven-thirty the following night found everyone sitting in the Subroom, pretending more or less believably to be working on homework. Leila had fetched cider and hot chocolate an hour ago, and she stared into the fire as she cradled her mug. Tristan was doodling flames around the corners of his medicine essay, and Eli fingered the blade of the pocket knife he'd gotten last year from Leila. On the couch, Hayley had fallen asleep with her head on Trey's shoulder.

Fifteen minutes passed, the silence growing louder, until finally Leila set aside her mug and stood.

"It's time," Eli said hollowly.

Trey touched Hayley's shoulder, and she started awake.

"I'm scared," she said, rubbing sleep from her eyes.

Without speaking much, the students began pulling on shoes and coats in preparation for a trip into the cold tunnels. No one left until the whole group was ready; in a silent, tight pack, they followed Eli up from the Subroom to Natasha's classroom.

Natasha arrived a second after they did. "You kids don't look so good," she said, waving a hand to set the lights glowing. "Just tired, or is it something more?"

She took their silence for an affirmative.

"Well, you shouldn't worry. If you've been imagining pagan rituals, you're far off the mark. What we're about to do is very similar to a strategy employed in recent wars. There are certain pilots who fly unmanned jets from control rooms back in the US; these pilots drop bombs as they fly, but the work itself is similar to playing a video game. Disturbing, yes, but completely legal. What we are about to do will leave you much less culpable than these bombers."

Tristan grimaced.

There were clicking footsteps in the hall, followed by an outburst of laughter that was hastily smothered, and Zeke's gang strode into the classroom. Damian and Cassidy looked excited, but Zeke was pale.

"Are we all here?" Natasha asked. She did a quick count. "Good. Follow me. I don't have to remind you that what we are about to do is very serious, so any fooling around will not be tolerated."

With a few nudges and whispered complaints, the students fell into line behind Natasha. Rusty looked back with a worried frown, and Leila prodded him in the spine.

As they wound their way through the familiar tunnels, following the faint glow of lanterns held aloft by every third person, Tristan tried to imagine the town they were about to set ablaze. The hunters would be dropping off to sleep in their warm lodges. *They'll be wrapped in furs*, Tristan thought, trying to harden himself against them. *And they'll have huge elk heads mounted on the walls, and bear rugs in their living rooms.* The image helped a bit.

When Natasha pushed open the door to the Map Room, Tristan immediately looked for the scattering of auras spread across the globe. This time he had no trouble recognizing them at once. Before he could figure out which part of the world they were facing, Natasha had turned on the lights.

"This is the village we'll be targeting," she said, striding forward and tapping a faint patch of auras in the middle of nowhere. "Now, we won't be creating a massive, devastating upheaval, so we have to work on a much smaller scale." She bent and retrieved a disc from the ground, this one fractionally larger than the last, and fixed it to the globe. "Observe."

Tristan trailed behind as the others hurried over to a different stone table than he had used before. Already it was beginning to wrinkle and bulge—a mountain and a series of rolling hills surged up, followed by a ragged layer of pines. Houses grew along the sides of one smooth valley, sprawling across the slopes above a narrow airstrip.

"Watch carefully," Natasha said. She drew the fountain-pen conduit from her pocket and balanced it in her

palm. “This is acting as an anchor, through which I can draw on the magic supply beneath the globe. Theoretically I could remove all but the gold marble from this instrument and still instigate the fire, but I would have to replace the other elemental anchors before proceeding to any other type of disaster.”

“How do you know what type of disaster you’re creating, then?” Leila asked.

“Each has a specific hand motion,” Natasha said. “Thank you for reminding me—in tomorrow’s lesson I will hand out a pamphlet with directions for various disasters.”

This struck Tristan as humorous in the most horrible way, but he was too intent on watching Natasha to worry about it just now.

“This is the point of origin,” Natasha said quietly, touching the nib of the pen to the rear of one toy-sized cabin. From there she drew the instrument along the ground in a jagged line that wound its way around the house, towards the town center, and through the trees. Sometimes she lifted the tip to clear a fence or pine, but soon she had drawn an invisible line that snaked throughout the village.

“What happens now?” Damian asked hungrily.

Natasha gave him a sharp look and didn’t answer. Tristan drew in a long breath.

“Hey!” Eli said, leaning closer.

Hayley jumped.

The spot that Natasha had chosen as the origin was beginning to glow yellow. Then, like a lit fuse, a ghostly fire began to spread along the line Natasha had drawn. The leaping flames were hardly more than vapor on the stone, but they grew brighter as the trees began to catch and the blaze spread to the lodges.

“That’s incredible,” Cassidy said, clutching at Damian’s arm. Her eyes, lit by the ghostly flames, were greedy.

“Now what?” Tristan asked. “Are we just going to let it burn?”

“Precisely,” Natasha said. “We will continue to supervise the area carefully, and once the fire has done its work, we can subdue it before the whole forest is destroyed. Firefighters will be called, of course, but it is impossible to say whether they will respond adequately to a place as remote as this.”

“So you’ll send a rainstorm,” Leila said.

Natasha nodded. “Exactly. We can leave the fire burning for about twelve hours, at which point the rainstorm will finish it up. The area will be safe by Thursday, which is when we’ll fly on over.”

“Can we stay and watch?” Cassidy asked eagerly.

Natasha strode to the door of the Map Room and held it open, waiting for the students to follow. “You should get some sleep. If you want to come back during lunch tomorrow, you can watch me put out the fire.”

Hayley walked stiffly to the door, Cailyn, Eli, and Trey joining her reluctantly. The walk back through the tunnels couldn’t have been more different than the trip down. The students straggled out behind Natasha, talking in low, excited voices and huddling in groups around the lanterns.

“That was amazing,” Leila said in a feverish whisper. “I don’t like it much, not when I think about it, but watching that...everything seems real now.”

Tristan nodded fervently; it felt as though they’d just crossed some invisible line. There were no secrets now.

“It was so *pretty*,” Rusty said in a hollow voice, hugging the lantern to his chest. “I can’t believe it’s actually happening, somewhere out there.”

Back in the Subroom, Hayley curled up under her covers without changing. When Leila and Rusty went up to the bathrooms to shower, Evvie, Cailyn, and Eli drew chairs around the dining table and continued a furious, whispered debate they’d been carrying on since leaving the Map Room. Amber took a seat by the fire, staring into the flames as though she was carved from ice; Tristan joined her in silence, and they shared a quick look of understanding. They were the only ones who were expected to follow Natasha’s example.

“It’s odd,” Amber said, so faintly that Tristan barely caught her words. “All I can imagine is how wonderful it would look if the whole ocean were stirred to dance. So much power, so much raw beauty. And it would destroy the world.”

Tristan shivered. “You scare me sometimes,” he said. “But I would rather have you controlling the Map Room than any of the teachers here.”

To his surprise, Amber didn’t seem offended. “I frighten myself sometimes.” She did not look away from the fire, but her expression softened. “I don’t know how much I might be capable of.”

When Leila returned from the showers, she told everyone very sharply to go to bed. “I won’t be able to sleep with you three snapping at each other all night,” she told Evvie, Cailyn, and Eli.

The three of them shot her poisonous looks, but Trey intervened. Cailyn’s face was flushed as she stalked off to the bathroom, and Eli continued to glare after her.

“You too, Triss. Get to bed,” Leila said.

“What was that about?” he asked, nodding at the table.

She shook her head. “I didn’t catch much of it, but it sounded like Cailyn thinks Natasha is practically an angel for stopping those hunters, and Eli’s in a bad mood and just wants to yell at people.”

“Figures,” Tristan said, getting reluctantly to his feet. “Good night, Amber.”

He sank into sleep almost at once, but the low crackling from the fireplace was magnified a hundred times in his ears. He dreamed he was walking through the streets of New York City, flames trailing from his fingertips. Behind him the city was swallowed in a raging inferno; Tristan could see the fire reflected in the windows of the skyscrapers, and he watched with a detached fascination. The sparks burst overhead like dandelions going to seed.

* * *

As oblivious as he could sometimes be, Brikkens noticed that his class was in a strange state the next morning. Ryan Riggs fell asleep and started snoring with his head on the table, while Evvie, Cailyn, and Eli kept shooting spiteful glances at each other across the room. Rusty dropped his pencil, his book bag, and finally a marble, which gave a loud snap as it hit the table and engulfed his head in a billow of smoke.

“Really!” Brikkens said. “What has gotten into you, my friends? Are you quite all right, Lennox?”

Coughing, Rusty waved away the dark smoke.

“We were in the Map Room last night,” Hayley said succinctly.

“Aha,” Brikkens said. “I’d forgotten entirely. But that explains everything. No need to worry, my dears. I was here when Alldusk and Merridy had their first demonstration, and let me tell you, it was a week before the school got back on its feet. You’re doing quite well.”

“Yeah, but we haven’t even gone to the town yet,” Rusty said. “That’s the part that’s supposed to be really awful, isn’t it?”

Brikkens waved a hand airily. “Never fear. Well, seeing as I can’t expect you to concentrate much today, how about we have a bit of a treat? You deserve it, after how much you improved on our most recent test.”

Brikkens’ idea of a treat was a deep pot of chocolate fondue that Quinsley somehow conjured up almost at once. There were bananas and pretzels and marshmallows to dip, and as the students crowded around the cart, they resumed their arguments and discussions from the night before.

“I still don’t see how it’s any more of a crime than—” Cailyn hissed.

“Do *you* want to take over the effing Map Room when Drakewell’s gone?” Eli said sourly.

“No, but—”

“What are you thinking?” Tristan asked Leila in an undertone, taking his chocolate-dipped pretzel to the corner where she stood. “You’ve been awfully quiet about this whole thing.”

Leila gave him a lopsided smile. “I’m hardly the best person to judge what’s right and wrong here. I think it’s best to just watch and see how everything plays out. And make sure this place doesn’t get destroyed in the meantime.”

Tristan nibbled at his chocolate pretzel, watching the other students crowd closer to the fondue. When Damian stood on his toes to yell at Eli, Hayley ducked hurriedly under his arm and escaped the melee.

“You know,” Tristan said at last, “I think you might be right.”

* * *

Their other teachers were nowhere near as lenient as Brikkens, and the rest of the day passed as usual. The only surprise was Natasha’s class; they entered the room to find bright green booklets on each desk, and upon flipping to the first page, Tristan realized they were the same guides to creating disasters that Natasha had promised the

day before.

Inside the front flap, the first page read, *A Quick Disaster Reference Manual*.

<i>Basic Weather Events</i>	4
<i>Freak Weather</i>	5
<i>Spiral Storms</i>	9
<i>Tectonic Shifts</i>	10
<i>Volcanic Activity</i>	12
<i>Fires</i>	13
<i>Oceanic Disturbances</i>	14
<i>Seasonal Events</i>	16
<i>Snow and Ice</i>	18

“I see you’ve discovered the booklet,” Natasha said, closing the classroom door behind her. “You don’t need to worry about these just yet, but since a few of you had questions about what I did last night, I wanted to let you have a look. Go on, satisfy your curiosity.”

Glancing furtively at his neighbors, Tristan turned to the section on tectonic shifts. There, at the top of the page, sat the word *earthquakes*. Beside it was a row of diagonal slashes. It was too easy. Quickly he flipped to *fires*, where he found a zigzag line describing the jagged motion Natasha had demonstrated last night. He stared at the page for a long time, odd thoughts bouncing off one another in his mind. To his right, Rusty had closed the book and pushed it as far as possible to the front of his desk.

This is messed up, he mouthed when Tristan looked his way.

Tristan nodded.

Meanwhile, thuggish Ryan was studying the pages with more concentration than he had ever spared for his classes before.

Once Natasha had given them a few minutes to peruse the booklets, she told them to leave their belongings in the classroom and follow her back down to the Map Room.

The lights were already on when they arrived, and the stone table still had the contours of the mountain valley they had set aflame. Up close, though, it was almost unrecognizable. No buildings had survived the fire, and the trees were nothing but charred stumps; carved as it was from gray stone, the scene looked as though it had always been exactly as it appeared. There was no evidence that a town had only recently been reduced to ash.

“Natasha?” Cailyn asked. “Can you see weather—storms and such—on the maps?”

“You’re wondering about the rainstorm,” Natasha said, looking pleased. “It is no longer raining here, but if the storm were still occurring, we would be able to see it. However, the clouds themselves are only visible when they drop low enough to come within range of this small scale.”

“But there are no clouds on the globe,” Finley said. “Why not?”

Natasha smiled at him. “Because they got in the way. A few magicians did try to make this globe cloud-sensitive several years back, but there were so many clouds covering the earth in inconvenient places that it was only good as a weather map. So we got rid of the clouds.”

“What if you had a system for—turning the clouds on and off?” Leila crossed to the globe. “Wouldn’t that make everything much easier?”

Tristan joined her and traced a finger along the ridged contours of the Canadian Rockies.

“Yes, of course,” Natasha said. “That was actually a project Brinley and Gracewright were working on before Darla wrecked this place. They’re always trying to develop this system further, since these maps are far from perfect. However, their work has been put on hold as we continue repairing the maps.

“Well, that’s all for today. Tomorrow we’ll leave early for the village, and afterwards we’ll make a trip to our supply town, where we will spend the night. Start packing tonight, and remember that it will be cold. I expect we’ll be feeling the aftermath of that rainstorm tonight, as a matter of fact.”

“Great,” Zeke said. “I just love rain. I’m sure a bit more water is exactly what our beautiful dead grass needs.”

“At this elevation, it will be snow,” Natasha said briskly. “Now hurry along.”

Zeke's expression brightened.

When they reached the main corridor, Natasha held the class back for another moment.

"We'll be eating breakfast at five o'clock tomorrow morning," she said, "and we'll walk down to the plane at five thirty. I'll come by the bunkroom to make sure everyone is up, and those of you sleeping elsewhere had better not be tardy."

She raised an eyebrow pointedly at Cailyn.

"Why do we have to leave so early?" Damian grumbled.

Tristan held his breath, hoping Natasha wouldn't mention him.

"It's a long walk to the airstrip, and the flight will take about an hour. No more complaints, please."

He let out his breath in relief.

Chapter 8: Ashes to Ashes

Leila was the first up the following morning, and she amused herself by throwing pillows at the others to rouse them. Tristan startled awake when something walloped him in the back; he curled into a ball under his covers and glared at Leila.

“Can I have that pillow back?” she asked coyly.

Tristan hurled it at her, hitting her solidly in the stomach.

“You should be thanking me,” she said, turning and slamming the pillow on Eli’s shoulders with a bit more force than necessary. He broke off mid-snore and rolled over with a look of alarm. “Natasha might tell Drakewell about the Subroom if we show up late.”

Tristan yawned and dragged his hair over his face. “He’s an idiot if he doesn’t already know about it. Damn it, why did I think this was a good idea?”

In small groups they began to stumble up to breakfast, yawning and grumbling. Cailyn and Evvie were still packing, debating whether they would need their snow-boots in addition to their sneakers, and Rusty doubled back to get his jacket on the way up.

Quinsley greeted them, cheerful as ever, though today he was wearing jeans and a sweater instead of his usual apron.

“Morning, Leila, Tristan. What did you do with Rusty?”

He came by their table with a basket of muffins and croissants, still warm from the oven. Tristan took three muffins and bit into one, which was bursting with sweet cinnamon and silky apple chunks.

“He’ll come,” Leila said dismissively.

When Rusty joined them, red-faced and out of breath, they quietly resumed a discussion they’d been carrying on the night before.

“I still don’t think there will be bodies,” Tristan whispered. “That fire was burning for twelve hours—I bet everything will be gone.”

“Then why is Grindlethorn coming along?” Leila asked, nodding at the teachers’ table.

“He’s optimistic?” Rusty suggested.

Over at Zeke’s table, Damian was speaking in an undertone to Ryan and Cassidy, who both looked gleeful. Stacy had her arms folded, a confused frown darkening her plain face.

Soon it was time to leave. Hayley, Cailyn, and Evvie appeared just as Natasha began herding everyone toward the stairs; they grabbed a few muffins and stuffed them into their pockets, looking flustered. Grindlethorn and Quinsley joined Natasha on the ballroom floor, as all three would be going along for the excursion.

Just as Natasha had promised, the ground was covered with a crisp inch of snow that crackled under their feet. The sky was a clear, pale blue, which only made the cold sharper on their faces. Tristan zipped his coat as far as it would go and buried his chin in the collar, wishing he’d brought his scarf.

“I miss the summer,” Rusty said, rubbing his hands together and hurrying to keep up with Eli and Trey.

“Oh, but it’s so beautiful!” Leila’s cheeks were pink, and her eyes sparkled.

The flight was more exciting than usual, with the skies clear and the mountains lying in stark splendor below, iced with a flawless coat of white. Everyone fought over the window seats, and the losers stood and craned their necks to watch the scene spread out below. By the time they descended to the village airstrip, the sun was radiant in the east and most of the students were in such a good mood that they’d forgotten the purpose of the trip.

“I can’t believe how long we’ve been trapped in the Lair,” Tristan said. “It’s beautiful here, isn’t it?”

Leila nodded.

The snow didn’t cover the ground here, though the mountains behind them were dusty with frost that glowed coral in the sunrise. As Tristan turned to climb down the ladder onto the runway, he caught a whiff of sour ashes.

His excitement vanished as he remembered exactly what they were doing.

Every scrap of vegetation had been reduced to nothing; trees were blackened and stripped to splinters, and the sparse patches of grass had withered and charred. The remains of a few houses loomed beyond the naked pines, ghostly frames sagging like the ribs of a skeleton.

“Welcome to Whitney,” Natasha said quietly.

“Where are the firefighters?” Hayley asked. “Shouldn’t they still be here?”

Quinsley climbed down from the cockpit and slammed the door; the sound rang out eerily in the silence.

“They never came,” Natasha said. “As I mentioned before, it’s not uncommon for places like this to receive very limited emergency response.”

“What are we supposed to do now?” Zeke asked with a bit more vehemence than usual. “Dig through the ashes and run off with anything valuable we find?”

“Zeke,” Natasha said, “you will take this seriously or you will wait for us in the plane.”

“Well, how else do you guys—” He broke off, hopping on one foot. Leila had kicked him in the shin.

Natasha led the way to the end of the airstrip, where Tristan could make out a dirt road barely emerging from the dust. From a distance, her cheery green sweater stood out like a stain amidst the gray ruins.

“Keep close, now, and please be respectful,” Natasha said. “If you see any signs of life, signal to one of your teachers immediately.”

As they started along the deeply rutted road, climbing gradually up the slope away from the landing strip, the students clustered close behind Natasha. No one seemed willing to break ranks; Damian didn’t seem to notice that Eli hovered directly behind him, and though Leila and Zeke had been herded so close together that their elbows kept colliding, neither paid the other any heed.

“We’re nearing the town center,” Natasha said softly. Her voice floated back to them like a breeze stirring the ashes. “The stores were closed for the night when the fire began, but there could have been guests caught at the lodge. I can imagine a shopkeeper racing into town to save his goods, but the fire came too suddenly for anyone to make it this far.”

“So we’re—we’re going to the lodge, then?” Cailyn asked. She coughed.

“Yes.”

They crested a rise and came upon what had once been the town of Whitney. It was utterly demolished, less than a ghost town. The wide dirt road, flatter and less rutted than the one leading up from the airstrip, was lined with pine stumps and empty stone planters. A warped and crumpled pickup truck—someone must have flown it up, since there were no roads leading to the town—sagged beside the teetering stone frame of a fireplace, and at the end of the town a stone sign with carved lettering sat in front of a desolate lot.

“This was the lodge,” Natasha said, gesturing to her right. There was nothing to distinguish this patch of earth from the one beside it, aside from the lack of tree stumps. “Take a stick or anything you can find, and help us dig through the ashes. Be careful—they may still be hot.”

No one moved, and after waiting a moment Natasha sighed and led the way over to the remains of the lodge. She picked up the scorched handle of some sort of gardening implement and began poking around in the ashes; eventually Cailyn copied her, and the others warily followed her example.

“Leila, what’s this?” Tristan whispered, bending down to grab what looked like the end of a curiously pale stick. It was very light, almost hollow, but it was caught on something in the refuse. When he dislodged it, he realized it was an antler with two prongs at the end.

“Looks like an elk’s antler,” Leila whispered back. “Maybe it was hanging on someone’s wall.”

Making a face, Tristan took a firmer grip on the smooth antler and used it to sift aside the debris. He poked around listlessly for a while, barely shifting the charred wood and bits of metal from side to side, keeping an eye on everyone else. He was afraid to dig too deep, because he might actually find something.

Beside him, Leila was determinedly clearing the rubble around a long wooden beam she had found, while Rusty poked through the contents of a small latched box. Amber had wandered off to the side and was now staring at the ground as though she hoped to see through the piles of refuse; nearby, Trey stood in a shallow hole he was digging with a shovel he’d found. Damian and Cassidy were digging side by side, and Tristan thought he saw Cassidy pocket something shiny.

At a sudden thought, Tristan straightened and waded over to Amber, still clutching his antler.

“Amber?” he muttered, watching Natasha. “Did you see any auras on the map? Is anyone here alive?”

Amber shook her head slowly. “The last survivor was right here.” She tapped a toe on the ground. “But while we stood in the Map Room, the light faded. It’s too late.” Amber took a step backward, and again the bitter stench of ashes swept over Tristan. “Of course, that was the whole point, wasn’t it? It seems cruel to pretend otherwise.”

When Tristan opened his mouth to reply, someone shrieked. He whirled and saw Hayley running backwards, stumbling and flailing as she scrambled away from something.

“What happened?” he asked, not expecting a reply.

Amber shrugged, her eyes wide, and they hurried back towards the rest of the students, Tristan craning to see what Hayley had unearthed.

“Hayley!” Natasha called. “Hayley, what is it? Don’t worry, everything’s going to be okay!”

Trey caught Hayley and tried to restrain her, but she only cried out again and tore free of him. Regaining her balance, she turned and ran through the ruins to the street, leaving a dusty cloud of ash behind her.

Tristan still couldn’t see what everyone was gathering around, but Eli cursed loudly and grabbed Trey’s elbow. Then he saw.

It was a human arm, sprawled grotesquely in a pile of splintered wood. The rest of the body must be somewhere below; the arm was buried from the shoulder on.

Looking closer, Tristan felt suddenly ill. The skin had puckered and melted away, exposing raw bone. What was left behind was as maimed and distorted as dripping candle wax.

Stomach heaving, Tristan took two trembling steps backwards and fell over a brittle log. He landed hard. Too weak to stand, he gripped his knees and tried to swallow the bile on his tongue. Zeke retched and stumbled away to throw up. Amber didn’t move, but her face had gone stark white.

Natasha alone maintained her composure. “Come away. I think you’ve gotten the idea.”

She helped Zeke to his feet and steered Finley carefully away from the mangled arm. Leila grabbed Tristan’s hand and pulled him up, though she was trembling violently.

Slowly they straggled out from the ruins. Rusty kept up a stream of muttered curses and groans, clutching the stick he’d been digging with as though it was a lifeline. Hayley was crouching on the street with her head in her hands, and Cailyn drew her into her arms. Though Hayley was silent, her face was streaked with tears.

“What was the point of that?” Eli spat. “What the *hell* was the point?”

Natasha didn’t reply.

Tristan was still weak; he and Leila continued to lean on each other as they followed the straggling line down the road to the end of town. Halfway along they passed a sign carved from stone, which read:

JACK’S EXOTIC FURS

It was like a twisted attempt to justify what they’d just seen.

At the end of the road, Natasha stopped and surveyed an empty plot, hands clasped behind her back. The students gradually clustered around her, scanning the blackened earth for some clue, but there was nothing to see.

“What’s this?” Damian asked at last, his voice gruffer than usual.

Natasha didn’t turn. “This was the schoolhouse. For a population this small, there was only one teacher.”

Tristan’s stomach heaved. There had been families. Children. He hadn’t even thought of that. His imagination had limited the residents to grizzled old men and maybe a few wives. This was such an aberration that all his senses rebelled against the truth. *We did this. This is our fault.* He’d never felt such revulsion with himself. He’d stood and watched the fire, and thought it was *pretty*. He was a monster.

A heavy silence lay over the students. Hayley sniffed and wrapped her arms around Cailyn’s waist again, and Zeke shuffled his feet restlessly. At long last, Natasha turned away from the ruins of the schoolhouse, her face grave and her brown lips pinched.

“Time to go. We’ve had enough.”

Chapter 9: The Midnight Gathering

Quinsley and Grindlethorn led the way back through the ghostly town, Natasha keeping up the rear. Tristan kept stumbling, and every time he looked to the side, he thought he could see another mangled limb protruding from the wreckage. Breathing hard, he forced himself to keep his eyes trained on Quinsley's shoulders.

It was a very subdued group that resumed their seats on the plane. No one cared for the window seats any longer, and Tristan was grateful when the roar of the engine drowned out the silence.

Before long they had touched down once again, this time on a runway that retained an early-morning dusting of snow. When Quinsley joined the students on the ground, he smiled grimly and gestured at the quaint little town, shops and cabins clustered around a central square like a gingerbread village.

"Welcome to Millersville," he said. "I come here several times a week. All of our food orders are shipped here from down south, and the shopkeepers are very friendly. We'll stay the night at the Aspen Lodge; remember to say hello to the owner for me."

As Quinsley turned and trudged off through the frost, Natasha wound a scarf around her neck and pulled a loose hat over her ears.

"Go enjoy yourselves. I hope you've all remembered your money." She turned to follow Quinsley and then paused. "Meet me at the lodge when it gets dark. We'll have dinner there."

Damian and Cassidy set off almost at once, following Natasha and Quinsley up a winding path towards the center square. Just before they disappeared into the pines, Cassidy linked her arm through Damian's elbow. Stacy, Ryan, and Finley trailed behind them, but Zeke stayed where he was, still looking a bit sick.

"I don't even have the heart to tease him," Leila whispered. She shoved her hands into her pockets and led the way up the path.

Tristan's knees kept threatening to fail him, so he stared straight ahead, the pine boughs melting to shadows in his vision. When Leila stopped abruptly, he nearly collided with her. They had reached the town square. A snow-dusted fountain sat in the middle of the plaza, and on three sides the cobbles were lined with neat wood buildings. From the signs, Tristan recognized a restaurant, a café, two souvenir shops, and the Aspen Lodge.

"Look, let's get a cup of coffee," Leila said.

"Yes, please," Rusty moaned. He pushed Leila forward.

Tristan put a hand in his pocket and weighed the coins he had won. He had wanted to ask Evvie out, but that now seemed like the worst idea imaginable. Glancing around the square, he saw Evvie sitting on a snowy bench alone; he was about to go over to her when Cailyn, Hayley, Eli, and Trey joined her.

Dropping the coins back into his pocket, Tristan turned and followed Leila and Rusty across the trampled snow into the café. He would have to ask Evvie out some other time.

As they ordered drinks, Eli, Trey, Hayley, Cailyn, and Evvie slipped through the door in a swirl of snow, stamping their boots on the mat before claiming the low table before the fire. Over in a far corner, Damian and Cassidy were sharing an armchair, their drinks forgotten as they kissed in the shadowy recess of the bar.

Rusty made for a table beside the window; sliding into his seat, Tristan glanced at Evvie and imagined kissing her the same way. When she looked his way, he dropped his gaze at once, face hot.

"What was that about?" Leila asked suspiciously.

"Nothing."

They sat sipping their hot drinks in silence, drawing comfort from one another's presence. Every so often Tristan caught Leila's eye, and she smiled wistfully, her eyes clouded. Rusty gripped his mug with both hands and stared out the window, watching a cardinal shuffle along a log.

Before long the snow began to fall again, fat white flakes settling on the cobblestones and clinging to the

windowpanes. When the cardinal ruffled its feathers and flew off, Rusty drained his cider.

“I don’t even know what to do with all this money,” he said, reaching in his pocket and tossing six gold dollars onto the table. “It’s like I’ve forgotten how to buy stuff.”

“Think of that room we found,” Leila said. “The one with all the piles of gold. If we sold all the gold discs we’ve been using for poker chips, we could probably buy this whole town.”

“Maybe we could buy a few more decorations for the Subroom,” Tristan said, endeavoring to keep his voice light. It was easier to pretend they’d never seen Whitney, that they were just here on holiday, like everyone else in this little Christmas-card town.

“Let’s go,” Leila said, setting her mug down with a loud clatter. “I can’t sit here any longer.”

The clouds hung lower than ever, and the village was already darkening to a hazy blue twilight. Beyond the whirling snowflakes, strings of colorful holiday lights lined the roofs of the square.

Tristan, Leila, and Rusty ducked into the closest souvenir shop, which was crammed full of handmade trinkets—wooden figurines, quilts, straw ornaments, and jewelry. They wandered around, touching the delicate woodcarvings and thumbing through books, until it was fully dark. Then, because he felt guilty for not spending anything, Tristan pooled his money with Rusty’s and bought a puzzle.

Most of the students were already in the Aspen Lodge when Tristan, Leila, and Rusty stomped up the front step. The door jingled merrily as it swung shut, and Tristan wiped his wet boots on the mat.

“I hope you enjoyed your afternoon,” Natasha said gently. “As soon as Amber returns, we can go to dinner.”

The lodge was connected to a restaurant, into which Natasha ushered them as soon as Amber slipped through the jingling door. There was a table set for eighteen at the center of the restaurant, while most of the other booths stood empty.

“I know you wouldn’t usually sit all together like this,” Natasha said, pulling back a chair and taking a seat, “but I was hoping to talk to you while we ate.”

“You think *talking* to us is going to make everything all right?” Eli said vehemently. “We’re not going to believe this crap any longer. You didn’t tell us the whole story before we started—you didn’t say there were kids there, or that the whole damn place would be *gone*. But why should we expect anything different? That’s how it’s been since we all got here—lies and crap. Why the hell should we listen to you?”

“Eli, please sit down,” Natasha said. Her face remained perfectly serene, though Eli looked ready to attack her. “Remember, there are other guests here. We must be...*polite*.”

Discreet was what she meant, Tristan thought. He sank slowly into his chair, reluctant to resume the subject he’d been forcing himself not to think about all afternoon.

As the waiter came around with menus, Eli threw himself into his chair. The room was silent again as everyone thumbed through their menus. When Tristan turned the page and saw a bright photo of pasta with marinara sauce the color of blood, he felt nauseous again. He quickly closed the menu and folded his arms. He ended up ordering a bowl of vegetable soup, though he wasn’t sure he would be able to stomach anything.

Collecting the menus again, the waiter disappeared into the kitchen.

“I want you to know that I’m proud of every one of you,” Natasha said. “The fact that you were affected so profoundly means that you’re still human. Whatever you did before you came here, you haven’t lost your human compassion. And that’s essential to what we’re doing. When we work to sustain the natural order, we do it because we love this beautiful earth—we love every piece of this fantastic creation. Without love, we’d be murderers. But you have to understand that there’s a difference. You’re *not* evil.”

“Drakewell’s not doing this for love,” Tristan muttered to himself, but Natasha heard him.

“Rowan Drakewell was—and is—a great man capable of great love.”

“Yeah, ‘cause you’re in love with him,” Zeke said.

Natasha’s eyes narrowed. “No, but that’s not the point. If you had any idea how much he has lost—how much he has been forced to sacrifice for this school—you wouldn’t dare mock him.”

Tristan slouched in his chair, not convinced. Even when Drakewell decided things fairly, rather than flying into a rage and punishing everyone in sight, it seemed that he was always working for his own ends. For the natural order. He sacrificed emotion for higher goals, and that frightened Tristan.

“Your headmaster aside, perhaps you can more easily believe that the rest of us teachers act out of love, for

you and for everything we value. If we didn't care for you, we would never have shown you the truth of what our disasters leave behind. We would have kept you away from Whitney at all costs."

"You think it was *kind* of you to show us that—that awful place?" Eli spat.

"Yes." Natasha sat forward in her chair, the dim restaurant lights reflecting in her eyes. "It was the greatest kindness we could possibly have done."

The kitchen doors swung open just then, and a wave of warm, fragrant air swirled out behind the waiter. Natasha thanked him as he came around with baskets of bread, and did not resume her impassioned argument until he had left the room once again. Damian reached for a slice of hot bread and tore into it, but he was the only one.

"Imagine what this school would create if we kept you sheltered," Natasha continued as though there had been no interruption. "You're isolated, completely under our power. If we chose not to show you the truth, we would be brainwashing you. We could turn you into an army of mindless servants, able to calculate the death toll and physical size of a disaster but unable to fathom what you were really doing."

She swirled the ice cubes in her glass and laughed softly. "If we wanted, we could even pretend this whole operation was fake. We could teach you how to use the maps without ever revealing what they truly did." Her voice dropped to a whisper. "Would you prefer that? Is the truth worth what you experienced in Whitney, or would you rather we lied?"

This time no one spoke. Tristan reached for a piece of bread and slowly tore away the crust. It was warm and moist on his fingers.

"I knew—all of your teachers knew—that this would turn some of you more firmly against the school than before. But we agreed it was time, and it was a necessary risk. We believe that magic should only be used with a full understanding of the consequences."

Their dinners arrived then, and it appeared that Natasha's speech was over. Outside, snowflakes continued to fall, blushing in the multicolored lights. Tristan shredded his bread into his soup, watching the snowflakes wink orange and blue and red as they floated past the string of lights.

"I think she's right," Leila told Rusty quietly. Tristan didn't have to look sideways to imagine Rusty's mutinous expression. "Last year, after we tried to stop Merridy, Drakewell didn't have to tell us what the Map Room was for. He could have made something up. Imagine what it would've been like if we started using the globe, and we never knew what it did."

Tristan dropped the last of his crust into the soup. "That would've really screwed with our minds. If I found out I'd been murdering people without realizing it, I think I'd kill myself."

Leila nodded and stabbed her fork into her pasta. "That's what I was afraid of all last year," she said, her lips barely moving. Natasha was watching her from the other end of the table. "I was worried that just making those marbles was hurting people somewhere. I didn't think it could be as simple as it looked."

"Well, you were half right," Tristan said. "What are you thinking, Rusty? I don't like this any more than you, but I think we're going to have to—I don't know, accept it or something."

Rusty's knuckles were white on his butter knife. "That damn *arm*," he spat. "I keep seeing it. How come you've already forgotten it? It looked like something they dug up in Hiroshima. What if that happened to one of us? What if it'd been *Christa*? She doesn't matter, does she, 'cause she's not one of us. We're the only goddamn people in the whole world that matter."

Again the scene returned to Tristan, and the spoonful of soup he'd just swallowed turned to damp ashes in his throat.

"What did you say?" Leila asked. "Who's Christa?"

"Never mind," Rusty muttered.

"Maybe they shouldn't have taken us," Leila said sadly. "No offense, Rusty, but you're scaring me. It feels like someone's going to explode as soon as we get back to the Lair."

They finished their dinner in silence. As the waiter cleared away their dishes, Natasha got to her feet.

"If anyone would like to talk to me, tonight or ever, I would love the chance to hear your thoughts. I know this is hard."

Quinsley nodded and raised his glass. "I'd love to talk with you too, if you'd like that," he said. "I may just

be a cook, but I went to this school the same as anyone. Although it's been a long time, I still remember my first disaster."

Leila smiled at him, and he tipped his glass to her.

Tristan and Rusty were sharing a room at the lodge that night, and Tristan nearly invited Leila to join them—her confident demeanor was beginning to crack as they said goodnight. He needn't have worried, though. He was still far from sleep an hour later when he heard a commotion in the hallway. Sitting up, he glanced over at Rusty, who was staring wide-eyed at the ceiling.

"I'm going to see what's going on."

Rusty nodded.

Tristan padded over to the door and eased the door open—Hayley, Cailyn, and Trey were standing in the hallway in their pajamas, and Leila joined them a moment later. Cailyn had a blanket draped around her shoulders, while Hayley clutched a pillow to her stomach.

"But Natasha might get mad," Hayley was saying. "She *did* say we had to go to our rooms after eleven."

"What's wrong?" Leila asked, looking from Hayley to Cailyn. "Bad dreams?"

In the dim hallway lights, Leila's face looked colorless.

"I can't—I can't—" Cailyn tightened her clawed grip on the blanket.

"She's not doing so well," Hayley whispered. "I thought we could go sit by the fire, but Natasha might not like that."

Tristan was surprised. Until now, Cailyn had been one of the students least perturbed by what they were doing. He had envied her clear thinking.

"Who the hell cares?" Rusty said from behind Tristan. He emerged from the dark room, still fully clothed and miserable. "I don't wanna listen to her."

"You're right," Hayley said. "Do you guys want to join us?"

Rusty nodded fervently.

Once Trey fetched Eli, the seven of them grabbed blankets from their beds and tiptoed down to the lodge fireplace. The still-flickering fire was surrounded by sofas much nicer than those in the Subroom, and they settled gratefully onto the cushions. It took some persuasion to get Cailyn to sit down, though she eventually dropped onto the side couch and drew her knees to her chest. Hayley and Eli sat on either side of her, muttering empty reassurances and rubbing her shoulders.

"You okay, Leila?" Tristan asked softly, joining her and Rusty on a second couch.

Leila's eyes were reflected oddly in the firelight. "Of course," she said shakily. Looping a hand around Tristan's elbow, she put her head on his shoulder. "Sorry," she whispered. "I know it's stupid, but I'm afraid you guys are going to vanish if I look away."

Tristan was starting to drift off, Leila a warm weight at his side, the fire winking beneath his heavy eyelids, when Cailyn began to talk. Tristan closed his eyes firmly and listened. He felt as though he was eavesdropping on something very private.

"I feel awful," Cailyn said in a choked voice. "Somehow I—I always dismissed people dying. There are billions of people in the world, and they'll all die anyway. Everything would be better off if there were less of us. But—but—" her voice trailed off, and Hayley murmured something reassuring.

"I can't imagine how much that must've hurt," Cailyn whispered. "Those poor people were asleep, and then they were trapped, and the fire swallowed them alive. They didn't even have a chance to say goodbye to their families." She sniffed. "No one should have to suffer like that. Not animals or people. I can't believe I *wanted* that to happen. What if that awful arm had been yours, Hayley?"

"It's okay," Hayley said. "We're all here, and we're safe. That's all that matters right now. Do you still trust Natasha?"

"Yes. No, of course not. I don't know." Cailyn's voice grew muffled at the end, and when Tristan peeked sideways he saw that she had buried her face in her knees.

Whether any of the others were able to sleep or not, everyone grew quiet after that, the fire crackling peacefully in the background. Tristan fell asleep eventually, his whole body weary and his thoughts wrapped in a snarled mess.

The fire had burned itself out by morning, and someone had tucked another blanket around Tristan and Leila. Tristan didn't move for a while; his eyes were caked with sleep, and his mouth still tasted of ashes. Eventually Natasha came down the hall to rouse them, smiling fondly at them all.

"Are you mad at us?" Hayley asked, rubbing her eyes.

Rusty yawned and stretched his legs towards the fire, nearly falling off the couch.

"Of course not," Natasha said. "But come and look outside—the snow is beautiful." She crossed to the window and drew back the curtain. Outside, a smooth wave of snow looped around the trees and rocks behind the lodge.

Natasha turned, silhouetted against the glare from the snow. "It's time to go home."

Chapter 10: The Hailstorm

A fresh layer of snow lay deep around the Lair, and it was a wearying hike up the hill from the airstrip. No one except Hayley had brought enough layers; a collective sigh of relief went through the students as they descended through the barrier into the warmth of the ballroom.

The moment they were safe in the Subroom, Rusty threw down his backpack and kicked it against the wall.

“I hate them. I hate everyone.”

“Rusty, hush,” Leila said.

“I can’t stay here. I hate it.”

He was talking loudly, but the others in the Subroom pretended not to hear him.

“Come on!” Rusty demanded. “Are you all gonna pretend that didn’t happen? Huh?”

“No,” Hayley moaned. She sank into an armchair and slouched so far back she was nearly horizontal. “I can’t stand it any longer. I can’t live like this, I swear I can’t. They’re going to have to kill me if they want me to stay here.”

“Don’t say that,” Trey said fiercely.

Tristan looked at Hayley in alarm—her dull, hopeless tone scared him much more than Rusty’s righteous anger.

“None of us like it,” Trey continued, “but we don’t exactly have a choice. If we stay here, maybe we’ll be able to change something. If we leave, the teachers win.”

Eli took an aggressive stance opposite Trey. “Are we going to fight them, then?” he said. “Are we seriously going to do this?”

“I don’t know,” Trey said. He plucked at a bit of stuffing that bunched out from the couch. “Not yet, but someday. I’m not going to just sit and let this happen forever.”

Eli continued to glare at him, until Cailyn walked deliberately between the two boys, and Eli let his hunched shoulders drop. “I’ll hold you to that,” he said, turning away.

After that outburst, everyone grew very quiet and settled in to various solitary tasks, feigning concentration. Tristan kept glancing at Leila; she was the only one who knew his thoughts and shared his opinion, and he was afraid of speaking to anyone else for fear of triggering their anger.

Amber disappeared to her usual forest haunts, while Hayley spent several hours cleaning the Subroom, sweeping and mopping the floors, dusting every book on the shelves, and scrubbing the dining table until it gleamed. Cailyn offered to help, but Hayley was determined to do it alone. After a while, Eli grabbed his coat and stalked upstairs, Trey hurrying after, his face lined with concern. Tristan didn’t blame him—Eli looked ready to do something reckless.

Before long Tristan couldn’t stand the taut silence. Feeling too ugly to face the fresh snow, he turned to the tunnels of the Lair, wandering without a destination in mind. If only he could go far enough from the sterile halls of the school, maybe he could forget what he had seen.

He roamed farther into the tunnels than he’d ever gone before. He had brought a few marbles that could give him light or lead him back to the Subroom if he got lost, but he preferred to stumble through the dark with only a hand along the coarse wall to guide his way. His pulse thudded in his ears as he went deeper and deeper, past anything he knew, and he welcomed the overwhelming rush of adrenaline. His thoughts were chiseled down to nothing; every instinct was trained on the raw awareness of his life suspended in the pressing darkness.

What was a human life? Reduced to so little, it was easy to imagine the earth enveloping him whole, engorging

his flesh and suffocating his consciousness. Goosebumps prickled down his arms, and a stale breeze ruffled his hair like the breath of the underworld.

If only death was that simple.

When his legs felt leaden and his hands had gone numb, Tristan finally turned around. It felt like he had been walking for days in a vacuum, and he was suddenly ravenous.

The return trip was much longer than he expected, and he kept stumbling, his aching legs threatening to collapse beneath him. His eyes strained to see in the dark, and numbness turned to dull fear. He was about to set an Intralocation spell on the Subroom, afraid he had lost his way, when his hand brushed against the familiar wood grain of the Subroom door. Slumping in relief, he pushed it gratefully open.

“Where’ve you been?” Rusty demanded. He sounded almost like himself again.

Tristan blinked in the harsh light, waiting for the room to swim into view. Squinting around, he saw that Amber, Eli, and Trey were still away, and Leila had vanished as well.

“Where’s Leila?” he asked, slinking over to join Rusty by the fire.

“I thought she went after you,” Rusty said indignantly.

Tristan shook his head. “Maybe she’s in the kitchen.”

Rusty threw his notebook at Tristan’s stomach. “You still haven’t told me where you were.”

“Just walking,” he said. He picked up Rusty’s notebook and flipped through a few pages. “Haven’t you done any homework yet?”

“No. I’m not gonna keep doing what the teachers want.”

Tossing the notebook on the table, Tristan said, “Well, you’ll be punished for the next twenty years, I expect.” He stood and fingered the marbles in his pocket. “Is it dinnertime yet? I’m starving.”

Trey emerged in the Subroom just as they were leaving for dinner, his expression grave.

“Where’s Eli?” Cailyn asked at once.

He just shook his head.

Leila and Amber reappeared at dinner; it transpired that Leila had been helping Quinsley, though she didn’t seem inclined to talk. Tristan didn’t realize that anyone else was missing from the ballroom until Zeke slunk in halfway through dinner, his face bruised and swollen.

“Leila?” Tristan asked in surprise. “Were you fighting with Zeke again?”

“No!” Leila said vehemently. “I haven’t been anywhere near him!” She gave Tristan a hurt look. “Besides, he’s way stronger than me. I’d be bruised too if I’d gotten in another fight.”

“Sorry,” Tristan said, though he continued to watch Leila out of the corner of his eye. He couldn’t think of anyone else who would have beat Zeke up this badly.

Trying valiantly to pull off his usual haughty air, Zeke dropped into his chair beside Damian and threw Leila a challenging look.

She glared at him.

“You know,” Tristan said slowly, “I almost think it could’ve been his friends who beat him up.”

“He probably deserved it,” Leila said, though her expression softened marginally.

It was not until late that night that Eli slouched into the Subroom, his face bright red from the cold and his shoulders shaking. He deliberately did not look at Trey; it almost looked as though he had been crying.

* * *

As the next week rolled by, it was almost possible to pretend that life had returned to normal. Instead of sulking, Hayley began cleaning the Subroom more vigorously than ever, until every loose grain of dust had been scraped from the coarse stone floor and Cailyn started ordering anyone who entered to remove their shoes. Eli and Trey still weren’t talking; indeed, Eli didn’t appear to be speaking to anyone. Rusty had stopped turning in most of his homework, and he didn’t open his books or take notes in class. Grindlethorn and Brikkens heaped daily punishments on him, until he was hardly getting any sleep, while Natasha tried repeatedly to talk sense into him. Alldusk pretended not to notice.

“You can’t do this forever,” Tristan said at the end of the week, when Rusty stumbled up for breakfast just

as the others were pushing in their chairs and packing away their books for class. Rusty was hollow-eyed and stooped; he could've passed for Drakewell's son. "Here, you need to eat." He stuffed a muffin and two apples into Rusty's hands.

"I wouldn't be doing the punishments at all, if I didn't need food," Rusty said blearily. He nearly walked into the ballroom door, which Leila heaved open just in time.

"You think I'd let you starve?" Leila asked indignantly. "Remember when Tristan got fifty hours last fall? I brought him food all weekend, and he was just fine."

Rusty sighed. "Then I'd never get to eat with you guys. That'd be really lonely."

"Well, just make sure you don't collapse on us," Leila said gently. "Seriously, Rusty, I'm getting a bit worried."

They had reached Brikkens' classroom; Rusty patted Leila clumsily on the back before following Tristan into the room. He sank into his chair and fell asleep almost immediately, head pillowed on his arms.

After Chemistry that afternoon, Alldusk stopped Tristan, Leila, and Rusty on their way out the door.

"Could you three stay for a minute?" he asked. "I want to talk to you."

Glancing at each other, Tristan and Leila took seats on either side of Rusty, who yawned and nudged his bag across the table.

"I just wanted to ask if everything was all right," he said gravely, looking at Tristan. "I know everyone was a bit shaken after Natasha's excursion. I hope none of the students in your room are discussing mutiny."

Tristan thought of the marbles they still had stockpiled from their first year, and of Trey's promise that they would take a stand eventually. "No," he said. "Of course not."

Alldusk nodded and turned to Rusty. "You look miserable," he said. "Is there any way we could persuade you to start trying again?"

Rusty looked at his hands, which were twisted together in his lap. "Maybe," he said at last. "See, there's this girl at home—at Juvie, that's where I met her—and she said they're probably gonna lock her in the madhouse before C-Christmas." His voice broke. "I just wanna go home and see if she's okay."

Tristan was taken aback. Why had he never guessed? He stared at Rusty, wishing he'd asked his friend what was really wrong.

"Well," Alldusk said, looking as startled as Tristan felt. "Well, that's a conundrum. Thank you for being honest. I can't promise anything, but I think something might be arranged. If I put in a word for you with Drakewell, will you please promise to start turning in your homework again?"

"Yeah," Rusty said, his expression brightening marginally. "I'll try." He stood shakily, looking more hopeful than he had in weeks.

Alldusk smiled at Tristan. "Now, if only all of our problems could be solved so easily, we'd be settling in for a nice, peaceful Christmas about now."

"Come on," Leila said. "We'll be late for Natasha."

As she and Rusty turned to the door, Tristan leaned forward and whispered, "Are you doing okay? Do you still miss Professor Merridy?"

Alldusk sighed and nodded. "She's a good person, whatever she did, and I wish I could see her one last time. But we have to get used to loss. It's a necessary part of what we do here."

"Well, maybe you'll run into her someday," Tristan said, though without conviction. Giving Alldusk a half-smile, he turned and raced to catch up with Leila and Rusty.

"—can't believe you didn't say anything!" Leila was saying with indignation. "I thought we were your friends!"

Rusty hunched his shoulders defensively. "I thought you'd hate me."

"What?" Tristan said. "For caring about someone back home? If my brother was still alive, I'd be thinking about him all the time."

"Christa's different," Rusty mumbled.

They were approaching Natasha's classroom, and Leila slowed. Through the door, Tristan could hear the scraping shuffle and low murmur of students still taking their seats.

"Why weren't you upset until after the field trip, then?" Leila asked. "If you knew all along that she'd be...relocated, why didn't it matter until then?"

Rusty turned and slouched against the wall, frowning at the floor. "I still don't want anything to do with the

professors. But if they'll help Christa..." His shoulders sank an inch lower. "Quinsley helped me send a letter before we left. I thought maybe something would've happened. I mean, it's been months since I've seen her. But I got her letter back when we'd gotten to the supply town, and all she said was, 'Nothing's changed.' I'm scared she's gonna kill herself if they send her to that asylum."

Rusty made an odd hiccupping sound and sank all the way to the floor, kneading his fists on his forehead. It was a moment before Tristan realized he was crying. Suddenly he remembered running into Rusty on the stairs after he'd been talking to Quinsley about something; the discovery of a set of auras on the nearby ridge had driven that conversation completely out of his mind.

"Rusty," Leila murmured, crouching beside him and stroking his hair with. "Alldusk wouldn't lie. He's going to help you."

Rusty's shoulders shook.

"Come on, let's skip class," Tristan said. "It's been a few days since I've earned any punishment."

"Good idea," Leila said.

She and Tristan took Rusty under the arms and lifted him back to his feet, and together they led him up to the kitchen. For a moment he dug in his heels and refused to go into the kitchen with his face all blotchy and tearstained, but Quinsley heard their approach and loudly bade them enter.

The kitchen was warm and smelled of baking bread and cinnamon. Without asking any questions, Quinsley steered Rusty to a seat at the counter and set a plate of molasses cookies in front of him. A minute later he was pouring hot chocolate for all three of them.

"Thanks," Leila said, wrapping her hands around her mug. "I'll be back tonight, I'm sure, as soon as Natasha gives us hours for missing class."

"Excellent," Quinsley said. "I have a mountain of dishes waiting to be scrubbed."

Leila rolled her eyes.

Resting his elbows on the counter and lacing his hands together, Quinsley said, "If you want to talk about anything, Rusty, I'd gladly listen."

Rusty sniffed. "No, I'm just being stupid. It's okay."

Leila squeezed his shoulder, and their talk turned to lighter topics—Christmas and sledding and holiday baking and parties.

"Do you love her, Rusty?" Tristan asked carefully after Rusty had cheered up marginally. "Christa, I mean."

After a moment of silence, Rusty nodded. "She's the one who carved that fairy girl. Remember?"

Tristan's eyes widened as he recalled the wooden figurine Rusty had chosen as his sole belonging precious enough to keep at the beginning of their first year. He had thought Rusty a bit simpleminded and straightforward, but now.... How many secrets of his remained to be uncovered?

As the conversation returned to less dangerous subjects, Tristan mused that most of the students were beginning to pair up. Damian and Cassidy were certainly together, and Hayley and Trey as well, if he was not mistaken. Rusty had a girl back home, and even Eli and Cailyn might have gotten together if not for the strange, angry mood Eli had recently fallen into. Had Evvie noticed as well? Was she upset that Tristan hadn't asked her out yet?

She couldn't be, Tristan thought with irritation. No one except Damian and Cassidy could possibly think about that sort of thing right after seeing the ruin of Whitney.

When the hour was nearly over, Alldusk knocked and slipped into the kitchen. "Natasha sent me to find out where you three had gone," he said, smiling. "I couldn't tell if she was worried or if she just wanted to assign you extra homework."

"Well, I'm not going back," Leila said. "There's no point now."

"Of course not," Alldusk said. "However, I also happened to pass Professor Gracewright on my way through the ballroom, and she's looking for help sealing off the cracks in the greenhouse. She says there's a blizzard starting up outside."

"Ooh, that's exciting!" Leila said. "Let's go find Gracewright."

Tristan and Rusty laughed, each startled free from his own dark thoughts, and followed her out to the ballroom.

“What are you kids doing here?” Gracewright called from the doorway. Her knitted hat was soggy with melting snow, and she looked as though she’d been about to go speak with Drakewell. “Shouldn’t you be in class?” A drop of slush plopped onto her nose, and she shook it away irritably. “Never mind that. I need help with the greenhouse. I’ll excuse you if you come with me.”

Pulling her hat more firmly over her ears, Gracewright hurried back to the stairs, moving surprisingly fast on her tiny legs.

Though they didn’t have coats, Tristan, Leila, and Rusty followed her eagerly up through the barrier to the meadow. The wind screeched through the cracks in the longhouse, and when Gracewright heaved open the door, they were assaulted with a powerful blast of snow. Tristan’s face stung. The wind tugged them forward into the meadow, where they sank to their knees in powder. Beyond the doorway, the world vanished in a blinding swirl of white. Tristan couldn’t even guess which way the greenhouse lay.

“Stick together!” Gracewright yelled over the wind. “Don’t lose me!”

Linking hands with Tristan and Rusty, Leila forged ahead in the snow, bent double against the wind. Already Tristan couldn’t feel his face. Gracewright was nothing but a gray smudge ahead of them; Tristan squinted after her and tried to move faster, fighting his way through the deepening snow.

The greenhouse didn’t appear in front of them until they were nearly at its door, and Gracewright wrenched it open a crack and nudged the three of them in before slamming it behind her. Instantly they were engulfed in warm air. Tristan had the strange sense that they were trapped in a bubble; the sound of the raging storm was just as loud as before, only now it was low and distorted through the glass panes.

“I’ve never seen a storm this bad,” Gracewright said over the roar of the wind. “Usually I just leave a few enchanted heat lamps under the tables, and the plants are fine, but I’m afraid the whole greenhouse might collapse.”

As the wind continued to howl, growing louder by the minute, Gracewright handed around rags and caulking guns. Leila and Gracewright squeezed bulging lines of white caulk along the greenhouse frame where it held the panes of glass in place, and Tristan and Rusty stood on the bench to shove rags in the seam of the roof.

“Do you think we should try and put the plants somewhere safer?” Tristan asked, cringing away from the roof as the whole building rattled. “In case the greenhouse really does fall down?”

“They wouldn’t survive ten seconds outside,” Gracewright said grimly. “I wish we’d known this storm was coming.”

Tristan was stepping over a potted fern when something crashed onto the roof directly over his head. He started and lost his balance; arms flailing, he fell backwards off the table and slammed against the table on the opposite wall.

“Triss! Are you okay?” Leila said, hurrying over to him.

A little dazed, Tristan struggled to his feet. He’d whacked his shoulder on the table, and his left arm felt like it was going to fall off.

“Careful, there,” Gracewright said.

“What the hell was that?” Tristan said, brushing Leila away. “Didn’t you hear it?”

“What, the wind?” Rusty asked, dropping to his knees on the table.

“No, that s—”

CRASH!

All four of them heard it this time. It sounded like someone had hurled a rock at the greenhouse roof.

Leila cursed. “Look!” she yelled, pointing to the roof. Something big and white was sliding down the glass, rasping as it fell.

THUD!

This time Tristan saw what had hit the roof—it was a ball of ice larger than his fist. Cracks spiderwebbed across the tinted pane as the third hailstone rolled from the roof.

“Save us,” Gracewright said under her breath. Then she yelled, “Get out of here! Back to the Lair! NOW!”

She gave Tristan a surprisingly fierce shove towards the door. Rusty jumped off the table, and Leila threw her caulk gun to the floor. Pausing a split second at the doorway, Gracewright squinted out into the storm. Then she shouldered the door open and took off running.

Tristan, Leila, and Rusty linked hands and sprinted into the storm, heads down and eyes blurred with the whirling snow. Tristan couldn't see where they were going, but Leila tugged him forward, so he ran blindly.

"Argh!" Rusty yelled from somewhere to Tristan's left. Leila gasped. Tristan clawed at his eyes, trying to see what had happened, but Leila yanked him on. She screamed something, her voice ripped away by the wind.

At last a familiar dark edifice loomed out of the blinding snow; Leila dove for the door and Tristan toppled in after her. A hailstone pummeled his foot just as he dragged it inside, but he was too numb to care.

The door slammed shut behind them, plunging everything into hazy darkness.

"Rusty? You—you okay?" Tristan gasped. He was still gripping Leila's hand as though it was a lifeline. All three were on their knees.

"Yeah," Rusty said weakly.

"Oh my god," Gracewright said from somewhere in the shadows. "Are you safe? Are you hurt? Oh, that was horrible; I cannot believe I let you out in the storm..."

"Rusty was hit by one of those balls of ice," Leila said. "But I think he's okay."

"Get downstairs," Gracewright said. "Hurry. It's not safe here."

As Tristan, Leila, and Rusty helped each other to their feet and followed Gracewright down the stairs, the hailstones began battering the roof in a thunderous roar.

Chapter 11: The Shattered Dome

When they passed through the barrier, the noise stopped abruptly. As the warm air engulfed them, Tristan shivered.

“Gerard!” Gracewright called, her voice strained. “Gerard, come here!”

The kitchen door opened a second later, and Quinsley appeared, his face smudged with flour. He looked ready to crack a joke, but when he saw the four of them, his smile slid away.

“What the devil just happened?”

“Go—fetch the headmaster. At once!” Gracewright said breathlessly.

Quinsley nodded and broke into a run as he crossed the ballroom.

Gripping her wool hat and pulling it so low that it nearly covered her eyes, Gracewright staggered over to the professors’ table and sank into a chair. Tristan, Leila, and Rusty took seats nearby, waiting for Drakewell.

“That did not seem *natural*,” Gracewright said shakily. “Something is wrong.”

Leila nodded, biting her lip. “Rusty, where did you get hit?” she asked after a moment.

Gritting his teeth, Rusty rolled up his sleeve and showed her a red circle on his forearm. Then he laughed. “It doesn’t look that bad, huh? But it hurts like hell.” He tugged his sleeve down again. “Tristan’s gonna have an even bigger bruise from falling off that bench, I bet.”

Tristan rolled his shoulder back and fingered the tender spot where he’d collided with the table. Soon they heard racing footsteps echoing off the marble, and as the four of them turned to watch, the ballroom door crashed open. Drakewell half-ran to the platform, red-faced and disheveled, Quinsley pounding along behind him.

“What’s happened?” Drakewell gasped.

Tristan had never seen him this unraveled.

“The storm,” Gracewright said. “It’s not normal. We were nearly killed with hailstones the size of apples! Something is wrong.”

“Indeed it is,” Drakewell said. “That storm was created by magicians. Quinsley, run down to the Map Room and check if one of the students has been meddling. Fairholm, fetch Natasha.”

Quinsley turned and sprinted from the ballroom, Tristan close on his heels.

Merridy, he thought with every pounding footfall. *Merridy’s attacking us. I was right.*

Natasha was in her classroom, to Tristan’s relief; he had forgotten the class was still in session.

“Where on earth have you been?” Natasha asked, taking in Tristan’s snow-dusted coat and frantic expression.

“Drakewell needs you,” Tristan gasped. He clutched the stitch in his chest, leaning against the doorway. “He’s in the ballroom. There’s a hailstorm—”

In the second that Natasha’s eyes met his, an understanding passed between them. She was afraid of exactly the same thing he was—the auras along the nearby ridge.

He didn’t have the chance to say more, because Natasha swept past him and hurried down the hall, leaving the class staring at the empty doorway. He hurried after her, wishing they had done something about the auras. It was too late for that now, though.

“Do you know anything about this?” Drakewell demanded as soon as Natasha and Tristan returned to the ballroom. His face was still flushed. “It looks very much like an attack. Quinsley is down in the Map Room verifying that no student was involved.”

“They can’t have been,” Natasha said. “They were all in my class. Well, except Tristan, Leila, and Rusty, of course, but it seems they are accounted for now.”

“It appears that someone has penetrated our defenses,” Drakewell said coldly. “If anyone has any information to volunteer, I need to know immediately. Our protective enchantments should not have let in such deadly projectiles.”

Natasha stepped in front of Drakewell, hands on her hips. “Tristan tried to give us this information several times, but no one took his word seriously. He was afraid Darla Merridy had set up her own base and was still intent on destabilizing us.”

“Your evidence?” Drakewell barked, turning on Tristan.

“I don’t have any,” he said quickly. “But I swear I didn’t burn down my own house, and Zeke’s house was washed away almost at the same time. Someone else did it. I know they did.”

“He certainly approached me with the same opinion,” Natasha said. “You cannot accuse him of hiding information.” She glanced at him again, confirming his suspicion that she hadn’t mentioned the auras to Drakewell.

Warily Tristan said, “Shouldn’t we check the map? Just in case someone’s nearby, I mean.” He hoped against all hope that Drakewell would find the stray auras and deal with them quickly.

“Indeed,” Drakewell said. “I will return shortly. Abilene, Natasha, summon the students to the ballroom. This is an emergency.”

Before Gracewright and Natasha had even left the ballroom, the rest of the students piled through the doors, muttering in confusion.

“Gracewright says we’re in danger,” Hayley said, speaking to the room at large as though seeking a voice of authority.

“Yeah,” Tristan said. “I think someone’s attacking us.”

“Not again!” Eli groaned. “I bet Drakewell’s just messing with the Map Room so we all feel helpless and start trusting the teachers again.”

“He was up here,” Leila said. “Everyone is accounted for. It’s someone outside the academy attacking us.”

“And that is a hundred times worse than a threat from within,” Gracewright said grimly. “If someone has managed to destabilize our defensive enchantments, we are vulnerable to attack from all sides.”

“I thought there weren’t any other magicians,” Damian said. “What’s this bullshit?”

“Thank you, Damian,” Natasha said curtly. “We have reason to believe that your former professor Merridy has continued her efforts to destabilize us. Whether she is working alone or has recruited help remains to be seen.” She turned to Alldusk. “Brinley. Would you check the damage upstairs? The headmaster will need to know how many layers of protection have been jeopardized.”

“Very well,” Alldusk said, tugging his sleeves up. He bounded up the stairs, not slowing to pass through the Prasadimum barrier, and vanished into the emptiness beyond.

“Couldn’t they just blow the entrance up and get in here?” Eli asked Natasha.

“Not quite.” Natasha took a seat at the edge of the platform and crossed her legs, one ankle twitching with impatience. “That Prasadimum has been reinforced with several more discriminating layers of magic. For instance, one of the oldest magical remnants in the academy is our stone door. It was modeled by some of the first magicians to live here, and we don’t entirely understand how it works. But if anything disturbs the stairway, such as a flood or fire or explosion, the door pulls fragments of stone from the walls around it and seals off the stairway. No one can pass until the disturbance has been remedied.”

“Not even if they blew up the stone wall?” Zeke asked.

“The wall appears to replenish itself infinitely,” Natasha said. “You would have to put dynamite to this entire valley before you destroyed enough rock to break down the wall.”

Zeke opened his mouth to make another flippant remark, but the room fell silent as Drakewell stalked in. At the same time, Alldusk reappeared from the stairway, his black hair dusted with a feather-coat of snow.

“The outer enchantment is gone,” Alldusk said. “Only the illusions remain. If someone manages to find our exact location, we’ll be helpless.”

“That was obvious even on the globe,” Drakewell said. “Our protective enchantment has not merely been weakened. It has been shattered.”

“Who was it?” Gracewright asked weakly. “Could you see anyone on the map?”

Drakewell shook his head. “Not a stray aura within a hundred miles. However, I suspect someone is hiding out nearby. No rogue magician could gather enough power to manipulate a month’s worth of weather from afar.”

“Then it seems we were wrong to dismiss weather magic,” Grindlethorn said tiredly.

“Very wrong indeed,” Drakewell said. “We will not make such a mistake again. If any of you notices something out-of-place, be it a strange track or a sound you cannot identify, I must know.” He turned to look at the students as he said this.

Tristan nodded along with his fellows, swearing to himself that he would report any stray auras to Drakewell immediately. It seemed they were no longer dealing with innocent mountaineers; he couldn’t risk letting a magician slip by for the sake of preserving his conscience.

“You know what this means,” Natasha said. “We cannot afford to let our vigilance lapse.”

Drakewell stepped in front of Natasha. “Until we discover who is responsible, you are restricted to the Lair. Professors as well.” He gave Gracewright a sharp look. “Collect what you can from the greenhouse; your classes will henceforth take place in Professor Brikkens’ room. Gerard will see to it that you have adequate storage for your supplies.”

“I will continue to tend to the greenhouse,” Gracewright said. “I’ll do it at night, when no one will be watching. I cannot let the plants die.”

Drakewell assented with a sharp nod. “For the rest of you, I hope you take this seriously. Any transgressions will be punished severely. We cannot afford any mistakes.”

“What if we just left and stopped murdering innocent people?” Eli said. “That wouldn’t be much of a tragedy.”

“Maybe it’s a sign,” Zeke said. “Maybe it’s just the world saying it doesn’t want to put up with you any longer.”

“No ordinary weather would have destroyed our barrier,” Alldusk said. “Only disturbances with a magical source are able to impact the enchantments. I don’t know whether Darla or someone else is responsible for this, but we are in direct danger here. Leaving the academy will just make us more vulnerable than ever. You should know that, Zeke. I’m almost certain now that our rogue magician washed away your house.”

“We should just stop,” Eli said. “Merridy was right. What you’re doing is twisted and rotten. She *should* destroy this place. I might even help her do it.”

“Fritz!” Drakewell barked.

This time Natasha stepped quickly in front of Drakewell. “Your misgivings are understandable,” she said. “However, we cannot assume our attacker is your former professor. Even if it is, we do not know her agenda. If she has amassed enough power to attack us directly in the Lair, she has the ability to do a great deal of harm. Are you certain she will return home and live out her days quietly once she’s destroyed us thoroughly? Or will she proceed to shape the world however she sees fit?”

“Whether you support our work or not, the known evil is far gentler than the unknown.”

* * *

Confined belowground, Tristan and his friends grew restless and moody. They might have been on the space station, for all they knew of the world around them. The constant temperature and light of the marble hallways began to grate at Tristan, until he longed to stand in the snow and let his toes grow numb and his cheeks raw.

If there even was any snow outside.

Botany classes in Brikkens’ room were no longer interesting—unable to collect or tend to live plants, Gracewright devoted the hour to theory and memorization. On the few occasions that she brought in potted plants to prune or tie up, Brikkens complained so bitterly about the mess that she soon abandoned these lessons.

Two days after the ice storm, Drakewell greeted the students in Delair’s classroom and led them without explanation into the tunnels.

“I hope he’s not doing another effing disaster,” Eli muttered from behind Tristan.

“I doubt it,” Leila whispered, too quietly for Eli to hear.

At the door of the Map Room, Drakewell stopped, blocking the entrance. “Take care,” he said, tapping the lights. “There are sharp fragments on the floor.”

Edging around Hayley, Tristan saw what Drakewell referred to. Scattered across the stone were what looked like hundreds of fragments of glass. Only when Tristan knelt and picked up one of the larger pieces, still no bigger

than his thumbnail, did he realize that it was not glass but something more delicate, almost insubstantial.

He had an inkling that Drakewell had spoken literally when he referred to the protective enchantment shattering.

“What lies before you is a job so tedious I could not ask anyone to do it alone,” Drakewell said. “These are the remains of our outermost protective barrier. We do not know how the original barrier was erected, so instead of beginning anew, we will piece this one together and re-adhere it to our valley. You will find that the fragments cling together when you fit them correctly.”

Finley was the first to kneel beside the scattering of fragments; pushing his glasses more securely into place, he began sifting through the pieces. Hesitantly the others joined him; Cassidy looped her red hair around one finger and plucked at the shards with her fingernails, as though afraid they might sting her.

“What’re we supposed to do with all that dusty stuff?” Rusty asked. “Do we just shake it around until it turns into something?”

“For once in your life, you may have given us a useful suggestion,” Drakewell said snidely. “If you would like to take responsibility for collecting the dust—every scrap of it, mind you—into this glass, you may experiment with shaking the scraps to see if they adhere to one another.” He handed Rusty a greasy-looking glass, a dustpan, and a brush left over from the summer cleaning spree.

Brow furrowed in deepest concentration, Rusty dropped to all fours and began crawling around in search of any shimmering dust too small to reconstruct.

Meanwhile, Tristan crossed to the globe, hoping to catch a glimpse of any auras near the academy. He still had trouble distinguishing the auras with the room fully lit, but he was beginning to recognize the bright patches that constituted cities.

“There is one aura, far off to the right,” Amber whispered from behind.

Tristan spun in surprise. “Magical or normal?”

“Definitely normal.”

Nodding, Tristan dropped to his knees and turned his full concentration to the fragments of the enchantment. Drakewell had turned his gaze on the two of them, his eyes flashing, and Tristan was careful not to lift his head until Drakewell’s attention had been diverted.

Tristan had always been rather good at puzzles—it had been the pastime he and Marcus shared. Marcus had received two heart transplants before his death, the second one on the cusp of his tenth birthday, and had spent more time at the hospital than any of his classmates combined. Each time he returned from the hospital, Tristan had greeted him with a new puzzle. It was his promise that he would stay inside and keep Marcus company while he recovered, no matter how good the weather or how insistent his friends.

As he reached first for one ragged scrap and then another, the curving glass surface growing beneath his hands, Tristan lost himself to a string of memories. The last puzzle they had ever done together was a golden-scaled dragon breathing fire into a vast cavern, and Tristan had spilled his lemonade on the completed border. Remembering Marcus’s indignation—he had thrown the half-empty glass at Tristan and stained the carpet in the process—Tristan’s eyes itched with unshed tears. He blinked fiercely and reached for another piece of glass.

Before long, Tristan, Leila, Zeke, and Finley had each assembled a sizeable piece of the enchantment. Rusty was still diligently sweeping the floor, though it looked as if he had a piece of glass about the size of a nail-head at the bottom of his cup.

“Give that here,” Leila told Tristan. Taking his piece, she fitted it with hers and held out her hand to Zeke. “Don’t you dare stab me.”

Zeke pretended to jab her in the ribs with his lethal-looking shard of glass; a second later he produced it from his other hand, grinning.

“Very funny,” Leila said. Zeke’s piece attached just as easily as Tristan’s had, though there were several obvious holes whose missing pieces were probably rattling around in Rusty’s cup.

“That’s enough for now,” Drakewell said. “Class is over. Leave the shards where you are, and take care on the way out. We will return tomorrow.”

Tristan stood and shook out his stiff legs before following Drakewell from the room. As they shuffled down the tunnels, he mused that, intentionally or not, Drakewell had been very clever to bring the students back to the

Map Room on an innocent mission. Once the students grew accustomed to working in the Map Room, and began investing their curiosity and efforts into the maps for reasons unrelated to disasters, they might be more receptive to the idea of disaster-creation. Tristan recognized that very reaction in himself—though he tried to resist it, he was fascinated by the shattered enchantment and eager to return to the Map Room to see how it functioned once it was made whole.

“Did you see that piece I made?” Rusty asked as soon as Drakewell disappeared up the marble stairway. “It was actually working! My idea was awesome!”

“Good for you,” Tristan said drily. “I think my piece was the biggest, though.”

Leila elbowed him. “Not true! Yours had more holes in it. Mine was all one solid piece.”

“I said mine was the *biggest*, not the *heaviest*,” Tristan said.

Leila snorted.

“Hey, remember that puzzle we got in Millersville?” Rusty said. “Wanna start that tonight?”

Tristan and Leila both groaned.

As Damian and Cassidy passed Tristan’s group, holding hands and laughing, Tristan glanced at Evvie, who was deep in conversation with Hayley and Cailyn. How was he meant to go about asking her out? And would she agree to it? If she turned him down, he wasn’t sure he could bear the shame.

When they reached the Subroom, Tristan followed Rusty over to the fire and said in an undertone, “Can I ask you something?”

Rusty blinked at him. “Yeah, ‘course.”

Tristan sighed. “I just wondered—how are you supposed to ask girls out? I’ve been meaning to ask Evvie out for ages, but...it never seems to be the right time. What did you do with Christa?”

Rusty made a face. “I didn’t ask Christa out or anything. I just like her tons. We were at Juvie together, and we always had dinner together. That’s all.”

Tristan scowled. “Well, I don’t think Evvie’s going to join me for dinner here, is she? Leila would bite her head off.”

Laughing, Rusty said, “Aww, you’d better think of something more exciting than that. But you should do it! Evvie’s pretty cute.”

“Shh!” Tristan looked frantically over at Evvie, who was absorbed in her homework.

He had a hard time concentrating on his homework that evening, his head spinning with memories of Marcus and ideas of what he could do with Evvie. It was a shame they were restricted to the Lair—if he could go up to the meadow, he could take her on a picnic or go sledding down by the lake.

After a while, Evvie noticed that Tristan was watching her more than usual. She looked up and gave him a curious stare; flushing, Tristan dropped his eyes to his textbook.

* * *

The next day, Natasha took her class down to the Map Room to finish piecing together the protective enchantment. After working in near-silence the day before, the class was bursting with questions.

“Does this go on the globe or on one of the tables?” Cailyn asked.

“As you know, the globe and tables are linked,” Natasha said. “Whoever first put these enchantments in place worked from the tables, as they were able to more accurately pinpoint the school’s location in a smaller scale. However, once activated, the enchantments exist on both the globe and the tables—as they do in the air surrounding our meadow.”

“Do you just plop a big glass bubble over the valley, and it sits there like that?” Rusty asked.

“Not quite.” Natasha smiled. “We have to work a set of complicated enchantments to fix the glass bubble in place, and once it has adhered to our valley, it becomes a part of the map in the same way auras are an intrinsic part of the globe. Amber might be able to see the protective dome, but it will be invisible to the rest of you.”

As most of the class turned to look at Amber, she reddened and stepped backwards so she was nearly hidden behind the globe.

They were so close to finishing the glass dome by the end of the hour that Natasha asked if anyone was

willing to stay and see it to completion. Damian, Cassidy, Stacy, and Ryan left immediately, but the others stayed late to see what would happen when the dome was reattached.

“Have there been any other people nearby?” Tristan asked. He wasn’t sure he wanted to hear the answer.

“Yes, unfortunately,” Natasha said. “I am trying to persuade Drakewell to let the students sit in on our decision-making sessions. A group of seven recently appeared in the mountains, and while some of us believe it’s nothing more than a hiking group, there are others who wish to eliminate the threat immediately.”

“What do you think?” Cailyn asked.

“We must be careful.” Natasha got to her feet and brushed off her hands. “If these newcomers are involved with the rogue magicians in any way, we cannot let them roam unchecked through the mountains. But if they’re hikers, we cannot kill off the entire group without raising suspicion. Since we are not certain, neither choice is ideal.”

“Are all the auras the same, then?” Tristan asked.

Natasha shook her head fractionally. “I’ll speak to you about that later.”

Rusty stared at her, hungry for more explanation, but Natasha said nothing more on the subject.

At last they had finished assembling the glass dome. It was large enough to sit comfortably on Tristan’s head, with a translucent, milky sheen swirling through the glass. One small gap remained in the side, no bigger than the end of Tristan’s fingernail; though Natasha eyed it closely, she said nothing.

“Thank you very much for your help.” Natasha took the dome from Leila and placing it carefully on the closest stone table. “I will give each of you an hour’s credit against any punishments you’re given.”

“You’re not going to put it on the map now?” Rusty asked, shoulders sagging with disappointment.

“Sorry,” Natasha said. “I need Rowan and Brinley for this, and we can’t have any distractions. We will fix the enchantment in place later tonight.”

“Does it keep out animals and such?” Cailyn asked, bending to fetch her bag. “Or just humans?”

“Just humans. In fact, it segregates those entering by the strength of their auras. Hypothetically, someone with a remarkably weak aura would be able to pass through.”

“How did we get in the first time, then?” Trey asked.

Natasha gave him an appraising look. “Good question. Rowan lifted the barrier long enough to let the new students past. Once inside, you can always pass through without trouble.”

As the other students gathered their coats and left the room in pairs, Tristan lingered, waiting to hear what Natasha would reveal. Leila stayed as well, staring at the globe so intently she had nearly gone cross-eyed, evidently searching for the elusive auras.

“So,” Natasha said when the door had swung shut behind Eli and Cailyn. “You wanted to know about the auras. The problem is, one of the seven auras we found is unusually bright. The other six are ordinary. But sometimes mountaineers and other people who have developed an especially keen awareness of the outdoors have brighter auras. The leader of this particular group could be an unskilled magician—or simply a well-trained mountaineer.”

“Couldn’t you kill the leader and leave the rest alone?” Leila asked.

“Certainly,” Natasha said. “However, that goes against our general principles. If we killed a mountaineer, we would be eliminating one of the people who we respect most—someone who values wild places and knows how to enjoy the wilderness without changing it irrevocably. If we were to target the group, we would have to kill every one of them.”

“What if you found out more about them?” Leila asked.

“How do you propose we do that?”

Leila shrugged.

“Aside from what we can learn from these auras, the only way to find out more is to fly over the group and watch them with binoculars. Or, worse still, hike out to meet them.”

“What’s so bad about hiking out to see them?” Tristan asked.

“It would be dangerous, unless we met them in force. And that would leave the Lair vulnerable.”

“Wouldn’t Drakewell be strong enough to fight them?” Leila asked. “He’s a much better magician than Merridy, isn’t he?”

“True,” Natasha said. “But we’re beginning to doubt that Merridy is involved at all. Besides, I would not send Rowan Drakewell out to deal with this on his own. He is far too unpredictable.”

Tristan glanced at Leila, wondering if she was thinking what he was thinking. “You knew him when he was a student, didn’t you? Was he always this nasty?”

“No.” Natasha leaned against the stone table, her gaze faraway. “He was a bright, passionate student in his day. I admired him for it, and especially admired his dedication to our work. He grew attached to a girl named Ilana, a gorgeous, witty little thing who was the envy of every girl at the school. They were inseparable. Then...there was an accident. It was just after we finished our schooling, when Rowan was beginning his intensive Map Room training.”

Her eyes narrowed. “But I shouldn’t be telling you this.”

“What was your headmaster like?” Tristan asked. “Was he reasonable?”

“Very,” Natasha said. “In fact, I often wished he would be less so. He was so fiercely democratic that he would do nothing without the unanimous agreement of his fellows. Where Rowan might have sent a smaller disaster to upset any precarious industrial operations, his predecessor left them in place until it was too late. There were several notable oil spills during his time. The staff voted on whether they should send a disaster to do away with the oil rigs before they began drilling, but each time they failed to reach a unanimous decision. If they had stopped the drilling projects before they got so far, the ocean would be considerably less polluted than it is now. The Bay of Campeche oil spill in 1979 was the first project we students supervised, and both Rowan and I voted to destroy the rigs before they set up any sort of drilling operation.”

“But you can’t prevent every oil spill *everywhere*,” Leila said. “Unless you sent so many hurricanes through the ocean that no ships could ever sail.”

“True,” Natasha said. “However, there are two ways to approach this dilemma. One is to accept that humans will continue to degrade the world indefinitely, and to allow them to discover—independently—the error of their ways. The other is to realize that most people are incapable of changing their habits until it is far too late. Those of us who believe in this second idea think that, as magicians, we have a responsibility to prevent as much destruction as possible to avert the ultimate collapse of our world.”

“So we’re killing people to keep the entire human race from extinction,” Leila said. “It sounds sensible enough.”

Tristan raised his eyebrows at her. Theoretically Natasha’s ideas made sense, but he was having a hard time swallowing their actual implications. “Do you really think there’s no other way? Is the entire world actually doomed if we don’t do something?”

“Jared Diamond would certainly agree,” Natasha said. “And he’s a scientist and an author, not a magician.”

“What if there’s a way to mess people up without killing them?” Tristan asked. “Like, what if we sent hurricanes with plenty of warning, so they could destroy cities without anyone dying?”

“A very good idea,” Natasha said. “Of course, ethics are not so black-and-white—saving lives is not ‘good’ while ending lives is ‘bad.’ You might be doing a worse disservice by rendering underprivileged people homeless. Would it be worse to kill them outright, or to doom them to a life of poverty and desperation? Only your victims can answer that.”

Tristan swallowed. Each way he turned led him down a more distressing path.

“But if you don’t mind a bit of extra work, I would love to hear your ideas. Could you come up with a list of non-lethal disasters for next lesson that we might be able to explore? I would love nothing more than to find a solution that allowed us to protect our earth without harming anyone.”

“Maybe,” he muttered. He couldn’t stop thinking about Natasha’s words—was life better than death in every situation? And if the earth was stripped of enough trees and the atmosphere warmed enough that every living thing was subjected to poverty and starvation, would that be better than continuing their work here?

“Very well.” Natasha straightened and gave Tristan and Leila an apologetic smile. “Thank you for listening; I hope you think about what I’ve said. Now, I think we ought to return to the school before Drakewell sends out a search party.”

That night Tristan and Leila retreated to a corner of the Subroom with a notebook and a pile of half-dried-up pens.

“I almost think Natasha is right,” Tristan said grimly, tapping his pen against the notebook. “I just wish it was someone else doing this. Not us.”

“I liked your hurricane idea,” Leila said, scratching *Hurricane* at the top of the page. “Especially if it’s somewhere like New York City, not some impoverished city where no one will have anywhere else to go.”

“Don’t change the subject,” Tristan said sharply. “What do you think?”

Leila dropped her notebook with a loud slap. “I have no idea! And I don’t want to think about it right now.”

“Fine. Any other disasters, then?” He scratched his chin, wondering vaguely if the two whiskers that were now coming in would eventually cover his face thoroughly enough to hide some of his scarring. “I guess it’s better than coming up with ways to kill people, at least.”

“Right.” Reluctantly Leila picked up her notebook again. “Let’s list everything that’s not too dangerous. Earthquakes and tsunamis are definitely out.”

“What about fires that everyone sees coming?” Tristan said. “Everyone will evacuate, and then the fire can burn down their houses.”

Leila wrote *Wildfire* in neat letters. “Floods might work too. I think they’re more likely to ruin people’s houses than to kill very many of them.”

“Unless it’s a flash flood,” Tristan said. “I don’t want that.”

After an hour of brainstorming and debating, they had a list of five disasters that would cause havoc without killing too many people: hurricanes, floods, wildfires, tornadoes, and non-lava-spewing volcanoes.

“I’m sure there’s a term for that,” Leila said, pausing halfway through the word *volcano*. “I’ll ask Natasha.”

“What are you guys doing?” Rusty asked, ambling over. He had just lost a game of poker to Eli, Trey, and Cailyn. “You look like you’re planning something secret. Is it a surprise?”

“No,” Tristan said. “It’s just an extra assignment from Natasha.”

“Ugh. I’m glad I didn’t stay after class!”

Tristan and Leila shared a knowing look. It had been worth staying late to hear about the person Drakewell had been.

“I wonder what the accident was,” Leila said quietly once Rusty had left. “Why haven’t we met Ilana? Maybe she’s dead.”

Tristan glanced at her, trying to imagine Drakewell as a teenager. How was it that *Drakewell* had managed to get himself a girl when Tristan couldn’t? It wasn’t fair.

* * *

Halfway through November, Tristan ventured to the top of the stairs and opened the door to the meadow just to see what had become of the world outside. At a sharp gust of wind, his senses came alive again and a thrill of energy ran through him. He wanted to make for the forest and run beneath the trees, kicking up snowdrifts, the afternoon sunlight at his back.

The meadow was lost beneath an almost-undisturbed circle of white. A single, well-trodden set of footprints led to the greenhouse, crossed by a dainty set of deer-tracks.

As Tristan knelt and scooped up a handful of snow, he saw a shadow dart between two pines.

He froze. “Who’s there?”

Dropping the snow, he reached for the five marbles he had taken to carrying in the pocket of his jeans. If he went for a teacher, whoever it was could escape. Tristan took four careful steps towards the edge of the meadow, sinking almost to his knees in the snow.

“Hello? Who’s there?”

Another flicker of movement passed between the branches of a sagging pine. Tristan raised a marble and concentrated on summoning a flame, hoping at least to surprise whoever was spying on the school.

“Show yourself!”

After a long silence, the marble growing warm in Tristan's palm, a small figure emerged from the forest.

It was Amber.

Tristan took a step back in surprise. "What the hell are you doing?" The marble cooled at once in his hand, and he dropped it back into his pocket. "I was about to attack you!"

Amber bit her lip, head bowed. A strand of white hair fell across her forehead. "Sorry."

"You've been wandering around, haven't you?" he asked, unwontedly harsh. "Even though it's dangerous, and Drakewell said he'd punish you?"

Amber lifted her head and met Tristan's eyes. She stared at him for a long time, neither ashamed nor upset. "What are you doing up here?" she asked eventually.

"Reminding myself that there's a world outside that damn hole. I'm *this close* to going crazy." He held his thumb and forefinger an inch apart. "But don't ignore my question. I'm worried about you!"

Amber's lips twitched. "Yes, I was wandering," she said. "I always do. I have to."

"But Drakewell must've seen you on the globe," Tristan said. "He knows you've been ignoring his orders. Why isn't he furious?"

"He was." Amber came closer, her head bowed. As she brushed past a laden pine bough, a clump of snow dropped off and landed on her shoulder. Without thinking, Tristan brushed it off.

Shyly, Amber smiled at him. "I went out the day after he told us to stay inside. He cornered me after Natasha's class and yelled at me."

"And you still went out?"

"Of course." Amber gave him a look of pure, calculated innocence. "I told him that he could punish me as much as he wished, but if he tried to keep me from wandering, I would simply...wander away. He knows I could, too."

"Sheesh," Tristan said, shaking his head in amazement. "I had no idea you were so—rebellious."

Amber's smile widened. "Do you remember when you found me on that lake last year?"

Tristan nodded in surprise. How could he forget? His first impression of the school had been the ghost-like student he had encountered on the lake, nearly vanishing in the otherworldly mist.

"Would you like to come for a walk with me?" Amber asked slyly.

Tristan glanced over his shoulder at the open door to the Lair. He would already be in huge trouble—what more harm could this do?

"I'd love to," he said. Though he had forgotten his coat, the cold did not bother him. It was a shock so pleasant that he was tempted to unbutton his shirt and roll in the snow just to soak it in while he still could.

"Drakewell was frightened by how close I had come to slipping away," Amber said as they began wandering through the trees. "He told me there is a continuous current on that lake that nudges everything towards the foot of the hill, just to assure no students or canoes go missing, but when I started across the lake in the wrong direction, he had to triple the current before he managed to force me back."

"Damn." Amber never ceased to surprise him. "But why did you want to leave?"

"I thought this would be another prison like the last. I wanted to escape before it was too late."

They passed around a rough boulder and into a grove of stark white aspens, their trunks sitting in small indents in the snow. The wind blew more sharply here, whistling past the naked twigs and through the brown patches of grass. A pair of squirrels dug industriously at the foot of one of the aspens; Tristan and Amber skirted around the edge of the grove so they would not disturb them. Just before they returned to the deeper shadows of the pine forest, Tristan spotted something small and black lying in the snow.

"What's that?" he asked. Reaching down with stiff fingers, he dug the rectangular box from the snow. It was roughly the size and shape of the music tapes he had owned as a child, but sleeker and unmarked.

Amber took it and turned it over carefully in her hands. "I have no idea. There are no tracks here. I don't know where it would have come from."

"We should show someone," Tristan said.

"Even if you get in trouble?" Amber returned the black rectangle to Tristan.

"Yes," he said firmly. He would not make the same mistake twice. "Let's get back now. I shouldn't be out here."

Drakewell was in the ballroom when they returned, glowering at them from the foot of the stairs.

“Ashton! I do not remember saying you were allowed to encourage others to share your dangerous pastime. What—”

Tristan reached into his pocket and handed Drakewell the black box. “What’s this? We found it in the forest. I don’t know how it got there.”

Drakewell snatched the black box from him. When he peered closer at it, the color drained from his face. “Follow me.” He marched from the ballroom and down the first flight of stairs to Alldusk’s classroom, which was dark and empty though still filled with the lingering smell of charred wood.

“Brinley!” Drakewell bellowed.

Not waiting for Alldusk to appear, Drakewell crossed to the center of the room and dropped the black box in the fire pit. He lit the fire with a marble and sat back, eyeing the box until it began to melt, reeking of burned plastic. Tristan and Amber hovered behind him, not sure if they were intruding.

Just as the plastic caught on fire and disintegrated, exposing a melting mess of electrical parts within, Alldusk bounded into the room.

“Professor Grindlethorn said he smelled something odd,” Alldusk panted. “What’s going on?”

Drakewell sat back on his heels, wiping his hands on his knees. “*That* was a GPS tracking device. Our rogue magicians will know exactly where to find us now.”

Chapter 12: A Walk in the Woods

With a curse, Alldusk dropped to his knees by the fire.

Tristan took a step back, feeling sick. This was his fault. Everything he did went horribly wrong. He should have left the tracking device where he found it.

“You couldn’t have known,” Alldusk said weakly.

“This is precisely why electronics are not allowed at this school,” Drakewell said coldly. “We are vulnerable to any sort of tracking technology. Round up the staff, Brinley. We need to make plans for dealing with a direct threat.”

“So you don’t think they can see our auras on a map or anything?” Tristan asked.

Drakewell narrowed his eyes at Tristan. “Correct. Though we have no idea what these magicians are capable of, they would certainly have located us before now if they had a globe like ours that showed auras. Gerard has continued his supply trips, and Gracewright tends to the greenhouse, without attracting attention. We will have to tighten our security.”

“Doesn’t Merridy know exactly where the academy is?” Tristan asked. “Or do you somehow forget once you’ve left?”

“Of course not,” Drakewell said. “I am beginning to doubt whether Darla Merridy is involved. Though if she was not, I cannot explain how you and Elwood were targeted over the summer.”

A shiver ran down Tristan’s spine. If they were dealing with an unknown entity, who could say what they were capable of?

* * *

Though nothing was said to the students, everyone seemed to know about the tracking device by the end of the day. Zeke’s gang kept throwing accusatory glances at Tristan and Amber through dinner, and Evvie wouldn’t meet his eyes when he looked her way.

The professors, meanwhile, were engaged in deep conversation throughout the meal; even Quinsley sat and joined them, so intent on their discussion that he forgot about his dessert until a trickle of smoke began oozing under the kitchen door.

“Goodness,” he said, jumping to his feet. “My pies!”

As autumn deepened, the only visible change in the season came in the form of the cooking that emerged from Quinsley’s kitchen—creamy pumpkin soup and butternut ravioli and gingerbread cookies. After a particularly miserable test in Grindlethorn’s class, Eli and Trey gathered bucket-loads of snow and brought it down to the ballroom for an underground snowball fight before dinner. No one wore hats or coats, so it was easy to target the exposed necks and heads of their rivals, and even Amber joined in after a fashion.

When every scrap of snow had been thrown, the students staggered back to the edge of the platform where they sat, damp and red-faced and breathless. Leila pretended to put an arm over Tristan’s shoulder and instead dropped a clump of snow down his back, and he wrestled her off the platform.

Drakewell returned just as Leila was picking herself off the floor. He gave the mess a scowl and turned back the way he had come without saying a word.

“Damn,” Zeke said. “We’re dead.”

Leila, Tristan, and Zeke broke out laughing. Before long the others joined in. They had been trapped inside so long that their rivalries had dropped into the background in favor of a general simmering resentment.

“We should probably clean this up,” Hayley said eventually. To Tristan’s surprise, everyone except Damian and Cassidy stayed behind to mop the melted snow from the floor. He was even more surprised when Drakewell

refrained from punishing them. Indeed, he didn't say a word to the students that evening.

Tristan had completely forgotten that Thanksgiving was approaching until Natasha joined the students at breakfast one day to say Drakewell had cancelled classes for Thanksgiving out of the goodness of his heart. Several students laughed at this, and she added, "You are not excused for the day, though. We expect you in Brikkens' classroom at one o'clock sharp. An hour's punishment will be awarded for tardiness."

"You could have told us yesterday," Damian said. "I wouldn't have gotten up so damn early if I'd known classes were cancelled."

"You're welcome to go back to bed," Natasha said. "I, for one, am looking forward to a peaceful day. If you plan on complaining all day, I would rather you sleep."

Damian grimaced at her and stayed put.

"Back when I was a student, Thanksgiving was a mandatory group activity day. Our headmaster saw it as a team-building exercise that gave us the chance to open up just a bit. Of course, Rowan has done away with the tradition, but if anyone wants to join me, we can do a few group activities this morning. It might help you work out some of your restless energy."

Clearly Drakewell had told her about the snowball fight.

After breakfast, Natasha led the students onto the ballroom floor. Even Damian stayed, though he looked as though he had just eaten something unpleasant. First she led them through a set of stretches, and then she asked them to sit on the floor in a circle.

"In the spirit of Thanksgiving, we'll go around the circle and each say one thing we're thankful for. It can be funny or serious, but be honest."

"This is lame," Damian said.

"Thank you for your input," Natasha said sharply. "Would you like to participate, or would you rather leave? I think Quinsley has hot chocolate for anyone who stays."

"I'm leaving," Damian said. "Come on, Cassidy, Zeke, Ryan."

Cassidy and Ryan jumped to their feet immediately. Making a face at Leila, Zeke stood reluctantly and slouched off after them.

"That's a shame," Natasha said. "In my year, our professors were intent on reducing student rivalry. They forced us into a lot of team-building exercises; at first we hated most of them, but over time we realized they were useful. Now, I'll begin. I'm thankful that I got a chance to return to this school. I've been away for sixteen years now, and it's a treat to see my former professors again and work with all of you. Your turn, Evangeline."

Evvie bit her lip. "I don't know. I guess I'm thankful that I've been living in the same place for two years now."

Tristan gave her a reassuring smile. As a foster child, she had probably been shunted from family to family for most of her life.

Hayley was quiet for a long time before answering. "I'm thankful I got to leave Juvie. This place is definitely better."

"This place is awesome," Rusty said. "I'm so happy I got to come here! Imagine if we'd been locked up forever."

Cailyn grinned at Natasha. "I'm thankful you came along, Natasha. You're the best teacher I've ever had!"

Natasha gave her a warm smile. "Thank you, Cailyn."

"Crap," Eli said. He ran a hand through his sloppy hair, sending half of it tumbling into his eyes. "I'm thankful for you guys, I suppose." He still wasn't looking at Trey, though he darted a nervous glance at Cailyn. "You're the only ones willing to put up with me."

"You stole my idea!" Leila said.

Trey was next. "I'm thankful to be learning so much," he said solemnly. "Magic is fascinating. I just wish it wasn't so evil."

"Debatable," Natasha said. "But thank you for your honesty. Leila?"

"I'm glad I get to help Quinsley in the kitchen," she said. "It's so much fun." She grinned at Tristan, who suspected she had quite a bit more she wasn't saying.

Tristan was next. He wished he had left the room before it got to his turn. He didn't want to admit the

truth—that he was grateful for everything he had here. Marcus was the only part of his former life he missed. He had never excelled at an ordinary school subject the way he did with magic, and nothing had felt so intuitive or *right* before. But he knew at least half of his roommates would hate him if he said as much.

“I’m thankful we don’t have classes today,” he muttered at last, not looking at anyone.

Eli snorted. “Profound.”

Amber whispered she was grateful to live in such a wild place, and after that Tristan stopped paying attention. He was having trouble reconciling himself with what he had just realized—that, despite all of the moral uncertainties they were facing, he was entirely grateful to be here. Whether or not he agreed with the professors, this was his place in the world. He was meant to use magic and perhaps even meant to have a hand in deciding the fate of the earth.

He wondered if any of his friends felt the same way.

Just then Quinsley came around with a tray of hot chocolate mugs, which the students accepted gratefully.

“What’s this thing at one o’clock?” Rusty asked, wiping chocolate from his upper lip.

“You’ll have to wait and see,” Natasha said.

When she stood and told the students she would see them later, Leila whispered, “I have a bad feeling about this. I think they’re just buttering us up for something.”

“If it involves chocolate, I don’t care,” Rusty said. He finished off the last of his hot chocolate and lay back on the marble floor, smiling in satisfaction.

* * *

He was not so flippant when one o’clock came around and the students filed silently into Brikkens’ classroom. With its white domed ceiling and inset pillars, the room reminded Tristan of a Greek temple more than ever before; now that half the seats were filled by dour teachers, he felt as though he and the rest of the students were on trial for some crime they were unaware of.

Extra chairs had been drawn around the great round table, enough for everyone to sit in a circle, and Drakewell had taken Brikkens’ usual seat.

“Thank you for your prompt attendance,” Drakewell said as the students settled in their customary seats. “Following recent events, I have been persuaded by several of your professors that the time is right to include you in our decision-making.”

“I’m not sure I want to be included,” Eli said under his breath.

Drakewell pretended he had not heard. “Two students recently encountered a GPS tracking device not far from our meadow. How it got there is uncertain, though most of us believe it was dropped from an airplane or helicopter. The point is that our rogue magicians now know the exact location of the academy. We are in a state of high alert, supervising the meadow twenty-four hours a day until the outer protective enchantment has been restored.”

“Have you seen anything?” Finley asked.

“Yes,” Drakewell said. “That is precisely why you are here. As of last week, there have been three groups making their way through the mountains near the academy. *Three*. Each group appears to consist of ordinary hikers led by someone who might or might not be a magician.”

“You’re just letting them wander all over the mountains?” Damian said. “Isn’t that dangerous?”

Drakewell clasped his hands on the table before him. “Exactly. We have eliminated two of the groups, though one of the potential magicians has escaped. Now that a third group has appeared, we must decide whether it is reasonable to eliminate them as well, or whether a different course of action should be taken.”

“We shouldn’t kill them,” Evvie said at once. Tristan wondered if she was thinking of her mountaineer father. When Drakewell turned his cold gaze on her, she hunched her shoulders as though she regretted voicing an opinion.

“Obviously there are many who would agree with you.” Drakewell sighed. “However, the point remains that we are in danger from these rogue magicians. They cannot be left to their own devices.”

Natasha straightened. “We know this is tied to the rogue magicians in some way. There is no other reason

why three groups of hikers would just *happen* to show up in our mountains, in the wrong season for hiking, exactly after the magicians pinpointed our location. But killing this group won't get us any closer to figuring out why they have suddenly decided to lead ordinary hikers into the mountains."

"What if it's a diversion?" Tristan asked.

"That was my first thought," Natasha said. "As soon as the second group appeared, I knew the magicians were up to something. However, I don't know what they hope to achieve with this."

"Maybe they want to draw us out of the Lair in force," Finley said, scratching his nose.

"How many magicians do you think there are?" Leila asked. "If they want to draw us out of the Lair, they must think they have a chance at beating us."

"They don't," Drakewell said flatly. "Not as long as we have the globe on our side. We can bring ruin to the entire world. A handful of magicians cannot stand against us."

"Then why are you worried?" Zeke asked sarcastically. "Let the magicians do what they want! We're clearly indestructible."

"Unless they have a globe of their own," Delair said, twirling his moustache around his fingers. "Which is likely, given the weather magic they conjured up."

"I still find that very hard to believe," Grindlethorn said. "In all likelihood, they've set up a smaller-scale conduit directly targeting these tunnels. It is theoretically possible."

Drakewell frowned at Delair, the dark circles around his eyes more obvious than ever. His unending surveillance of the Map Room was clearly taking its toll.

"If we met the magicians somewhere in the mountains, wouldn't the map be useless?" Tristan asked. "We wouldn't be able to tell anyone apart. Anything we sent after the magicians could hurt us too."

"True," Natasha said. "I think you're onto something. These magicians could have set up a trap, or they could be hoping we're foolish enough to hunt them down and then use the globe indiscriminately. If there are four or five rogues, they might think it's worth losing one of their number in exchange for killing half of us."

"So—do we go the safe route and kill the entire group? Or do we hike out to investigate, and risk walking straight into their trap?"

"This is where we vote," Drakewell said. "By participating, you agree to support whichever decision we settle on. When we act, we must act as a unified power. Internal division will destroy us."

"First—a show of hands for the first option. Who believes we should eliminate the threat at once?"

Drakewell was the first to raise his hand, followed by Natasha, Grindlethorn, Delair, and—after a pause—Damian, Ryan, Cassidy, and Stacy.

When Cailyn raised a timid hand, Hayley elbowed her in the ribs. "What's wrong with you?"

Cailyn shook her head and turned away from Hayley.

Zeke, Tristan noticed, had not raised his hand.

"Now, who believes we should abandon the safety of the Lair and take a foolish risk in hiking out to meet this group?" Drakewell asked.

Most of the students from the Subroom raised their hands at once—Tristan, Leila, Rusty, Eli, Trey, Hayley, and Evvie—and Alldusk, Quinsley, and Gracewright joined them. Finley put his hand up nervously after a while.

Amber and Zeke did not vote.

"You must choose a side," Drakewell snapped. "Ashton, Elwood, what do you think about this matter?"

"I already told you what I thought," Zeke said. "We shouldn't do a single damn thing. The climbers can fall and break their necks perfectly well without our help."

Drakewell drew a sharp breath. "Ashton? If you are to lead this school, you must become accustomed to participating."

"I agree with Zeke," Amber said, to everyone's surprise. "We are safe underground. We should draw the magicians to us, not the other way around."

"That's a majority, then," Natasha said briskly. "And now, we decide who will meet the rogue magicians. If something goes wrong, every one of us will accept responsibility. Rowan, who do you want to send?"

"I must go," he said. "If there is any danger, I have to be there. If you are willing, I would have you accompany me."

Natasha nodded grimly.

“After that—Abilene, you know these mountains better than any of us,” Drakewell said. “And Brinley, you’re one of the most skilled magicians here. We cannot go without you.” Suddenly Drakewell turned his icy gaze on Tristan. “Fairholm. Ashton. I will have you accompany us as well.”

Tristan and Amber glanced at one another in shock. Half of Tristan was eager for a chance to get out of the Lair at last, but the other half of him wished he had voted to dispose of the magicians from the safety of the Map Room.

“That is all,” Drakewell said. “If there are any further questions, you can speak with me in private. I must return to the Map Room.”

Ignoring Natasha, who had opened her mouth to say something, Drakewell stood and strode out of the room. When the door thudded shut, the sound reverberated through the silent chamber.

* * *

And so Tristan and Amber found themselves packing for their snowy hike the next morning. Natasha had dug up the backpacks from the previous year’s survival test, and Tristan kept having flashbacks to the roar of the avalanche descending on him before the world disappeared. For the first time since that awful botched escape attempt, he could see how Merridy’s test would come in handy. If someone was manning the Map Room while they were away, and decided to send a helpful disaster to distract the rogue magicians, the professors would know exactly how to respond and get themselves out of danger. Tristan, on the other hand, was likely to find himself buried under another mountain of snow.

“Aren’t you bringing a coat?” Tristan asked Amber when she tied on her boots and wandered over to the Subroom door to wait for him.

“I don’t need one.”

“What if you’re knocked out? I don’t think you’ll be able to keep yourself warm while you’re asleep.”

Amber wrinkled her nose and reluctantly asked Leila to borrow her coat.

“Good luck, guys,” Leila said. “Don’t you dare get yourself killed, Triss.”

“I’m not planning on it,” he said nonchalantly, though he was more nervous than he was letting on.

They were the last ones to arrive in the ballroom, though for once Drakewell confined his displeasure to a twisted smile.

“Water bottles? Coats? Gloves? Hats?” Gracewright waited for Amber to pull a fluffy blue hat out of her side pocket and tug it low over her eyes before nodding. “Let’s go!”

Tristan grinned at Amber. She looked very cute in the knitted hat, her cheeks pink with excitement.

Waving to Quinsley, Tristan followed Amber and the four professors up the stairs into the meadow. They had chosen a brilliantly clear day for the hike, the sunlight winking off the mountaintops and transforming the crisp layer of snow into a blanket of rhinestones. As Drakewell had told them at breakfast, the group of hikers had just crossed into the far reaches of their valley, which meant there was no time to lose. By the end of the day the hikers would either be out of their reach...or standing atop the Lair.

“Be on your guard,” Drakewell said. “Abilene has crampons if we need them—do not focus so intently on the hikers that you forget how to hike yourselves.”

Tristan thought he was speaking mostly to him and Amber; Natasha and Gracewright had spent a lifetime tramping through far more treacherous terrain.

Gracewright picked a direction through the trees and began trudging forward, following what must have been a familiar route, because she did not hesitate or stop to find her bearings. Tristan looped his thumbs under the straps of his pack and fell into step behind Delair, who had traded his usual black coat for a longer brown trench-coat.

As they climbed through the trees, the wind picked up, carrying billows of sharp snow that bit into Tristan’s cheeks. Before long the trees began to shrink and thin out. Up here, most of them had grown sideways to escape the wind. Tristan zipped his jacket as high as it would go over his chin and pulled his hat more securely over his ears.

Gracewright called a halt to their trek just before they passed beyond the last grove of trees, which more closely resembled a clump of bushes. Ducking into the shadow of a high rock hung with icicles, they found a brief respite from the wind.

“We have to keep our energy up,” Gracewright said. She handed around trail bars that Quinsley had probably baked that morning and reached for her water bottle. “Drink as much as you can. You don’t realize how dehydrated you are when it’s this cold.”

Once he managed to unscrew the cap with wooden fingers, Tristan gulped gratefully at his water. A crust of ice had already formed on top, though it shattered when he tilted the bottle.

“How are you doing?” he asked Amber in a low voice.

She turned to him, beaming. “I could do this forever.” Her cheeks were bright red from the cold; the color added a rare streak of life to her chalky skin.

“What do we do once we catch up with the magicians?” Tristan asked Alldusk.

“That depends on what we find,” Alldusk said, rubbing his hands against his cheeks. “If we suspect a trap, we’ll proceed in two groups so they don’t guess our numbers. If it turns out they’re just mountaineers—”

“Unlikely,” Drakewell said.

Alldusk ignored him. “—we’ll inform them that there have been a number of fatal avalanches in the area recently, and recommend they return immediately the way they came.”

“Which is perfectly true,” Gracewright said.

Alldusk settled back against a snowdrift. “And if their leader is the only magician in the group, Gracewright will guide the others back while we capture the leader for questioning.”

“That does not remove the possibility that the hikers will spread word of their unusual encounter,” Drakewell said. “We would do best to capture the leader and dispose of the rest.”

“We can introduce ourselves as search-and-rescue workers,” Gracewright said. “The hikers will understand if we question someone who leads group after group of unsuspecting hikers into an avalanche danger zone.”

“Besides,” Natasha said, “if they get back safely, they can spread the word of the danger. There won’t be any other hikers foolish enough to follow in their footsteps. Clearly the original deaths have been hushed up, or the hiking expeditions would have stopped.”

“Tristan, Amber, and I will stay behind as backup,” Alldusk said. “Drakewell, Natasha, and Gracewright, do you want to meet the hikers first?”

“We should not confine the majority of our skill to the advance group,” Drakewell said. “Natasha will remain behind, and Fairholm will accompany me.”

“Right,” Alldusk said. He grimaced at Tristan, who was not entirely pleased to be offered up as bait.

“Time to go,” Drakewell said, crossing to the side of the rock. As soon as he stepped into the wind, he squinted, his hair ripped back from his face.

“Crampons first,” Gracewright said. Undoing the drawstring on her bag, she took out a case with six pairs of crampons. “Fasten them securely. You don’t want them falling off. And be very careful where you step. If you stab a hole in your leg, you have a long way to hike back before Grindlethorn can help you.”

She buckled her own on without delay while the others reached for the remaining five pairs. Tristan secured the straps tightly over his boots, resorting to pulling them closed with his teeth when his stiff hands would not cooperate.

“Everyone set?” Gracewright asked, standing and shaking out her legs. “Let’s go.”

It was much easier to walk with the crampons. Within a few steps, the snow grew solid and slick; Tristan was grateful to have a set of spikes to dig into the icy surface. Punching his toes through the top crust of ice, he followed Drakewell and Gracewright up the exposed slope. Amber, Natasha, and Alldusk had fallen behind, ready to hide at the first sign of the hiking group.

The hill grew steeper and steeper, until Tristan had to use his hands to steady himself against the incline. He wished he had an ice-axe to dig into the snow, though if he fell, he’d likely impale himself on the blade.

Far overhead, a crow wheeled on the wind and turned south, casting a flickering shadow over the snow. The sun was blindingly bright, and Tristan’s eyes played tricks on him, suggesting shapes in the featureless expanse of white. He began sweating as they climbed, until he had to tug off his hat and shove it into his pocket. His ears

burned in the bitter wind.

At long last, they approached the ridge.

“Stay back,” Gracewright shouted at the second group. “They’ll be somewhere along here. The route we just took is the only way down.”

“How do we know when to join you?” Alldusk called back.

“I’ll scream,” Gracewright yelled. “Kidding! One of us will send up a flare.”

As Tristan followed Gracewright and Drakewell onto the top of the ridge, bracing himself for the fiercest gust of wind yet, Amber, Natasha, and Alldusk settled themselves in the shelter of a cliff to wait.

Just as Tristan steadied himself atop the narrow ridge, a gust of wind slammed into them. Gracewright and Drakewell braced themselves against it, but Tristan was caught unawares and nearly fell over. He wished he had ski poles or a stick or anything at all to help keep his balance.

“If you prove yourself a liability, you’re going straight back,” Drakewell bellowed at him.

“Sorry!” Tristan almost added that he would be happy to turn around and wait beneath the safety of the cliff. He was curious, though. It would be worth seeing these rogue magicians in person.

They turned right and began trudging along the ridge, dropping to their hands and knees whenever they reached a precarious rocky outcropping. It was both easier and much harder than climbing the slope—easier because the ridge was more or less flat, and harder because they were in danger of falling with every misstep or gust of wind.

As they drew near a gentle peak at the end of the ridge, Tristan spotted what looked like five figures on the hillside. He could not tell whether they were moving, so he said nothing—they could easily have been rocks. Eventually Gracewright turned and said, “That’s them. Stay on your guard.”

Tristan reached a gloved hand into his coat pocket and touched the handful of marbles he had stowed there. He was not sure he would be able to use them at all with his hands frozen solid, but their presence was reassuring nonetheless. At least they were not being ambushed somewhere in the woods. It seemed unlikely that anyone would have taken the time to set up a trap on this exposed ridge, especially since the hikers were likely to freeze to death if they lingered too long.

When they came close enough for Tristan to make out the members of the group—he couldn’t discern any of their features, since they were wrapped so thoroughly in layers—Gracewright stopped and called out, “Greetings!”

The leader of the group waved and trudged forward, leaving the other four hikers a few paces behind. “This is a surprise! What are you doing up here?”

“We’re with the Wilderness Search and Rescue,” Gracewright said. “There have been two other groups killed by avalanches nearby in the past month. I can’t force you to turn around, but I’m here to advise you strongly to turn back and attempt this venture at a different time.”

“You know exactly what happened to the other hiking groups,” the man said. “You killed them. Don’t pretend you don’t know what I’m talking about.”

“And why have your people been leading innocent hikers into our valley?” Drakewell asked harshly. “You will answer for this.” He flicked a hand in the man’s direction, and the guide crumpled to his knees, panting. “Abilene, take the hikers.”

Gracewright circled around the guide and approached the hiking group. As Tristan and Drakewell drew closer to the guide, Tristan realized he was very young—no older than twenty-five. More than ever, he suspected this to be a trap. Why else would the rogue magicians have sent someone so inexperienced out in the mountains alone?

Drakewell glared down at the magician. “Who sent you? What is your purpose in leading hiking groups through our mountains?”

“I’m just a mountaineering guide,” the magician said from his knees, his voice steady. “I live nearby. These are the easiest mountains for me to access.”

Drakewell slapped him with enough force to send him sprawling back in the snow. “Tell the truth!”

“You won’t accomplish anything if you kill me now,” the young man gasped, struggling to sit up. “I’m not useful. That’s why I’m here. The bastards expect me to die.”

“Who sent you?” Drakewell repeated, grabbing the man by his coat collar. “You have two options—answer

my questions and die painlessly, or suffer for your stubbornness.”

“I didn’t think you would actually come!” the man said, eyes darting wildly from Drakewell to Tristan and back. “She knows you so well.”

“*Who?*” Drakewell shook him.

The man swallowed and said nothing.

“What are you doing here? Why the hiking groups?”

When the man maintained his stubborn silence, Drakewell put a hand around his throat.

He yelled. “We’re supposed to be distracting you! Let go of me!”

Drakewell loosened his grip but did not release him.

“She wanted to draw you out of the academy. To leave it vulnerable to attack. And it worked.” His voice was high and breathless with fear. “You won’t get anything if you kill me. I’m useless!”

“We might even the odds,” Drakewell said harshly. “How many of you are there?”

“Six! No, seven!”

Drakewell tightened his hold until the man’s face grew purple. He gagged and tried to struggle free, without avail. “The truth,” he spat.

“I don’t know!” he gasped. “I really don’t know. No one told me.”

“You...are...*useless*,” Drakewell hissed. With another twitch of his wrist, the man crumpled before him, lifeless. Tristan crept closer, afraid to see whether he was actually dead.

He wasn’t breathing. Drakewell must have finished him off with magic.

“That was a senseless waste of time,” Drakewell said, climbing heavily to his feet. “Gracewright will lead the climbers away. We must hasten back to the Lair. If this man spoke honestly, they are in grave danger.”

“Who do you think he was talking about?” Tristan asked. “Did you recognize him?”

“Of course not. Don’t be daft.”

Tristan took that to mean there would be no more talk of the matter. Bowing his head against the wind, he turned and followed Drakewell back along the ridge. As they passed the first rocky outcropping, he turned and waved to Gracewright, who lifted a hand to him in turn. Then they dropped below the rocks and lost sight of Gracewright and the hiking party. Tristan fervently hoped that whoever was watching the Map Room did not decide to do away with the group, believing that Gracewright was the same magician who had first led the hikers into their valley.

When they rejoined Amber, Natasha, and Alldusk below the ridge, Natasha jumped immediately to her feet.

“Are you hurt? I heard a strange sound, but it was not quite a scream...”

“The magician is dead,” Drakewell said. “Gracewright is leading the hikers back. According to the magician, his fellows are descending on the academy as we speak.”

Alldusk rose quickly, swaying on the slippery snow. “Then we can’t waste any time. Let’s go!”

“I very much doubt the rogue magicians have gathered enough force to do our school any serious harm,” Drakewell said. “Still, we would do well to return.”

“Carefully, though,” Natasha said, steadying Tristan, who had nearly lost his balance when he caught his foot on a patch of ice. “We don’t want you tearing a hole in your leg.”

Tristan nodded and slammed his heel more securely into the snow. He fell to the back of the group as Drakewell took the lead; if he’d had his way, he would have unbuckled the crampons and slid the rest of the way down the ridge. His friends were back at the academy. If anything happened to Leila, he would never forgive himself.

As they were nearing the trees, Amber turned and gave him a joyous smile. She was radiant in the snow.

When they approached the Lair, Drakewell stopped and held up a hand. “Proceed with caution,” he whispered. “We know nothing of these magicians. If we cannot do more, I would at least like to get an idea of what we are facing.”

Unbuckling their crampons and stowing them in their packs, they crept forward once more, taking care to tread as lightly as possible. Tristan flinched whenever his foot broke through the snow with a particularly loud crunch. Amber, meanwhile, had resumed her usual levitation trick that allowed her to walk a hair’s breadth above the snow. She did not leave so much as a footprint in the new powder.

The return journey took longer than Tristan expected, far too long. The entire way, he could feel his heart thudding against his ribs. Had the magicians attacked yet? Was the school safe?

They should never have left.

At the edge of the clearing, Drakewell and Natasha stopped, concealing themselves as thoroughly as possible behind a layer of wide pine boughs. Then, to Tristan's surprise, they continued into the clearing. Drakewell took five steps forward before beckoning the rest to follow.

"Where is everyone?" Tristan whispered.

Amber shrugged. "See the footprints?"

Tristan looked down and noticed for the first time that the center of the clearing had been trampled by many pairs of feet. Several tracks led into the trees, all heading in completely different directions.

"They appear to have been and gone," Natasha said tensely. "I hope all is well in the Lair."

Alldusk jogged across the clearing and towards the longhouse. He vanished down the stairs, which looked undisturbed.

"Take care," Drakewell said. He followed Alldusk inside, treading softly. Did he think the rogue magicians were waiting for them below?

But there was nothing to be found. The stairs were wet from a trail of melting snow, but there was no sign of forced entry. From what Gracewright had said, the stairway would have had to be blasted to shreds before anyone could sneak in uninvited.

Only in the ballroom could they see that something was clearly wrong. Quinsley, Grindlethorn, Brikkens, and Delair were waiting for them, and not one of the students was in sight.

"Where's Abilene?" Quinsley asked as soon as he saw Drakewell. "Is everything okay?"

"Everything went according to plan on our end," Drakewell said. "Abilene is leading the hikers back out of the mountains. Obviously it would have been safer to dispose of them, but I knew that decision would not be taken well."

Quinsley nodded sharply. "The students are hiding below. They're in their bedrooms. Just half an hour after you left, Delair saw six auras appear as if from nowhere and make straight for the academy. We weren't sure if they'd captured you or if they were new magicians, so we went up to see what was happening. We found ourselves surrounded."

"All they wanted to do was attack our entrance!" Brikkens said. He was still visibly flustered. "They ignored us and tried to light the building on fire. Of course, we've fireproofed it since Fairholm's unfortunate incident last year, but they nearly succeeded in blasting it to pieces. Did you notice the hole at the back?"

Natasha raised an eyebrow at him. "No, we didn't think to check."

"It was thanks to Gerard that we drove them off," Delair said, patting Quinsley on the arm. "He sent a wall of vines shooting up right where they stood, and nearly trapped them all. The magicians burned the vines, but we nearly roasted them in their own fire. That was when they turned and ran."

"Has anyone been down to check the Map Room since?" Drakewell asked sharply.

The professors shared a worried look. "No," Delair said. "We wanted to guard against further attack."

"Idiocy," Drakewell spat. "What if the magicians have disappeared once again? You had a chance to discover their hiding place, and you did not think to take advantage of it! Fairholm, Ashton, come with me. You should see this."

Turning on his heel, he stormed out of the ballroom, Tristan and Amber scrambling to keep up.

"I'm afraid this mistake will come back to haunt us," Drakewell muttered. "I want you both to recognize magical auras. We will have to double our guard from now on."

Tristan was nearly jogging by the time Drakewell turned into the tunnels and vanished from sight. Though none of them stopped to grab a lantern, Tristan could follow Drakewell easily by the rough clamor of his heels against the stone.

When Drakewell pulled back the door to the Map Room, they were confronted with a brilliant flare of light.

"Show yourself!" Drakewell bellowed.

Tristan stopped in the doorway, wondering if someone might have simply left the lights on in their panicked retreat. But Drakewell swept across the room to the globe and circled around the back, eyes flashing with a fury

that Tristan had only seen the time he burned the school entrance. At a sudden scuffling and a muffled yell, Tristan and Amber looked at each other in surprise. Moments later, Drakewell reappeared, this time dragging Damian and Zeke by the collars of their shirts.

Chapter 13: Drakewell's Revenge

“You are the most useless pair of students I have ever had the misfortune to recruit,” he said icily, shaking the boys until Zeke fell to his knees. Though Damian was tall, Drakewell still towered over him. “Would you like to *explain*, or should I kill you now?”

Tristan went cold. Never, in all his own transgressions, had Drakewell threatened murder. He wondered if the death of the young magician was still at the forefront of Drakewell's mind.

“We just thought we'd look out for anyone dangerous,” Zeke said, struggling to regain his feet.

Drakewell kicked him so hard in the ribs that he sprawled on his back, gasping. “Tell the truth!”

“It wasn't my idea,” Zeke mumbled, clutching at his chest.

Damian gave Zeke a look of hatred so ugly Tristan wouldn't have been surprised if he kicked him as well.

Fist around Damian's collar once again, Drakewell slammed him against the wall. “Tell me what you've done!”

Damian's face went red, and he spluttered. Drakewell was clearly choking him. “I—” he gasped.

If it had been anyone else, Tristan would have raced to his rescue. Instead he edged backwards until most of his body was hidden behind the doorway, out of the line of fire. Amber stayed at his side, wide-eyed, unable to tear her gaze from the scene.

Drakewell loosened his grip on Damian just enough to allow him to speak. Damian coughed and rubbed his throat before asking hoarsely, “Will you let us go if I tell you?”

“Yes,” Drakewell snapped. Tristan didn't believe him.

Damian coughed again. “It was just a joke, Professor. Natasha showed us how to cause disasters. We've just been trying to make the biggest icicles possible out of a hailstorm.”

For the first time, Drakewell turned to the nearest table, which had taken on the shape of an isolated highway running somewhere through the mountains. Tristan could not make out the details from where he stood.

“Are those *cars* in the canyon?” Drakewell gave Damian another shake.

“M—maybe.”

Just then, Tristan heard soft footsteps approaching. Natasha rounded the corner and stopped, a finger on her lips, before joining Tristan by the door.

“You *imbecile*! Have you been *killing drivers* for *fun*?”

“Accident,” Damian gasped, trying to drag Drakewell's fingers away from his throat. “Didn't see them.”

Drakewell threw Damian to the floor. “You are *useless*. You're not welcome here any longer.”

As he raised a fist, clearly preparing to work a spell, Natasha pushed Tristan aside and hurried into the room.

“Rowan Drakewell! You cannot murder your own students!”

“You'll find I can do whatever I want,” he spat.

“Rowan! Calm yourself!” Natasha grabbed his shoulders and yanked him around to face her. “We are facing an unknown threat. Do you really want to weaken our side? The students will turn against you if you kill these two. You *cannot* afford that.”

Drakewell slapped Natasha so hard that he left a red streak across her face. “Stop interfering with my business,” he spat. “Get out!”

Eyes flashing, Natasha slammed her palms into Drakewell's chest so hard he toppled over. She put a foot on his chest when he struggled to get up. “You are not in your right mind,” she said coldly. “Don't try me. I'm a better magician than you. I've been using magic for the past thirty years, not moping around the Lair.”

“You don't know—”

“I know exactly what these boys have done,” Natasha said coldly. “It is utterly unforgivable. But they will *not* die for it. Tristan, Amber, look around and see if the magicians have vanished. Boys, come with me.”

Tristan crept into the Map Room with the feeling that any misstep might set off a bomb. Natasha extinguished the lights on her way out, leaving Tristan and Amber alone with Drakewell, who still lay on the floor, breathing heavily.

“Did you see what part of the globe they were looking at?” Tristan whispered.

“I think it was Russia,” Amber said softly. Tristan focused on the auras as they drew close and saw them blur together as Amber rotated the globe. He recognized the outline of the East Coast, brilliant with tiny lights, and quickly made out the cluster that marked California. From there Amber spun the globe until it settled on the black expanse that she must have recognized as their mountains.

“See that?” She put her finger on a dark section of stone. Tristan had to squint before he made out a cluster of auras. When she shifted the metal disc onto the lone patch of light, he recognized the exact path up the mountain they had followed earlier that day. The cluster of auras belonged to Gracewright and the hikers, who were moving slowly down the far side of the mountain.

“There’s no one else around,” Tristan said. “Where do you think they’ve gone?”

“Unless they have a helicopter, they must be hiding underground,” Amber said.

“Let’s go back,” Tristan whispered into her ear, hoping Drakewell did not hear.

The air shifted almost imperceptibly as Amber nodded.

Only when they had left the Map Room behind and turned two corners down the tunnel did Tristan dare relax. “Drakewell was scary, back there,” he whispered, still worried he might be overheard.

Amber nodded fervently, her face lit in the feeble glow from the veins of Delairium in the wall.

“Do you think he’ll ever forgive them?” He wondered if he would eventually become like Drakewell, hardened by years of work in the Map Room until he could no longer tell the difference between good and evil.

“I don’t know,” Amber said. “Is something wrong?”

Tristan was grateful for the darkness. “Why is he so horrible?” he asked at last. “I’m afraid I’ll be the same someday.”

“I don’t think you are capable of that,” Amber said. “Don’t be afraid.”

Tristan swallowed. “I hope you’re right.”

* * *

It was a tense, unhappy night. When Tristan and Amber fetched the rest of their friends from the Subroom, Leila pulled Tristan into a fierce embrace and said she’d been afraid he would die.

“We weren’t in danger,” he said grimly. Zeke and Damian’s cruelty, and Drakewell’s fury, had driven their hike up the ridge to the back of his mind. “I think they sent their main force after the academy.”

“Well, I’m pretty sure we’re safe in here,” Leila said. “Anything could’ve happened to you out there.”

“I want to see what’s happening,” Eli said. “Can we go up now?”

“Yeah.” Tristan took a new handful of marbles out of the tall vase at the back of the room before joining the others at the doorway. He didn’t want to be unprepared.

On their way up, Tristan glanced back down the stairs, wondering if Drakewell was still lying on the floor of the Map Room. Only then did it occur to him that the headmaster’s reaction proved that he still had retained some piece of his humanity. Though he had been willing to kill Damian on the spot, he still objected to wanton murder.

Most of the professors were absent when Tristan and his friends arrived.

“What’s happening?” Leila asked Quinsley at once. The chef was perched on a chair halfway across the ballroom, eyeing the stairs and the motionless streamers that marked the Prasadimum barrier as though expecting them to explode at any moment.

“Brinley and Osric have gone up to search for the magicians,” he said, sounding exhausted. “I don’t think it was a good idea. The rogues have the advantage, now that they know where we are. Do you know where the headmaster has gone?”

Tristan and Amber shared a nervous look.

“He’s—uh—in the Map Room,” Tristan said. “You should ask Natasha about it.”

Just then, Natasha joined them in the ballroom, closing the doors quietly behind her. Damian and Zeke were nowhere to be seen.

“Is something wrong?” Quinsley asked Natasha, standing heavily.

Natasha wiped sweat from her flushed forehead. “You could say that. Rowan was close to murdering Zeke and Damian a few minutes ago.”

“What?” Leila frowned at Tristan. “You didn’t say anything!”

“It’s not really my business,” he mumbled. In truth, he was still reeling from shock at what his fellow students were capable of.

“The boys will be punished accordingly,” Natasha said crisply. “They were caught sending icicles to impale cars driving along a mountain road. This is a gross abuse of their powers, and they will pay for it.”

Leila’s eyes had gone wide. “That disgusting bastard! I can’t believe I almost forgave him for last year.”

“Maybe they didn’t know,” Rusty said, staring at the kitchen door with a frown. “It’s like Ender’s Game, isn’t it? That globe doesn’t seem real. It’s just a bunch of little toy houses and stuff. It’s hard to believe what you’re doing on that actually changes things in real life.”

“Are you honestly defending them?” Leila said coldly. “I can’t believe it.” She turned away from Rusty and crossed her arms, scowling darkly at Zeke’s empty chair.

At the table behind theirs, Trey, Hayley, Cailyn, and Evvie had their heads together; judging by their mutinous looks, they were plotting some sort of revenge. Eli, who had taken to sitting with Amber since he was still not talking to Trey, kept casting jealous glances back at his friends. Meanwhile, Stacy, Ryan, and Finley were eating with unwonted concentration—clearly they had known what Damian and Zeke were planning, and did not want to appear involved.

Tristan lingered for a long time after dinner, unwilling to face the stairs. His legs were beginning to stiffen, and he felt utterly drained of energy. Leila stayed with him, her scowl fixed in place, not saying a word until Rusty followed Zeke’s gang through the doors.

“You okay, Tristan?” Natasha asked from the professors’ table as Quinsley cleared away the last of their meal. “I wish you hadn’t seen that. Rowan should not have acted so rashly.”

“Are you sure he wasn’t always like this?” Tristan said.

Glancing around the now-empty ballroom, Natasha pulled a chair over to Tristan and Leila’s table. “Grief changes people,” she began gently. “I wish you could understand how hard it is for Rowan. Living here, he’s constantly faced with everything he lost—everything that could have been.”

“Do you think I’ll be that way, too?” Tristan asked dully. “I don’t know how he does it. I’m afraid I’ll forget how to—to care about anything once I’m doing his job.”

Leila shook her head. “You won’t. I know you won’t.”

“Why did he change, then? What happened?”

Natasha sighed. “Don’t breathe a word of this to Rowan. I shouldn’t be telling you any of this, but it’s crucial you understand.”

“Of course not,” Tristan said quickly.

“You remember how I mentioned Ilana?”

Tristan and Leila nodded.

“It was the spring of Rowan’s first year as head of the Map Room when four of the new graduates went to the site of an earthquake to monitor its effects. Ilana was among them. I was not. Only later did we hear what happened—Rowan triggered the earthquake as scheduled, and fifteen minutes later the graduates began surveying the damage. When they were halfway through town, an aftershock came along and brought down the bridge that Ilana was crossing. She was not found until hours later, and by then she had fallen into an irreversible coma.

“She was beyond our care. Rowan hurried Ilana to the nearest hospital and stayed by her side for two months. She was stable, but she showed no sign of recovery. Rowan blamed himself for her death—he had overreached himself with the earthquake and had triggered a larger disaster than he’d intended.

“I did not speak to Drakewell for years, not after Ilana’s death. When I returned, I barely recognized him. He’s lost all faith in humanity, and seems intent on punishing the world for his own failure.”

Leila’s eyes had gone wide. “That’s why no one is left from his year.”

Natasha closed her eyes. “Six of us—myself included—left the school while Rowan was still watching over Ilana. We have spread around the globe, each helping the school in our own way, most of us unwilling to return. The others were driven away by Rowan’s cruelty. He did not respect his fellows, and threatened violence when they questioned his word. I’m glad I went away before I saw him change.”

“But you haven’t given up on him,” Tristan said quietly. He had seen Natasha arguing with Drakewell, cajoling him and prodding him in a way none of the other professors would dare. “Is that why you came back?”

Opening her eyes, Natasha studied Tristan for a long time. “Yes. I suppose it is. I admired Rowan very much when we were both at school together. I would rather have followed him than any of the professors at the time. Some naïve part of me still hopes to redeem him, to remind him of the person he once was. But I’m beginning to think that chance is lost.”

* * *

That night, Tristan lay awake long after his friends’ breathing had subsided into the soft, gentle rhythm of sleep. He was oddly reassured by what Natasha had said. Anyone would change if they thought themselves responsible for the death of a loved one; Tristan knew only too well how that felt. And yet he was not broken.

Tristan tried to imagine what he would have done in the same situation. What if his own careless disaster led to Leila’s death? He would do the same as Drakewell, he knew—he would stay by her side until the very end. But he didn’t think he could return to the Map Room after that. He would never, ever forgive himself.

His dreams, when they came, were filled with shadows of Drakewell’s past. He and Leila tried desperately to rouse a ghost-figure that resolved itself into Amber, and a handsome, cold-eyed student laughed at them until Tristan threw him down a bottomless hole. Drakewell’s laughter echoed after Tristan even as he fell.

* * *

Zeke and Damian did not reappear until the following morning, when they stumbled up to the ballroom looking thoroughly miserable. Neither one spoke a word all day, until Drakewell appeared in their Elementals class to announce another trip to the Map Room. Tristan thought he might be imagining it, but a spark of madness seemed to lurk behind Drakewell’s eyes.

“Our honorable students Misterys Doyle and Elwood will be leading your class today,” he sneered as he pushed open the doors to the Map Room. “They have been experimenting with the globe, and they have proved remarkably adept at the job. In fact, they recently perfected the ice-storm.”

He made a sweeping gesture at Zeke and Damian, who found themselves in the center of a circle of curious students.

“I think congratulations are in order,” he said sarcastically. “To reward you for your scholarly achievements, you will be the first to learn a valuable skill—how to find and track your loved ones back home. Wouldn’t it be nice to keep an eye on your families?”

Zeke shot a panicked glance at Damian. They both knew they were being led into a trap, but neither one could figure out what that trap was.

“Zeke. You first. Who do you care for most back at home?”

“This is dumb,” he said, though without his usual spite. When Drakewell continued to stare at him with that mocking smile, he muttered, “My mom, I guess.”

“Damian?”

Damian met Drakewell’s sneer with a foul glare of his own. Eventually he relented and said, “I miss Cherry. She’s just an old friend.”

Cassidy gave him a vile look.

“Zeke,” Drakewell said. “You can begin. Your family is in Colorado Springs—they have moved into a temporary housing block after their stay in the relief shelter.” He spun the map as he spoke, stopping with a finger on Colorado. “Here.” He dropped the metal disc and beckoned Zeke over to one of the round tables. “This is their house.”

Zeke stood over the table, gazing at his parents' flimsy-looking house with a mixture of longing and disgust.

"And you, Damian," Drakewell said. He produced a second metal disc from his pocket, which he affixed over Chicago. "Where does this 'Cherry' live?"

"Nowhere," Damian said coldly. "She's not your business."

"Would you like to discuss this with me in private?"

Damian went pale. "She lives there." He jabbed a thumb onto the stone table in a section of the city filled with run-down houses and more than one empty lot littered with junk.

"Very good," Drakewell said, his voice now dangerously soft. "Now, since these two think killing people is such an amusing sport, Elwood can entertain us all by killing his mother, and Doyle by finishing off Cherry. As you have mastered the use of the globe, you can choose whichever disaster best suits you."

Zeke jumped away from the table as though burned. "No way! Damn you! I'm leaving this place, I swear. This is messed up."

All trace of humor had left Drakewell's face. "No more messed-up than you were, indiscriminately killing motorists along that mountain highway. Did you think they were just toy cars? Every person you murdered had a family of their own to return to. Did you stop to *think* before you acted?"

Drakewell looked close to attacking Zeke once again.

"I won't do it," Zeke spat. Lunging past Drakewell, he yanked his metal disc free of Colorado Springs and hurled it across the room. "You can't make me!"

"Doyle." Drakewell rounded on Damian again. "You can go first."

Damian cursed. "You're mad. I'm not doing it!"

"Your alternative is a month in the tunnels," Drakewell said coldly.

"Fine," Damian said. "That's better than making Zeke kill his own damn mother!"

Drakewell stepped back. "Good." The venom left his tone. "Doyle, Elwood, while your actions are still utterly inexcusable, and while you will spend the rest of this year working off hours, I am glad to know that you have not entirely abandoned your own sense of humanity. Keep this in mind next time you plan something thoroughly idiotic. Class is dismissed."

Tristan stared at Drakewell. He had been on edge, expecting Drakewell to attack Zeke or Damian at any moment, but instead he had shaken them up as effectively as he had done Tristan with his ultimatum the year before.

After a long, startled silence, the class shuffled out of the Map Room, Damian and Zeke in the rear. Natasha was standing outside the tunnels when they returned to the main school, and she stopped Tristan and Amber.

"A quick word, please," she said quietly.

Leila paused, but Tristan shook his head at her.

Natasha didn't speak until the rest of the class had turned up the stairs and disappeared.

"We have been under a lot of stress lately, your professors and I," Natasha began wearily. "While that certainly does not excuse Rowan's violence yesterday, I want to take pains to see that he is not put to the test again. He and I have been supervising the Map Room twenty-four hours a day, on top of organizing lessons and repairing the barrier."

"When's that going back up?" Tristan asked swiftly. A persistent sense of danger had followed him back from the ridge—he had a bad feeling the rogue magicians were much stronger than they appeared.

"Very soon," Natasha said. "If not for the excursion yesterday, it could have been up today. Anyway, I'm asking you both if you're willing to take turns watching over the globe. I feel I can trust you, if no one else."

"What time do you want us down there?" Tristan asked warily. "And what happens if we get punishments to work off?"

"If the two of you could switch off weekday evenings, from eight until ten, it would be an enormous help," Natasha said. "And I'm sure we can give you credit against any punishments you happen to earn in the meantime."

"Okay," Amber said at once.

Tristan had to think for a bit longer. He hated the idea of sacrificing his evenings to sit in the cold, boring Map Room, but he didn't want anything bad happening to the academy. "Why can't the other teachers do it instead?" he asked, though he was close to agreeing in any case.

“They will be involved in more active ways,” Natasha said, leaning against the wall and running her fingers over her short, tightly-curling hair. “Some are scouting aboveground, now that the rogues know our location anyway, and others are working to gather as much magic as possible to prepare for an eventual attack.”

“Do you think they mean to destroy us?” Amber asked softly.

Natasha shook her head. “I have no idea. No goddamn idea. But until we know, we can’t let our guard down.”

“Okay,” Tristan said. “I’ll help. But if I turn in my homework late, don’t give me crap for it!”

Natasha gave him a sharp look. “A few hours of work each week does not excuse you from all responsibilities. Damian and Zeke will be doing about twenty times that, and they still have to turn in their homework on time.”

“Fine,” Tristan said sourly. He turned and headed down the hall to join the others at lunch. A second later, Amber caught up with him, her footsteps silent on the marble.

“I can’t believe Damian and Zeke would do that,” Tristan said, half speaking to himself. “And when we’ve got a bunch of other magicians to worry about, too! Drakewell is terrifying when he’s angry.”

“At least he’s not mad at you this time,” Amber said, giving Tristan a faint smile. “He could put his anger to good use once the other magicians show up.”

“Any guesses as to what they’re doing?”

Amber sighed. “It depends on whether Merridy is with them or not. If she is, I think they’re trying to destroy us. If not... what if they want to take over the Lair and use it themselves?”

“That’s a scary thought.”

* * *

Christmas was fast approaching, but no one was in good spirits. Though the outer barrier had been re-erected, Alldusk and Grindlethorn continued to patrol the forest whenever the weather was decent, and the classes remained belowground. Tristan quickly grew to hate his shifts watching over the globe; he had to stand in the dark for two hours at a time, staring at the table that marked their valley. He still hadn’t gotten the hang of spotting auras with the lights on, and even if he had, he couldn’t very well have brought a book with him. The rogue magicians could slip past his notice at any moment.

Zeke and Damian were the object of more hatred than ever, but Tristan was still shocked when Zeke limped to breakfast one morning with a black eye and a deep gash down one cheek.

“Did you do that?” Tristan asked Leila in an undertone as Zeke dropped into his usual chair, eyes fixed on his plate. His usual sneering manner was gone, replaced by an empty, exhausted pallor.

“No!” she said angrily. “For the last time, I haven’t been fighting with Zeke! Besides, he can’t have gotten that in a fair fight. Someone was beating him up.”

Leila was absent from lunch that day, and when Tristan confronted her in their botany lesson—presided over by Grindlethorn, since Gracewright had still failed to return—she refused to say a word to him.

Just before dinner the next day, Gracewright stumbled down the stairs into the ballroom, her coat caked in snow and her cheeks bright red.

Quinsley bounded over and scooped her into an embrace, brushing snow from her hood.

“I nearly thought you’d died!”

Gracewright extracted herself from his arms, beaming. “No, hardly. It’s good to be back!” Looking around the ballroom, she said, “Where’s your Christmas spirit? Isn’t your winter break beginning in two days?”

“It’s been a strange few weeks,” Quinsley said, lifting Gracewright’s backpack from her shoulders—the laden pack was half her size—and leading her back to the professors’ table. “The rogue magicians attacked the Lair while you and the others were away,” he continued. “Then they disappeared. And in the meantime, Zeke and Damian decided to play around with the globe and kill a few innocent drivers.”

The smile slid off Gracewright’s face. “Goodness. Are things okay now?” She looked around the hall, no doubt searching for Zeke and Damian, who were trapped in one of their daily punishments. Ryan, Stacy, and Finley had been very subdued in their absence.

“More or less.”

“And Rowan? How is he?”

Quinsley made a face. “Let’s just say he’s a bit...*on edge*. But how did it go? I’ll grab dinner, and then we all want to hear what you’ve been up to.”

Gracewright turned to smile at the students, who were all watching her with unabashed curiosity.

Once they were sipping at their garlicky minestrone, Gracewright shrugged off her coat and began. “It took us nearly a week and a half to make it back to the town they had started from. The storm picked up halfway through the third day, and we had to shelter out in our tents for a day until the whiteout cleared. Then, of course, we were wading through snowdrifts deeper than my waist, and one of the youngest hikers was convinced he had either hypothermia or frostbite.”

“Did he?” Rusty asked.

“Of course not.” Gracewright cupped her hands around her steaming mug of tea as though trying to ward off a bone-deep chill. “They were one of the most inexperienced groups of hikers I’ve ever seen. Usually mountain guides put their clients through a rigorous testing and training process before allowing them onto an expedition, especially when facing adverse conditions, but these people could have been picked up off the street for all the experience they had.”

“And they didn’t question it?” Quinsley asked.

“I believe the magicians had set up their trip as a competition with a twenty-thousand-dollar prize for the participant who took the best photos along the way. What they got were idiots, young and old, looking for a quick buck.”

“No wonder they didn’t raise a fuss after the first groups vanished,” Alldusk said quietly. He was still wearing his trench-coat and scarf after an afternoon patrolling in the snow. “No one expected them to survive.”

“The poor fools,” Gracewright said. “They were reluctant to disclose any more details, so I didn’t press them. The man who thought he had frostbite had a change of heart halfway through the trip, and broke down when he realized he had nearly died. It turns out he had a pregnant girlfriend waiting for him back home, and he’d used the hike as an excuse to escape the relationship he thought he didn’t want.”

“What happened?” Hayley asked.

“I’ve never seen a more affectionate reunion,” Gracewright said dryly.

Chapter 14: Sabotage

With Gracewright back, some of the gloom lifted from the Lair, and a few Christmas decorations began to go up here and there. A small tree with sparse branches appeared at the edge of the dining platform on the first day of break, and Brikkens hung his lemon tree with ornaments once again.

Evvie was acting kinder than ever to Tristan, which made him feel guilty for failing to ask her out. He kept waiting for the right moment, but it never seemed to arrive. How did the others do it? Admittedly, Cassidy was now ignoring Damian, who looked tired and resentful after his endless hours of punishment. And Rusty had not said another word about Christa, though Tristan knew he thought about her frequently.

A few days before Christmas, Tristan had a brilliant idea. What if he gave Evvie a present with a letter asking her out? That would be much less intimidating than doing it in person. But what on earth should he give her?

When he approached Quinsley in private to ask for help, the cook showed him to one of the more bountiful junk-rooms and let him loose to explore.

Just past the kitchen, the room was crammed floor to ceiling with every broken castoff imaginable. There was a whole bin brimming with rusted and dented kitchen equipment, though Tristan found what looked like a perfectly serviceable pasta-maker in its depths, which he set aside to repair for Leila. He also dug through several cases of books, most missing covers or pages, until he found two volumes on magical history that he knew Leila would love.

Evvie was much harder. He sifted through the junk until he spotted a purple square of silk she might like as a scarf, and paired it with a small engraved box that she could use to store marbles. He found an old Frisbee for Rusty, and a set of fancy pens he could divide between everyone else in the Subroom.

Once he had found enough interesting junk to fill the pockets of his jeans and coat, he hid the pasta-maker and books in a sack and returned to the Subroom.

"You're acting a bit mysterious," Leila teased as Tristan hid the sack in a very obvious lump under his mattress. "Trying to impress Evvie, or something?"

Evvie was thankfully nowhere to be seen. Trying not to flush, Tristan said, "Are you saying I'm not allowed to give Christmas presents?"

"Humph," Leila said. "I still think you've made a mistake. Evvie's not that nice, you know."

"You don't really know her," Tristan retorted.

"Neither do you."

When Tristan opened his mouth to deny this, Rusty sidled into the Subroom looking very sheepish. "Hey," he said, failing miserably at nonchalance. "Eli and Trey and Cailyn thought maybe you'd like to help with something."

"What?" Leila asked.

"Um...it's a surprise."

"Not good enough," Leila said. "Tell me, or I'll throw this book at you."

Rusty ducked instinctively as she lobbed the heavy textbook his way. "Fine! They're gonna do something to the bunkroom. As payback for Zeke and Damian killing all those people. Eli's still mad as hell."

"I'm not helping," Leila snapped. "Do you think this is going to solve anything?"

Tristan looked at her in surprise. The year before, he would have expected her to lead the attack. He wondered if she still somehow felt indebted to Zeke for saving her in the Map Room. "I don't think I should," he said. "Natasha's trusted me and Amber to help with the maps, and she'll kill us if we do anything against the rules."

Rusty made a face. "You're lame." He turned and slouched out of the Subroom, clearly reluctant to join in on whatever the others had planned.

"Remember cleaning all those toilets last year?" Leila asked. "I'm not messing with Zeke and Damian again."

She reached up and twisted her short braid around one finger; last year, when Zeke had cut off most of her hair, they had gotten in a fight that had landed Tristan, Leila, Rusty, Zeke, and Damian in huge trouble.

“In that case, maybe we should go up to the ballroom,” Tristan said. That way Quinsley would be able to vouch for their innocence.

Leila jumped to her feet. “Good point.”

Grabbing their books and homework, they hurried up the tunnel to the bunkroom floor, which was suspiciously quiet. Tristan slowed outside the bunkroom, listening for signs that anything was amiss, but all was still.

Zeke’s gang was up in the ballroom, where they usually did their homework, lacking a cozy study area like the Subroom had. Evvie was there as well, and Hayley, who looked disgruntled. Tristan guessed she knew what was happening and disapproved.

“I can’t concentrate,” Leila whispered after opening her medicine textbook and staring at the chapter for several minutes. “I almost wish I’d gone along just to see what they were doing.”

“We’ll find out soon enough,” Tristan said.

“Couldn’t they have waited until after Christmas?”

Tristan shook his head. Hiding his notebook behind Delair’s textbook, he began painstakingly to write a letter to Evvie. Biting the end of his pen, he struggled to think of the right words to use. Even Delair’s tangled theoretical homework would be easier than this.

Half an hour later, Rusty appeared in the ballroom, followed by Eli, Trey, and Cailyn. Tristan shut his notebook with a snap. When Rusty sat down across from Tristan, Leila gave him an unpleasant look.

“What did you do?” Tristan hissed.

“I can’t tell you here. But they’re gonna kill us.” He didn’t seem too happy about it now that the deed was done.

Tristan and Leila lingered over dessert that night until most of Zeke’s gang had gone off to bed. Then they followed Stacy back towards the depths of the Lair, hoping to get a glance at the bunkroom.

They were in luck. The bunkroom doors had been thrown wide open, and the reason for that was immediately clear: the room stank of piss and rotten food. Tristan vividly remembered the day in Juvie when someone had urinated on his pillow—it had taken days for the smell to dissipate. Creeping closer to the door, Tristan saw that two of the beds had been hacked apart, and most of the pillows were slashed to bits, their stuffing littering the floor. The walls were painted with bright red curse words, most aimed at Zeke and Damian.

Standing, Damian noticed Tristan and Leila staring at the mess within. “Get out of here, you bastards,” he spat.

“We didn’t do it,” Tristan said.

Zeke leered at him. “Do you think I *care*? Get the hell out!”

Tristan and Leila fled.

Only the following morning, three days before Christmas, did Tristan realize that Zeke’s gang had not breathed a word to the teachers. They had gathered up the sorry remains of their pillows and stitched them back together, and someone had diligently cleaned the room top to bottom, but nothing could fix the smell or the angry red paint. For the next two days the doors hung open, and Tristan got a whiff of sour urine every time he walked past.

For the first time since the ice storm, he felt almost sorry for Zeke and Damian.

* * *

On Christmas Eve, Drakewell made an appearance in the ballroom for the first time in weeks. He looked much older than before, the vengeful spark in his eyes now faded with exhaustion.

“Your professors and I have been working on a new barrier enchantment,” he said. “If any of you would like to join us in the Map Room, we would appreciate your help in casting it. Working together, we can serve as a powerful conduit to guide the spell.”

It had been a quiet, gloomy Christmas Eve. Zeke’s gang was barely talking, even amongst themselves, and

Zeke's black eye had gone from purple to green to grey. Though Quinsley had played a set of Christmas music over dinner, no one had sang along, and even their little Christmas tree seemed to be wilting.

"If it works, we can all go up to the meadow," Drakewell said.

That decided it. Every student stood and joined the professors in a solemn procession down to the Map Room. Sharing the lanterns between them, the students and teachers continued through the tunnels in a line of bobbing light.

Drakewell did not light the orbs in the Map Room, so Tristan and the others held their lanterns high as they crossed the room. "Silver Bells" was running through Tristan's head as he joined the others in a half-circle around the globe. He thought of Christmas Eve services he had attended, a lifetime ago when his family had been whole, before his mother left and before Marcus's second heart failed. Gripping his lantern, Tristan felt like one of the angels in the little kids' Christmas pageant. He wished Drakewell could have waited another day for this. Being down here only served to remind him how vulnerable they were, how exposed the whole school was to the magicians lurking somewhere outside.

"This is a piece of magic we haven't done before," Drakewell said. "We have constructed a second dome, this one designed to be more flexible than the first. However, it will need a great deal of magic to take effect—to solidify, as it were. This enchantment will serve as a complete camouflage, and will prevent anyone except the current residents of the academy from setting foot within our meadow. Unless they discover a way to track our auras, these magicians will be unable to see us while we remain inside the enchantment's protective ring."

When Tristan looked very closely at the nearest stone table, he thought he could see a ghostly dome over the valley, this one fashioned out of a material that resembled interlocking roots.

"Take one marble each," Drakewell said, passing around a bowl of marbles. "Holding the marble in your right hand, join hands with the people on either side of you. We need to make a solid chain around the globe. I will be directing the spell, so your job is to concentrate on channeling your power to me. You must dissolve your marble before I begin the spell, or the power will fail to transfer." He stepped up to the globe. "What are you waiting for? Move!"

Clutching his new marble, Tristan edged sideways around the globe as the students and professors began linking hands. He ended up between Leila and Eli, with Zeke on Leila's left. She gave him a hard stare before taking his hand.

"Everyone ready?" Drakewell asked. "When I say 'begin,' I want you to focus on transferring the marble's power to me at once."

Tristan closed his eyes, the marble cold between his hand and Eli's.

"Begin."

Tristan was accustomed to working spells with the marbles, so his grew hot within seconds. Instead of dropping it, he screwed up his face against the pain and waited for it to dissolve. At last, the heat flared in his hand before dissipating; he had to assume the power had surged down the chain to Drakewell, because he could feel it no longer.

On his left, Leila was struggling. He could feel her marble just barely growing warm between their palms. Silently begging her forgiveness, Tristan turned his concentration to Leila's marble. Almost immediately, the marble seared his palm. Leila's hand twitched in his, and he nearly released her; swallowing, he held his breath and waited for the fiery heat to slip away.

When Tristan opened his eyes, Leila was frowning at him. *You?* she mouthed.

Tristan nodded.

To his right, Eli had opened his eyes as well and was eyeing everyone he could see with curiosity. Zeke, meanwhile, still had his eyes closed, his face blank with concentration. The fading bruise across his eyelid was more obvious than ever.

At last everyone on their half of the globe had opened their eyes. No one spoke—how long would the spell take? Tristan hardly dared breathe for fear of disturbing Drakewell. With that much magic concentrated in one person, an accident could have dangerous consequences.

Suddenly the entire globe began to glow with red-hot light. It hovered there, pulsing brighter and then dimmer, before at last it drew back to one point on the globe's surface. There it flared up, as bright as the sun,

before dying.

For a moment Tristan couldn't see. The afterglow was seared across his eyes; he had to blink several times before the black circle faded.

"Did it work?" Leila asked softly, still gripping Tristan's hand.

"Yes." Drakewell stepped away from the globe, breaking the chain, and the others followed suit. "It should hold." He sounded wearier than ever, and he moved very slowly as he retrieved his lantern. "Now. Who would like to go outside?"

Drakewell stayed behind in the Map Room as the others raced back upstairs. It had been nearly a month since the hike, and Tristan had not been aboveground since then. He was still reeling from the spell Drakewell had cast—he had never seen such powerful magic before.

"Don't forget your coats!" Gracewright called as they passed the bunkroom corridor.

Before long they had gathered in the ballroom, bundled tightly in coats and scarves and hats and gloves. Quinsley was nursing a tall thermos of something that smelled alcoholic, and Brikkens had donned an unpleasantly festive vest with a reindeer splashed across the back.

Whispers rippling through the group, the students followed Gracewright up the stairs to the meadow.

The sky outside was clear and inky, the darkness splashed with myriad stars. The moon had not yet risen, so the Milky Way blotted a hazy streak across the night. Trees encased in crystalline snow ringed the meadow, shifting in a subtle breeze that bit at their skin.

Cailyn flopped down in the snow and made an angel, and Leila threw a halfhearted snowball at Zeke; Tristan and the rest just wandered across the meadow, eyes fixed on the stars. He had forgotten how vast the sky was. The snow underfoot reflected enough light for him to see his way, so he made for the far edge of the clearing where he could be alone. Filling his lungs with the icy air, he released all of the tension and worry that had dogged him over the past month.

A stronger barrier was up now.

They were safe, at least for the present.

As he neared the edge of the clearing where the greenhouse sat, its roof badly repaired after the ice storm, he thought he heard a tinkling bell overhead. Looking up, he realized that someone had tied a bell to a pine bough hanging over the greenhouse.

A figure moved in the shadows. Amber.

Her face was raised to the stars, and she appeared to be drinking in the power of the universe.

"Merry Christmas," he said quietly, coming up behind her.

Amber turned, her eyes wide with delight. "Can you feel it?"

"What?"

"Drakewell's spell. It's part of this forest. The woods strengthen it, and the stars feed it."

Tristan stared at her. "Did you help him design the spell?"

Amber's smile turned impish. "Maybe. This is how magic should be used."

Dropping to his knees, Tristan lay back in the snow, dizzied by the vastness of the Milky Way.

"Nature and magic were never meant to be parted. One without the other cannot be sustained."

"It's incredible," Tristan said. He wasn't sure if he referred to the spell or the sharp night air or the galaxy swimming overhead.

They stayed outside for what felt like an eternity. Tristan hardly noticed the cold; he imagined the breeze was lifting away all of the tension and fear and uncertainty of the past months. Tristan and Amber were some of the last students to return inside. When Tristan finally stood, his legs were numb and prickling and his nose had turned to ice. Slowly he led Amber back down the stairs, Leila joining them on the way.

In the ballroom, Quinsley had lit candles on every table; most of the students were sitting in silence, watching the flames flicker lower as they sipped at hot chocolate and eggnog and shared a plate of cookies.

It was the strangest Christmas Eve anyone could remember.

* * *

On Christmas morning, Tristan woke to find a tree larger than the one in the ballroom perched in the corner of the Subroom. Someone had cut and decorated it in secret—the branches were hung with garlands, and beneath it lay a small mountain of presents, including the ones Tristan had wrapped two days before.

Some of the tension that had permeated the academy in recent weeks had eased, and a feeling of contented camaraderie hung in the room.

“I bet we’re having something good for breakfast,” Leila said lazily, wrapping her blanket around her shoulders and making her way over to inspect the Christmas tree. “Last night was amazing.”

“Is there anything for me?” Rusty asked, hopping across the room while he tried to pull on his socks.

“No. It’s all for Eli.”

Before Rusty could protest, Leila chucked a small package at his stomach; he caught it with an “Oof!”

“We might as well celebrate,” Trey said. “Last winter was worse. Remember how afraid we were then?”

“True,” Leila said, nudging aside the wrapped pasta-maker in search of a smaller package. “I’m just glad Gracewright made it back okay.”

“I was scared!” Hayley said. “She’s not all that young, but she’ll never admit it.”

“Here, this is for you,” Leila said, tossing a small, round present more gently at Trey.

Eli was just stirring. Rubbing his eyes and yawning hugely, he shuffled backwards until he was sitting slouched against the wall. His dyed hair stuck out in every direction. “Did you say something about presents for me, Leila?”

Tristan’s curiosity got the better of him. Crossing the room, he joined Leila by the tree. “What’s that?”

She picked up the wrapped pasta-maker and nearly dropped it again. “It’s heavy!” She looked at the tag and then shook her head at Tristan. “You’re sneaky.”

When she had torn the wrapping off the newly-polished frame, she blinked several times in confusion. “Where on earth did you get this? I thought our pasta-maker was broken.”

“It was,” Tristan said. “I fixed it.”

Leila gave him a hug before digging up a present for him.

Half of the presents were gone before Evvie stumbled out of bed, her hair matted and her cheek red with the imprint of her pillow. Tristan carefully avoided looking at her as she unwrapped the carved box and the scarf, though he saw out of the corner of his eye when she sank into an armchair to read his letter. Face burning, Tristan put on his sweatshirt and tied his shoes with unnecessary concentration.

When everything was unwrapped, the students from the Subroom headed up for breakfast, many of them clutching or wearing their new gifts, their pockets filled with chocolate truffles. Evvie caught Tristan’s eye on the way out of the Subroom, a look of surprised gratitude on her face, and Tristan felt his face grow hot again. He wished he hadn’t written the stupid letter.

Quinsley had baked cinnamon rolls for breakfast, drenched in icing and still warm from the oven, and at every seat sat a small leather pouch embroidered with the corresponding student’s initials.

“For your marbles,” Gracewright said from the teachers’ table. “You should get in the habit of carrying a handful with you wherever you go, so you might as well have somewhere safe to keep them.”

“If I hear word of any mischief, the marbles will be confiscated,” Natasha said briskly. “Your headmaster was hesitant to give you that privilege.”

* * *

Tristan had thought matters were resolved between the Subroom and the bunkroom, but he was badly mistaken. Not three days after Christmas, Damian cornered Eli after class and beat him within an inch of his life. Everyone in the Subroom heard the story in vivid detail that night, when Eli recounted the fight with a tissue still held to his bleeding nose. He had been the one responsible for planning the defilement of the bunkroom, which was why Damian had targeted him; for some reason, Eli seemed oddly pleased about the whole affair.

“You’re a complete mess,” Trey said, pressing more tissues into Eli’s hand.

Eli gave him a roguish grin. Clearly he had forgotten his quarrel with Trey.

The next day, Grindlethorn was the only teacher who called attention to Eli’s injuries. It seemed even the teachers knew about the recent attack on the bunkroom, and were reluctant to involve themselves.

Natasha tore Tristan's attention away from their seething rivalry when she instructed them to form groups to plan their very first disaster.

"What?" Eli said, turning rapidly away from Trey, with whom he'd been conferring in an undertone.

"I said, you will be preparing to initiate your first disaster in a few months. This is a serious undertaking, so we will study the targeted region and map out any likely aftereffects and necessary precautions ahead of time. Divide yourselves into three groups of five, please, or do I have to do it for you?"

Tristan joined Leila, Amber, and Rusty, and once the rest of the class had sorted itself into groups, Natasha told Zeke's gang, "Sorry, but one of you will have to join Tristan's group."

Zeke and Finley played rock-paper-scissors; Zeke lost, so with much eye-rolling and grumbling, he scooted his chair over to join Tristan's friends.

"I think we have an unfair advantage," Leila said, not acknowledging Zeke's presence. "We have the two best magicians in our group!"

"Why thank you," Zeke said, slouching back in his chair.

"So, what're we supposed to do?" Rusty asked offhandedly. "Are there rules, or can we just send a big old avalanche down the side of some random mountain?"

Natasha had heard him. "Yes. Before you get started, there are parameters for the disaster you will be planning. Once you have charted every possible consequence of your chosen disaster, the class will vote on which one takes place." She wrote five numbers onto the board, and added the rules as she spoke.

"First, your disaster must have global consequences. Whether it affects the entire world—a storm in the Gobi Desert of China that sends dust across the United States, for example—or just makes it into global headlines, it must occur on the global stage.

"Second, you cannot target anywhere that has particular significance to anyone here. No annihilating your enemies, so to speak.

"Third, your disaster cannot have devastating effects on the environment while leaving humans untouched. Oil spills, for example, are not allowed. There has to be some form of direct disruption to humans—you can choose whether you destroy infrastructure or cause human deaths.

"Fourth, you must choose something with effects that can be accurately studied and charted. Try to keep the damage contained within the one disaster. When a magician overreaches him- or herself, the consequences can be dire. Attempting to trigger tsunamis or setting off wildfires in critical areas would be unwise.

"And finally, choose something that you will be able to justify to yourselves. Tristan and Amber, one of you will be working the globe this time, so don't settle on something so horrendous you won't be able to live with yourselves afterwards. Questions?"

Tristan turned to look at Amber, who was staring expressionlessly at Natasha. He couldn't tell if she dreaded or welcomed the opportunity to use the globe.

"What if we don't want to do this BS?" Eli grumbled.

"Then you can join the headmaster in his nightly Map Room vigil, and tell him at length why you're opposed to the idea," Natasha said sharply. "Any useful questions?"

Leila turned her desk around to face her group, and as the rest of the class followed her example, they broke into quiet discussion.

"What can we do that wouldn't cause too much harm?" Leila asked softly. Like the rest of the class, she clearly did not want their group's ideas shared.

"What if we started a hurricane that was aimed for—I dunno, New York City, or something—and then turned it into the middle of the ocean halfway there?" Rusty asked. "That'd definitely make headlines all over the world."

"Except it doesn't wreck anything," Tristan said. "Number three, remember?"

"We *could* target somewhere disgustingly wealthy," Leila ventured. "Some millionaire's neighborhood or something."

Tristan shook his head. "Not if we have to kill them. I won't do it."

They spent the rest of the class brainstorming, finally resorting to listening in on the other groups' discussions to see if they heard anything useful. Unfortunately, Damian's group was going for intense and brutal disasters,

while Eli's had dissolved into a debate of ethics.

Zeke, who had spent most of the hour making snide remarks whenever one of Tristan's group threw out a suggestion, finally said, "What about something really dramatic? Like a volcano that covers the whole sky in ash?"

Leila looked his way for the first time that lesson. She looked as though she struggled to hide her surprise. "Not quite that dramatic. But I think you're onto something."

Just then, Natasha dismissed them. Leila trailed behind Tristan as they filed out of the classroom, clearly thinking hard. "I hate admitting he's right," she said after a long silence.

Chapter 15: The Earthquake

They were in Alldusk's class the next week when Drakewell stormed in, searching wildly around the room until his eyes lit on Amber.

"You!" he bellowed. "Come here at *once!*"

Amber seemed to shrink even as she stood, her shoulders hunching in fear and her knees buckling.

At the doorway, Drakewell thrust a newspaper into Amber's face. "Look. LOOK!" When Amber backed up a step, he slammed the paper to the ground and grabbed her wrist. He dragged her from the classroom, the door swinging shut behind him. Amber looked as frail as a matchstick in Drakewell's harsh grasp.

"What's he doing?" Tristan demanded. He was on his feet, though he didn't remember standing. "He's going to hurt her!"

"I'm sure it's nothing to worry about," Alldusk said, though he sounded plenty worried himself.

Eli leaned over and grabbed the newspaper from the doorway. "There's been an earthquake in Haiti," he said, scanning the headline. "Looks like it destroyed just about everything there." He turned to Alldusk with accusation in his eyes. "How does that benefit our cause? Why the hell are we targeting one of the poorest countries ever?"

Face growing pale, Alldusk snatched the newspaper from Eli and read the story so fast his eyes blurred. "I had nothing to do with this. We would never have agreed on a disaster like this. It wasn't sanctioned."

With growing horror, Tristan realized why Drakewell had taken Amber from the classroom. Amber had been overseeing the Map Room on the night of the disaster.

Drakewell suspected her of setting off the earthquake.

"Sorry, Professor," Tristan said. Pushing his chair out of the way, he made for the door and slipped into the quiet hallway. Alldusk did not try to stop him.

Though Tristan could no longer hear Drakewell's shouts, he broke into a run towards the headmaster's office. Drakewell would either be there or in the Map Room.

As he ascended the last steps to the first floor, Tristan heard muffled shouts coming from Drakewell's office. He sprinted the final distance and threw the door open.

Drakewell broke off mid-word and rounded on Tristan.

"You! What are you doing here? Interfering, useless—"

"Leave Amber alone," Tristan said fiercely. "You know she's not responsible for that earthquake."

"You doubt my word?" Drakewell spat. "*No one else* could have done that. Ashton was the only one who entered the Map Room that evening. She's a lying, manipulative wretch. I won't have her at this school. I won't!"

"Go," Tristan whispered to Amber. "Get out. Now!"

Amber didn't have to be told twice. Fumbling for the doorknob, she escaped the room and fled.

When Drakewell made to follow Amber, Tristan stepped in front of the door. Drakewell looked as though he was contemplating kicking Tristan to the side, but after a long moment he sank into his chair, breathing in a hiss through his teeth.

"You have no idea how serious this is, Fairholm," Drakewell said tiredly. "I won't even try to capture Amber, because I know she can evade me. But I am beginning to worry she was planted here by the enemy. It would do a lot to explain why her magical talent is so abnormally advanced."

"She has nothing to do with them," Tristan said flatly. "I swear it on my life. And she didn't cause that earthquake."

"How convincing," Drakewell said with a tired attempt at sarcasm. "Does this mean you are involved as well?"

"No!" Tristan was still on his feet, and with Drakewell sitting he felt he had the advantage of him for once.

“I still hate myself for killing my brother. I’d be ready to jump off a cliff if I had killed all those innocent people in Haiti. What if the earthquake was just...an accident?”

“That’s not possible,” Drakewell said, though some of his vehemence had fled. “However, I will refrain from holding you responsible. If Amber can give me a better explanation of what happened last night, I might reconsider her punishment. But her silent insolence is unacceptable.”

At that moment, Tristan had the strangest feeling that Drakewell was beginning to respect his opinion for the first time. “Has this ever happened before?” he asked hesitantly. “A disaster you didn’t cause, I mean.”

“Not exactly,” Drakewell said. “Not within my time at the academy. We don’t have records for the entire period this building was occupied, so I cannot account for my predecessors. Disasters occasionally begin on their own, but we can see them on the globe before they happen, and we decide whether to quell them or let them play out.”

“So Amber might have just not noticed the earthquake, then,” Tristan said.

Drakewell shook his head. “Something that large would not happen on its own. It has not happened in five hundred years of magicians’ records.”

“Is it possible the other magicians have done it, then?”

“No. There is no way they could have gathered enough power for such a large-scale disaster.”

Who could it be, then?

When Drakewell pulled out a file and began riffling through his notes, Tristan took that to mean he was dismissed. On his way back to Alldusk’s classroom, he wondered if Drakewell could be wrong. Could the rogue magicians have targeted Haiti?

But why would they do that?

If they had joined Merridy’s cause, their main goal was to eliminate the academy and stop the disasters from occurring at all. Why would they then turn and attack one of the poorest, most vulnerable countries out there?

None of it made sense.

Back in the classroom, Alldusk was reading the entire article aloud while the students listened in disbelief. Alldusk nodded to Tristan when he returned, but did not pause his narration.

“Where’s Amber?” Leila whispered.

Tristan shook his head. She had probably sought refuge in the snow-locked forest, as far from the Lair as she could go.

After class, Leila waited for the others to leave before packing her books and heading towards Natasha’s class. Tristan waited, as she clearly wanted to talk to him in private.

“What did Drakewell say?” she asked in an undertone as they left Alldusk’s classroom. “He didn’t hurt her, did he?”

“He might’ve, if I hadn’t gotten there when I did. He doesn’t think the rogue magicians are strong enough to have caused that earthquake.”

“But Amber was the only one in the Map Room that night.”

Tristan nodded slowly.

Leila frowned as they turned down the stairs. “What if the disaster was just—a regular old natural disaster? Does Drakewell really control *every* disaster in the entire world?”

“He says he does,” Tristan said shortly. “Apparently he can see on the globe when something’s about to happen on its own, and he can decide whether or not he’ll stop it.”

“Every disaster in the entire world,” Leila said skeptically. “Either Drakewell’s lying, or there have been magicians doing the same thing for thousands of years now. But what about those trees with pinecones that don’t break open unless there’s been a fire? Are magicians responsible for *that*? It’d take a damn long time for something like that to evolve.”

“I have no idea,” Tristan said. “And I have a feeling Drakewell doesn’t either.”

They were about to be late for class, so they cut their conversation short. But after they had taken their seats, he glanced sideways at Leila and knew she hadn’t let the matter drop. She was scribbling something on the back of her homework, something that didn’t look like class notes, and did not appear to be listening to Natasha.

Tristan could hardly blame her. He stared at the blackboard without really seeing it, wondering where Amber

could have gone. He hoped she was not in danger.

At ten o'clock that night, Amber was still missing. Tristan knew she could take care of herself, yet he hated the thought of her wandering alone through the woods, terrified to return for fear Drakewell might kill her. Drakewell had taken Tristan's shift in the Map Room, so Tristan had finished his homework early and was growing restless.

"Does Drakewell still think Amber did it?" Rusty asked.

"I tried to convince him she didn't, but I don't know if he heard me," Tristan said. "I'll be back soon."

Abandoning his textbooks in the Subroom, Tristan hurried up to the ballroom. None of the teachers were around at this hour, and when he climbed the stairs to the meadow, the woods were as still as the school below. Not a branch stirred. The stars were dim next to the light of a gibbous moon, and the snow shone brighter than ever.

In the freshly-fallen snow, only one set of footprints led to and from the greenhouse; as usual, Amber had not left behind any trace of her passage.

Though he knew it was futile, and he knew he might attract the attention of the rogue magicians, Tristan ventured into the trees, careful not to disturb their clinging robes of snow. "Amber?" he called. "Amber!" In the stillness, his voice seemed to echo off the faraway mountain peaks.

Once the echo had died, the woods subsided into silence once again. It was so still he could have heard the gurgling of the far-off creek if it had not been locked beneath ice.

Digging in his pocket, Tristan found a marble and clenched it in his cold fist, imagining Amber beneath the Milky Way on Christmas Eve. The marble grew hot as the Intralocation spell took hold, but when he released the fiery sphere, it dropped like a rock.

Cursing, Tristan tried again. This time he held onto the marble so long he thought he would burn a hole through his palm, and when he let go, the marble dissolved into mist.

Tristan swore loudly and kicked a nearby log.

A squirrel chattered and ran from the log, hopping over the snow in two large bounds.

Frustrated, Tristan gave up on the spell. Trudging deeper into the woods, he called out again for Amber, though he didn't expect to hear anything in reply. With the moonlight so brilliant overhead, the trees cast shadows almost as deep as their daytime counterparts. If not for the cold, Tristan could have walked all night.

Before long, his hands and toes had frozen stiff. He hadn't grabbed his gloves or boots—foolishly he had hoped Amber might be waiting for him in the meadow. Pausing, he shouted her name one last time to the heavens. Then he turned and followed his trail of footprints back through the sleeping forest. The night was so brittle he could have shattered the very sky.

To his surprise, Leila waited for him at the top of the stairs, half-hidden in the shadows of the longhouse.

"You've been looking for Amber, haven't you," she said, tossing Tristan a hat and scarf. "I'm not going to tell you how stupid that was, but..."

"I know," Tristan said dully. "But I'm worried. Drakewell could have murdered her. I'll be amazed if she ever comes back."

"Well, it's no use looking for her now. Quinsley says you can't use an Intralocation spell on a person unless they're close by, so you won't have any luck wandering around up here."

"Crap. No wonder it didn't work." Tristan shoved his hands into his pockets, knuckles brushing against the four remaining marbles.

"She can take care of herself," Leila said briskly, holding the door open wider so Tristan could pass. "And if she escapes to the real world, lucky her. You wouldn't want to drag her back, would you?"

Tristan pulled the hat over his stinging ears as he passed through the barrier into the Lair. He wasn't sure Amber wanted to leave; surely she would not fit in any better in the real world than she did here.

"You really care for her, don't you," Leila said, so quietly Tristan almost thought he imagined it. "But it's as if she doesn't belong to this world. I don't understand her at all."

Tristan thought he understood Amber well enough. She was so remarkable, so inescapably different, that no one regarded her as just another kid. Eventually she had withdrawn into herself. He imagined she hated it—the stares, the whispers, the assumptions she was stupid just because she was quiet.

Leila gave him a sad smile. “She’ll come back someday, if she’s ready.”

In silence they walked down to the Subroom, which was already dark and filled with the sounds of quiet breathing.

He hoped Amber was safe, sleeping somewhere in the cold, empty wilderness above. He would have done anything within his power to bring her back.

* * *

Only in the week following the earthquake in Haiti did the full picture emerge. The quake had been a magnitude 7.0, and it had killed some 130,000 people, though the final count changed by the day. It sounded as though the country had been thrown into chaos, and the whole world was responding as best they could.

Tristan could not even imagine that number of fatalities. A hundred and thirty thousand...it was *twenty times* the population of Valley City, where he’d grown up. How could someone be cruel enough—twisted enough—to do such a thing?

And why would anyone target such a vulnerable place?

To Tristan’s surprise, Drakewell did not attempt to suppress the news that Quinsley now read daily at lunch. The headmaster seemed as unsettled by the earthquake as any of the students, though he was still a long way from earning Tristan’s forgiveness for the way he had threatened Amber.

Meanwhile, Amber did not reappear, and of their teachers, only Alldusk and Gracewright commented on her absence.

In class one day, Delair said offhandedly, “I guess that’s our chance of collecting air and water gone.”

He had known all along that Amber had created the orbs that summer.

“What about earth, then?” Finley asked. “Have you figured it out?”

“I’ve had more success than before,” Delair said, his eyes sparkling with enthusiasm. “To my complete bewilderment, geodes do in fact release magic when cracked open. Furthermore, one of our colleagues working abroad has verified that melting rock—they specifically tested molten lava—also releases earth magic.”

“What, are you going to build a furnace hot enough to melt rocks?” Eli asked.

“I would love to do exactly that,” Delair said. “In fact, I’ve been advocating it for years. But I doubt Drakewell will go to such lengths with more pressing concerns at hand. *However*, if I come across any geodes in my work, I will certainly pass them on to Brinley so your class can have a crack at collecting their magic.” He chuckled at his own pun.

* * *

Aside from Amber’s absence, life returned to normal as February stormed in with a string of below-zero days. Though the clearing was now safe from the rogue magicians, the prospect of braving the brutal wind was anything but inviting; for two weeks straight, they sheltered inside, Gracewright venturing alone to her greenhouse whenever her plants needed to be tended. She had started a second set of Prasadimum bulbs, just as a means of doubly fortifying the school, but they were wilting in their pots along the ballroom wall.

When Tristan confided in Leila that he wanted to go looking for Amber again, she told him sharply that he would freeze to death outside. He had to agree she had a point, so he waited impatiently for the storm to subside. Of course, with each day that passed, the likelihood that she had made it to a village somewhere far from the academy increased. He could search for a lifetime and never find her again.

During his Map Room shifts every evening, Tristan tried in vain to pick Amber out of the wilderness. He shifted the metal disc over every patch of the Canadian Rockies within several weeks’ walk of their valley, but he could not find a single human aura.

Halfway through February, he began to wonder if she had died.

Cruel visions haunted him at night—Amber’s body frozen like a statue in the snow, abandoned and windswept, as mice began to gnaw at her feet and birds carried her hair off for their nests. Earthquakes ravaging a city of crumbling ruins, while Tristan ran through the streets in search of survivors.

One night, after he woke drenched in sweat from a particularly gruesome nightmare in which Amber had become the corpse from Whitney, Tristan decided he could wait no longer. He had to find her.

The next evening he resolved not to leave the Map Room until he had located her aura. Surely it would shine brightly enough to stand out, even if she had in fact retreated to a mountain town. He scanned the mountains in steadily widening circles, growing more desperate as his search failed to turn up anything of interest. Even the rogue magicians had not made an appearance for weeks. It struck him as ominous.

As Tristan returned the disc to its usual place over the Lair, he settled in to watch the valley, hardly daring to blink, willing something—anything—to appear.

Just as his shift was nearing its close, he caught sight of a spark of light halfway up one of the mountains. It had appeared as if from nowhere—had it been hiding in a cave? As Tristan watched the spark, it moved along the mountain slope, weaving through trees and over rocks.

The longer he watched it, the more convinced he became that the aura belonged to Amber. It was certainly bright enough.

He stared at it for a long time, trying to memorize its location.

When Drakewell arrived to take over his shift, Tristan nudged the disc to the left to give Amber time to hide once again. He broke into a run once he'd reached the safety of the tunnels, and arrived in the Subroom out of breath and clutching at a stitch in his side.

"Leila," he panted. "Do you have a topo map of the Canadian Rockies?"

"You look like someone's just attacked you. What's going on?"

Tristan threw himself onto the couch and raked a hand through his hair. "I think I've found Amber."

Leila was on her feet immediately, digging through books until she found the Canadian atlas that included their valley. Flipping through the maps, she said, "Where?"

"I'm pretty sure she's hiding out in a cave."

Leila paused and gave Tristan a curious look. "Not the cave that collapsed on me last year, was it?"

"No. It looked like it was at the back of the valley, halfway up one of the mountains. Besides, didn't you say the entrance to your cave was completely destroyed?"

Leila nodded. "More or less." At last she found the correct map and spread it flat on the table, moving aside so Tristan could get a better view.

"I'm pretty sure it was this mountain," he said, indicating one on the northeastern slope of the valley. If his guess was correct, the cave was very close to the pass they had climbed. "I have no idea where it is, though. It's definitely on the slope facing us, low enough that it's still surrounded by a few trees."

"So you're planning to head off into the mountains, with no idea where this cave is, and wander around until you find Amber?" Leila asked drily. "It sounds like one of the stupidest plans I've ever heard."

"What else am I supposed to do? She can't live out there forever!"

Leila shook her head in exasperation. "You could tell Gracewright. I'm sure she'd be happy to help."

"Maybe," Tristan said. "But what if Amber hides? I don't think she wants to come back yet."

"And, of course, you're the only person she'll listen to," Leila said in annoyance. "Just—don't go alone. I don't want you freezing to death out there."

Tristan grinned at Leila. "You want to come with me?"

"What about me?" Rusty asked. He had just appeared through the Subroom door, hair wet from his shower. "Can I come?"

"Fine," Tristan said. "As long as you don't invite the whole damn room!"

Rusty glanced at Eli and Trey, whose heads were bent over a diagram they'd been labelling for Natasha. "I bet they don't want to help us, anyway."

* * *

They had to wait until the weekend to search for Amber, and the three days dragged on forever. What if Amber fled that cave before they arrived? This was their only hope of finding her, and it was a slim one at that.

On Saturday morning, Tristan woke early and climbed the stairs to the meadow to find that the storm had

subsided to a stiff wind. Though it was bitterly cold, the snow was no longer blowing horizontally, which meant they had a chance of finding their way.

"I'm really starting to think this is a bad idea," Leila hissed when Tristan rejoined her in the ballroom. "Those other magicians are still out there! They might attack us as soon as we leave the meadow."

"I've left it a couple times before," Tristan said, "and nothing happened."

"Yeah, but you were by yourself."

"You heard the professors. They can't see auras. So unless they're standing outside the meadow, waiting for us—"

"Which they very well may be doing," Leila said sharply. She didn't press the issue, though.

They had already packed their gear—water bottles, rope, two pairs of crampons that Leila had "borrowed" from Gracewright, and a compass—and they were wrapped head to foot in layers. Tristan was so well-padded he could barely turn his head.

"Where's Rusty?" Leila asked nervously.

"Maybe one of the teachers stopped him," Tristan said. "D'you think we should wait?"

Quinsley handed Leila a bundle of food, which she stuffed into the top of her pack. "Good luck."

"Thanks," she said. "I'm afraid Drakewell might show up if we wait any longer."

When the ballroom doors swung back, Tristan and Leila both froze. Zeke sauntered into the ballroom, his expression turning malicious as soon as he caught sight of Tristan and Leila with their laden packs. "You're going to be in trouble," he sneered. "Want me to find Drakewell for you?"

"We should go," Leila said under her breath.

With a last glance at the empty doorway, Tristan nodded. Rusty would have to stay behind this time.

The wind was stiffer than before when they forced open the longhouse doors and waded their way across the clearing.

"Are you sure this is a good idea?" Leila shouted over the howling gusts.

"No!"

The wind dropped once they entered the trees, but it did little to reassure Tristan. He was on constant alert for any sign of the rogue magicians; for all he knew, they could be waiting to ambush them somewhere in the woods. Every bird-call sounded ominous, and every branch cracking beneath the weight of the snow could have been the footsteps of someone stalking them.

They had charted out the compass directions on the map the night before, but for now they struck out towards the far mountains; Tristan hoped he might be able to see the cave once they drew closer.

After two weeks of cruel frost, the forest was hung with icicles shaped by the wind—waterfalls that had hardened into diamond cascades, arcing spears of ice hanging from snowy branches, and crystalline shells that enclosed pine needles and twigs and bushes. It was a harsh, unforgiving world, yet Tristan had never seen such beauty.

"Was it like this when you hiked up the ridge?" Leila asked, her face bright red from the wind.

"Not this cold," Tristan said. "And there were still patches of dry ground in the forest."

"I still think this is insane."

Tristan buried his chin more firmly in his scarf. "If we hurry, it won't be too bad." Though how they were supposed to walk quickly with the snow almost waist-deep, he didn't know.

"What has Drakewell been teaching you?" Leila asked.

Tristan shrugged. "Nothing, really. He's barely spoken to me since the start of the year. We've just been helping him keep a lookout for the magicians."

"I thought there was more to it," Leila said, a hint of disappointment in her tone. "I thought maybe he was letting you in on all sorts of secrets."

Tristan looped his hands under the straps of his pack. "I'm glad he isn't. I wish someone else could take over the Map Room eventually. Not me."

"But this way you get to decide." Leila brushed her hand over a branch and sent a flurry of snow stinging into Tristan's face. "You don't have to send such awful disasters if you don't want to."

"I still wish I didn't have anything to do with it," he muttered. It was the responsibility—the thought that,

right or wrong, he would take the ultimate blame for any decision—that scared him most. Even if everyone else had voted for a disaster, it would be Tristan’s hands dirtied by the act, Tristan who sent hundreds or thousands of people to their deaths.

“We don’t have to talk about it, if you don’t want to,” Leila said gently. “It’s amazing out here today. Remember, we’re still lucky to be living here.”

“Yeah.” He felt so far removed from his family and the sad, lonely grave on the hill that they could have ceased to exist. This was his home now. “Do you ever wish you could go back?”

“No way! I stayed behind for the summer, remember?” Leila elbowed him. “I don’t care about the disasters. We have our parts to play, and I’m not going to argue with that. I just want to keep you and the others safe.”

Tristan shivered as a sudden gust of wind tore through him. “Why are you so bitter about everything? What was it like for you, before this?”

“My dad was a bastard,” Leila said quietly, letting Tristan catch up again so he could walk alongside her. The trees were beginning to clear; before long they might catch sight of the cave. “And I was, too. That’s all there was to it. We didn’t get along. I stole a ton of stuff, because my family was poor and I thought it might help, but they hated me for it. So I gave up on them and just stole things so I could see them go up in flames. They deserved it, the rich pricks I took it all from. I wasn’t even surprised when I got arrested. I deserved it, too.”

Tristan glanced at Leila in surprise. Her face was carefully expressionless. He wasn’t sure what surprised him more—the fact that Leila had finally admitted the truth to him, or the cold, matter-of-fact way she had said it.

“Hey,” he said, reaching for her gloved hand and giving it a squeeze. “At least you didn’t kill anyone.” He wanted to hug Leila and tell her that what she’d done was behind her now; here at the academy she was smart and brave and fierce, and no one cared what had happened before. But her eyes were distant. Though it had been nearly two years now, she clearly still held her resentment and self-hatred and bitterness coiled tight within.

“What about you?” Leila asked, her voice wavering slightly. “You’re the most honest, innocent person I’ve ever known. How did you get yourself locked up?”

Tristan laughed dully. “Amber’s more innocent than me.”

“True,” Leila said, some of the darkness leaving her eyes. “We’ll have to quiz her on the way back. But what did you do?”

Tristan swallowed. “I killed my baby brother in a car crash.” Even now, his eyes stung at the memory. “I screwed up. I wish I could go back and take his place.”

“Don’t say that!” Now it was Leila who put an arm around Tristan’s shoulder and drew him briefly close. “I don’t know where I’d be without you.”

Just then, a shadow flickered behind a stand of bushes.

“What’s that?” Tristan whispered.

Leila ducked below the bushes. “Probably just a deer.” Then the shadow emerged from around a pair of scrawny aspens.

It was Amber.

Chapter 16: The Second Globe

“My god!” Leila jumped to her feet. “You nearly gave me a heart attack!”
Tristan stood gaping at her for a long moment before he collected himself. Then, as he met Amber’s timid gaze, he broke into a smile. “I almost thought you’d died,” he said, pulling her into a hug.

No one had ever embraced Amber before, not for as long as Tristan had known her. But instead of pulling away, she crumpled into his arms in relief and pressed her cold cheek to his shoulder.

“What the hell have you been doing out here?” Leila asked, patting Amber’s shoulder awkwardly. “I mean, what on earth did you eat?”

Tristan released her and studied her more closely. Her cheeks had an uncommon red blush to them, and her eyes sparkled with what could have been fear or wonder. But her hair was badly snarled, and holes had been worn through the knees of her jeans, through which Tristan could see half-healed scabs.

“Have you been living in a cave?” he asked.

Amber nodded. “Just up that mountain. I saw you coming, and I knew you would never find the cave on your own.”

“What—you think our powers of observation are lacking?” Leila teased.

“No,” Amber said stoutly. “But the entrance is nearly hidden under a snowdrift. It was not so hard to find when I first arrived. I have to crawl for about five feet before it opens up again.” She indicated her bruised, torn-up knees.

“But what did you *eat*?” Leila asked again.

Amber thought for a moment. “Some mice. A couple ptarmigans. Once, a whole deer. But I’m not very good at preparing wild game. I trapped them with magic—it felt unfair to the poor animals, but I was starving—and then I had no idea what to do next.”

“You should come back,” Tristan said. “We’ve missed you. *I’ve* missed you.”

Her eyes widened. “Are you sure Drakewell wants me back?”

“If he doesn’t, I’ll have a word with him,” Tristan said in a mock-threatening tone.

Amber giggled.

“Let’s go,” Leila said. “My feet are probably frostbitten already.”

Turning back down the slope, they began following their footprints south. It was easier going this direction, mostly because they did not have to forge a new path through the snow. Halfway back, Leila glanced over her shoulder at Amber and stopped abruptly.

“What are you doing?”

Amber stopped as well, looking worried. “What do you mean?”

“That.” Leila pointed at her feet. “How are you—floating, or whatever it is you’re doing?”

“It’s just a mental concentration exercise,” Amber said quietly. “I think you could do it as well, if you were taught properly.”

“I want to learn someday,” Tristan said. “We would’ve been up that mountain hours ago if we didn’t have to wade through all this snow!”

Though it was still early, the sun had dropped behind the spine of mountains by the time they returned. As soon as they passed into the meadow, Tristan relaxed—he had been on edge all day, just waiting for the rogue magicians to attack.

Belowground, the ballroom was filled with students and teachers, though dinner was not for several hours yet.

“Sorry we didn’t bring you,” Tristan said when he joined Rusty at their usual table. “What’s happening?”

“Something bad, I think,” Rusty whispered. “Drakewell and Natasha are talking about it just outside—yelling, actually. You know why I didn’t get up to the ballroom on time?”

Tristan shook his head.

“Drakewell stopped me. So it’s good you went without me, or he would’ve stopped you too.”

“Bastard,” Leila muttered.

A moment later the room fell silent. Drakewell and Natasha were standing in the doorway.

“We have some very serious news to share,” Natasha said. Like Drakewell, she looked weary and pale from her long shifts in the Map Room. Tristan had not seen much of her lately. “There was another terrible disaster. This time it was in Chile, and it happened while Rowan was overseeing the globe. We are therefore certain that this earthquake was caused by the rogue magicians...which means they have a globe of their own.”

Tristan went cold.

It was no longer a matter of *if* they would attack the academy.

The only question was *when*.

“We must take every precaution possible. Your headmaster and I believe that the magicians are planning something, and we will be in grave danger unless we stop them soon. Over the next weeks, several of your professors will be scouting the area and attempting to lure the magicians from wherever they are hidden. We are afraid they will target the Lair directly before long, so we will relocate you to the supply town for the time being. You will continue your classes there, and we will erect a protective enchantment around Millersville to keep you from harm.

“If we are correct, the Lair will be in far more danger than the town.”

Drakewell, looking older and more haggard than ever, stepped forward. “This will not be a holiday,” he said wearily. “You will be learning protective enchantments and practicing the use of small-scale conduits. This is a huge risk we are taking, sending you away from the Lair, but we have calculated it to be no more dangerous than keeping you here.”

“What if we just went home?” Hayley asked meekly.

“That would be worse still,” Drakewell said, some of his venom returning. “Remember what happened to Fairholm and Elwood over the summer? They would pick you off like flies.”

“Who’s going with us?” Rusty asked.

Drakewell scanned the teachers. “We need to divide our forces equally. You must be kept safe, but we cannot leave the Lair too thinly guarded. Grindlethorn, Delair, and Natasha, I need you to remain behind with me. Alldusk, Gracewright, Brikkens, and Quinsley, you will accompany the students. I trust the four of you will train them as quickly as you can. If it comes to a fight between our forces and theirs, an additional fifteen fully-trained magicians would do a great deal to tip the balance in our favor.”

Quinsley and Gracewright shared a fleeting smile. Tristan suspected they would both enjoy the chance to get out of the Lair.

“Pack your belongings after dinner,” Drakewell said. “You will leave before sunrise tomorrow.”

For the first time since his arrival in the ballroom, Drakewell looked Amber’s way. “I’m glad you chose to return,” he said stiffly. Tristan almost expected him to apologize, but instead he turned on his heel and swept out of the ballroom.

Tristan ate quickly that night—partly because he was ravenous after their hike across the valley, and partly because he wanted to start packing. He could tell he wasn’t the only one who was eager to spend time away from the academy. They had all had spent far too many days trapped underground this year.

On his way out of the ballroom, Natasha grabbed his shoulder. “Never do that again,” she said with surprising venom.

Tristan blanched. “What?”

“You know what I mean. You *must not* leave our boundaries like that again. You too, Leila.”

Leila folded her arms with a stubborn frown. “Aren’t you happy we found Amber?”

“Of course,” Natasha said, releasing Tristan’s shoulder. “But do you realize Rowan nearly attacked you? Two stray auras on the globe, dangerously close to the academy...what were we supposed to think?”

“Sorry,” Tristan mumbled. He hadn’t said anything because he knew Drakewell would have stopped them,

but Natasha wouldn't accept that excuse. "I'll tell you next time. I promise."

Natasha raised an eyebrow at him but did not detain him further.

"She's scary when she wants to be," Leila whispered on their way down. "No wonder she and Drakewell get along so well."

That night, the Subroom was a frenzy of preparation. Unsure of which classes would continue as usual, Tristan decided to pack all of his textbooks into his small rucksack. Leila had foregone the textbooks in favor of as many magic-related volumes from the bookshelf as she could cram in her own bag.

"What if they attack us?" Hayley asked, carefully folding her clothes and stacking them on top of her notebooks.

"I wish they would," Eli said. "It would give us something worthwhile to do. I'd be happy to fight them—they're a hundred times worse than anyone at the academy."

"How are you gonna fight them?" Rusty asked, shoving some of Delair's leftover shards of Delairium into his pack. "You gonna Intralocate them?"

Tristan turned quickly to hide his grin. Eli had been acting so wound-up lately that he might very well attack anyone who made fun of him.

Instead, Eli scowled and said, "That will be good, too. Learning to fight, I mean. It's like they're scared to teach us any real magic—we haven't done anything useful all year."

"Well, I don't blame them," Leila said. "With Zeke and Damian going crazy as soon as they found out how to use the globe, I can't believe they actually want to teach us how to fight."

"They did say *defensive* enchantments," Tristan reminded her, straight-faced again as he resumed his packing. The rucksack was straining at its seams, and he could not quite manage to fit his scarf.

Amber had been gone for the past half-hour; Tristan assumed she was in the showers, but he was worried she had changed her mind and fled once more. He was therefore relieved when the door opened to admit her, still dripping from her shower, her white hair straight and clean at last and her cheeks rosy.

"Better?" Tristan asked as she crossed to her bed.

Amber looked surprised to find someone talking to her. Blinking twice, she nodded. "There was quite a lot of dust in that cave, I suppose."

Tristan laughed. "I almost thought Drakewell was going to drop to his knees and beg your forgiveness."

"That would've been something," Leila said, shaking her head.

To celebrate their last night in the Lair—for a while, at least—the Subroom students stayed up late playing games and gambling with their hoard of marbles. Eli and Cailyn won the majority of the stash, but they handed most of it back over at the end.

"You guys should keep it," Eli said, shoving a handful Tristan's way. "I can't do much with it anyway."

"Wait, are we bringing it to the town?"

Eli shrugged. "If the magicians are going to wreck the academy, we might as well keep everything valuable with us. Besides, how are we supposed to collect magic in the middle of nowhere? Alldusk's going to be thrilled when he sees this."

"Maybe," Leila said doubtfully. "Or he'll wonder how the hell we managed to steal it all."

Only late that night did Tristan remember the earthquake in Chile that had forced their abrupt departure. It couldn't possibly have been as bad as the Haitian earthquake, could it? Of course, Chile was a much larger country. How many untold thousands had died at the hands of the rogue magicians?

And how many more would be sacrificed before they could be stopped?

* * *

Their wake-up call came far too early the next morning. Hayley had been given the responsibility of rousing the Subroom, and she had more than one pillow thrown her way when she turned on the lights and started rustling around in the wee hours of the morning.

"You can nap on the plane," she told Trey sharply when he burrowed deeper into his blankets.

Tristan was grateful he had finished packing the night before. Bundling himself in as many layers as he had

worn to find Amber the day before, he slung his pack over his shoulder and followed Leila and Cailyn up to the ballroom. Quinsley had thermoses of coffee and hot chocolate waiting for them.

“You’ll be even more grateful for these in the supply town,” he said as Tristan thanked him. “You’ll be spending plenty of time outside, so you need something to stay warm.” He looked even more enthusiastic than he had the day before.

“Are you actually going to teach us?” Tristan asked.

Quinsley laughed. “You bet I am! It’s all hands on deck from now on.”

It was an icy, dark hike down to the airstrip. Tristan slipped more than once on the hill, while Zeke circumvented the problem by sliding the entire way down on his coat. A dense fog hung over the valley, probably sent by Drakewell to veil their progress.

Once their plane had risen above the fog, the sky opened around them, the heavens still sprinkled with stars as the eastern horizon began to glow with the faintest hint of dawn. The sky was a pale gold by the time they landed in Millersville, the sun just beginning to cast its rays above the nearby peaks.

They were staying at the Aspen Lodge as before. This time they had an entire wing of the building to themselves—it was on the top floor, so their windows provided sweeping views over the cute little town and the mountains beyond. Once they had settled in, Quinsley summoned them down to the dining room for a breakfast of sweet potato pancakes drenched in proper maple syrup and mountains of crispy bacon. As they ate, he explained their situation.

“We are guests here, so you have to be on your best behavior. The lodge reserves the right to kick us out if we’re too rowdy, and if they do, you’ll be camping.”

Zeke sniggered.

Their classes commenced that very day, and they were the strangest classes Tristan had ever taken. The students were divided between Gracewright, Alldusk, Brikkens, and Quinsley, and took turns practicing spells and other skills with each professor. Tristan was grouped with Leila, Zeke, and Finley, which did not bode well. He had a feeling it was deliberate, though.

Not everything they learned was magic. Quinsley took them on a short hike through the forest, Tristan’s sore legs protesting the whole way, and showed them how to build a den in the snow for warmth and use magic to start a fire with damp, half-frozen logs.

“If anything happens to us, or to the academy, you’ll realize very quickly how difficult this terrain can be. No matter what happens to your teachers, I want all of you to learn the skills to make it out of here alive.”

Gracewright showed them how to navigate by calculating the sun’s angle in the southern sky and using it to determine the compass directions, and once she had led them to a small hollow in a hillside, she gave Tristan, Leila, Zeke, and Finley each a turn at trying to enact and maintain a temporary barrier spell while she threw clods of dirt at them.

Like the others, Tristan failed on his first try, though when he thought back to Amber’s woven barrier in the Map Room, he wondered if actual supports might help the spell. On his second try, he leaned a pair of sticks over the entrance to the hollow before trying the spell.

This time, instead of expanding until the magic dissipated, the spell clung to the sticks and hovered at the entrance to the hollow. When Gracewright threw a frozen clump of mud his way, it bounced right off the barrier.

“Well done,” she said, brushing dirt from her gloves. “The rest of you should try Tristan’s technique. The sticks are only a crutch, though,” she warned as Leila took Tristan’s place in the hollow. “If you’re being pursued, you cannot assume you will have time to put anything in place.”

“But somehow we’ll have time to find a handy cave?” Zeke said.

“No,” Gracewright said shortly. “That is a crutch as well. You have to start somewhere.”

In Alldusk’s lessons, Tristan realized for the first time how powerful the professor actually was. He explained how marbles could be used as a delicate conduit for the full power of nature—“Which basically means any spells you do in the wilderness, channeling the power all around you, will be far stronger than those conducted indoors.”

He spent the first day demonstrating how the woods themselves could become weapons and barriers. He drew the boughs of two pines together to form an impenetrable mat; broke through the ice in a small stream and sent a jet of water rocketing nearly a hundred feet into the air; conjured up a small blizzard that sent Zeke

stumbling to his knees; and dislodged a volley of rocks from a hillside.

“Perfect tricks for confusing, slowing, or even injuring your enemy,” Alldusk said. “None of them require a huge amount of power. All you need is creativity and concentration.”

“What if our enemy is throwing the same stuff back at us?” Leila asked. “Won’t they be powerful enough to do the same thing?”

“That’s where creativity comes in,” Alldusk said. “One of the first spells most people think to conjure up is fire. When you’re in a difficult situation, fire is usually the most obvious solution that comes to mind.” He nodded at Tristan, whose uncontrolled fireball had driven Merridy away from the Underground Academy’s marble hoard the year before. “I’ll teach you a hundred ways to put out a fire, and a hundred more ways to counterattack without resorting to such dramatic means.”

That day they spent the entire lesson learning how to tease the wind just right so it shook a tree free of its snow all at once.

“It’s good for distraction and not much more,” Alldusk said, demonstrating the spell. “But once you learn to harness the wind’s power, there isn’t much you cannot do. If you’re capable enough, you can even learn to levitate.”

This caught Zeke’s attention. He had been throwing small snowballs at Leila since their lesson started, which Leila had stoically ignored.

To Tristan’s surprise, Leila was the first to successfully shake snow from a tree. He thought it was mainly due to her eagerness to repay Zeke for the barrage of snowballs. As soon as Zeke had stepped up next to a suitably laden pine tree, she glared at its branches in fierce concentration. Tristan watched too, and nearly jumped when the tree actually gave a twitch and dislodged its entire blanket of snow.

“Yes!” Leila punched Tristan’s shoulder in triumph as Zeke cursed and stumbled back, completely covered in snow.

All dusk didn’t even seem to mind when Zeke and Leila began chasing each other through the woods, occasionally pausing to send a whole tree’s worth of snow crashing onto the other. Tristan wondered if he had come up with this exercise on purpose as a way to motivate them to learn faster.

Brikkens’ class afterwards was intolerably dull. They met in a badly-lit barn near the end of town, and spent the entire lesson memorizing the names of spells they would learn while away from the academy. None of the names meant anything without magic attached; it seemed to be a pointless exercise in rote learning.

When the fifteen students reconvened before lunch, everyone started trying to dump snow on everyone else at once, until the whole woods swirled with so much dislodged snow it looked as though a blizzard had passed through.

“Enough!” Quinsley called at last and led the way back to the lodge.

Chapter 17: Amber's Crime

Before long, life in Millersville fell into a comfortable routine. Tristan knew he should not grow complacent, yet it had been a long time since he had lived somewhere so peaceful, so simple. When he mentioned this to Leila, she scoffed at him.

“They’re using us as bait,” she said. “Drakewell doesn’t care if we’re safe. He wants us to draw the magicians out of wherever they’re hiding, and when they attack us, he can finish them off.”

“Well, I guess we’d better learn to defend ourselves as fast as we can, if that’s true,” Tristan said, shrugging. He didn’t want to think about the rogue magicians or anything that waited for them back at the academy. He especially didn’t want to contemplate the disaster he would have to cause before long.

The students were more devoted to their studies than ever before. Gone was the textbook-reading and the endless hours of homework. Instead, they were learning new spells and survival tricks every day. The mornings were devoted to intense practice—drilling, spell memorization, perfecting techniques, and the like—and the afternoons to testing.

Sometimes the students took turns coming up with counter-attacks as the teachers threw rocks and snowballs and magic their way, and sometimes the students were paired up to see who could crush the other’s spell most effectively. Though they were strictly forbidden to harm one another, accidents did happen, and Tristan ended up with a bruised leg and a bloody nose after a particularly intense match against Damian. After Tristan had diverted Damian’s volley of rocks with a dense funnel of snow, Damian had picked up a rock and thrown it at Tristan while he wasn’t looking. Tristan had sent a dead tree-branch crashing down on Damian’s head, and Damian had retaliated by punching Tristan in the nose when they rejoined the rest of the class.

The students had each been given a small weekly budget, which they spent gleefully at the small shops around the village, still marveling at their freedom. Eli had taken the chance to expand their game collection to include Settlers of Catan and Risk, which invariably devolved into shouting matches, especially when one of Zeke’s gang joined in.

Tristan had been preoccupied since Christmas, worrying about Amber and the attack on Haiti, but whenever Evvie caught his eye, he knew she hadn’t forgotten the letter he had written at Christmas. This would be the perfect time to ask her out, yet he could never seem to catch her at the right moment. Instead he joined Leila and Rusty for dinner almost every night at one of the local restaurants, just for the novelty of it.

By the time two and a half weeks had gone by, he was beginning to run out of excuses. When he caught sight of Evvie wandering into the forest alone, therefore, he abandoned Rusty without explanation and jogged over to talk to her.

“What are you doing?” Tristan panted, slowing just inside the trees.

Evvie turned. “I’m pretty sure I saw a moose heading that way just a moment ago. I haven’t seen one in years!”

Tristan scanned the trees but didn’t see any sign of movement.

“There are tracks just there.” She pointed to a line of deep indents in the snow. “But I can’t tell if they’re new.”

“That’s neat,” Tristan said. *Just ask her!* He kicked at a snowdrift. “Um, Evvie?”

“Yes?” She gave him a pretty smile.

“Do you want to—uh—join me for dinner tomorrow night?”

Evvie’s face lit up. “Oh! I’d love to!”

“Then I should probably go apologize to Rusty for running off on him,” Tristan said, unable to think of anything more to say.

Evvie nodded, blushing deeply. “I’ll see you tomorrow, then.”

“Yeah.” Turning, Tristan hurried off. Half of him was triumphant—he’d finally asked a girl out! The other half was dismayed—what on earth were they going to talk about for an entire dinner? He should have asked her out for coffee instead. Then he could have confined his embarrassment to fifteen minutes.

Rusty punched Tristan on the shoulder when he caught up once again. “You just asked her out, didn’t you?” He was grinning like crazy.

“Maybe. Don’t you dare tell Leila.”

Rusty snorted. “She’ll find out anyway. She always knows everything.”

* * *

The afternoon before his dinner with Evvie, Amber pulled Tristan aside and said, “Will you come with me? I have to tell you something.”

They escaped to the center square and from there into the grove of aspens that had given the lodge its name. Tristan had grown accustomed to wearing about ten layers wherever he went, so the cold did not bother him any longer.

“What is it?” he asked quietly as they wound their way between the scrawny white trunks.

Amber shoved her hands into her pockets and did not speak for a long time. At last she said, “I know where the magicians are hiding. But I don’t want to tell Drakewell.” She pulled back the sleeve of her coat and showed him a round, purple scar on the back of her arm. “He threw a marble at me, and it burned right through my sleeve. I hated him so much I could have killed him.”

“I know the feeling,” Tristan muttered. “I killed my little brother in a car crash, and Drakewell pretty much admitted he set the whole thing up. I almost *did* murder him when I found out.”

Amber’s eyes widened. “You never said anything.”

“I thought the rest of you weren’t that bad,” Tristan said, kicking at a stick that protruded from the snow. “Rusty didn’t even *do* anything, and Leila definitely isn’t a murderer. I don’t know what you did to get arrested, but I can’t imagine it was that bad. I thought I was the only one who—who killed someone. And I probably am.”

They were getting deeper into the forest now, surrounded by undisturbed pine boughs laden with snow. The birds were louder than before, their chirruping melody darting through the trees.

“What did you do?” Tristan asked hesitantly. “You don’t have to tell me, if you don’t want to. I wouldn’t blame you at all.”

Amber slowed and brushed a coat of snow from a decaying log. She sat there, Tristan beside her, and stared at the trees with her chin in her hands. Tristan did not expect her to answer his question, but at least she had not fled.

At long last, she spoke. “I can tell you. Only you.” She glanced at Tristan shyly before returning her gaze to the trees. “But you have to promise you won’t think of me differently.”

“Of course not,” Tristan said.

Amber took a deep breath. “I was born blind. It’s common enough for albinos. I was in Special Ed up until I left school, and I despised it. Most of the kids in those classes were very much mentally challenged—some of them had helpers who accompanied them everywhere. And because I took half of my classes with them, I was treated as one of them.

“But I was always smart. I knew it, though no one would recognize it. I learned to read Braille before most people could read print, and when our Special Ed teachers showed me the regular alphabet, I practiced etching letters in wet clay until I was comfortable enough to write without seeing the paper. I didn’t show anyone, though. I was too shy. All my life I felt like something was irrevocably wrong with me, and I shrank into myself. I still don’t know how to talk to people normally.” She dropped her eyes to the ground. “I think the kids here are the first people in my life who haven’t known me as ‘that blind girl,’ but I still can’t talk to them. I still feel like I’m one of the disabled kids.

“I hated all of it. I hated the games we played in Special Ed, and I hated being treated like a baby. I should have been more empathetic to the others, I know, but I couldn’t stand being counted as one of them. I begged to attend real classes for a week once, but people assumed my hearing was impaired as well, and their whispering

was painful. The teacher didn't know how to give me assignments or how to grade me, so I went back to Special Ed. Then..."

Amber raised her chin to look at Tristan, her blue eyes shadowed.

"It sounds crazy. I grew up in Oregon, and my neighborhood bordered a forest. Ever since my parents told me I was never to set foot in the woods, I wanted nothing more than to disobey them. They were afraid I would get lost. When I was about twelve, I ventured into the woods for the first time. Not far, because I was afraid of losing my way, but the very air felt different in the trees. Dense and humid, and laced with the smell of moss and decaying leaves. I stood in those trees for hours, all of my senses heightened, exploring the sounds and smells and feel of the woods. And just before I left, I thought I felt something more. Not an ordinary sensation; more of a *tugging*, as though the woods themselves wanted me to reach out to them.

"It was the magic."

Amber smiled faintly, her eyes distant.

"After that, I was in the woods every day. I ventured farther, losing my way several times, though I never panicked. If I wandered far enough, I might never have to return. I grew more attuned to the magic, to the sensation of power emanating from the oldest trees and the purest springs, and I sought it out.

"One day I saw a faint shadow in the corner of my eye. It was the strangest feeling, having a single point to focus on. I was not accustomed to directing my eyes in any one direction. I stared at it, that hint of grey, but I couldn't figure it out. Over the next week, I grew better at distinguishing shadows. By the time I turned thirteen, I could see shapes.

"I was seeing the auras. I saw them as a pale light, undefined, with impenetrable shadows on every side."

"Wow," Tristan said. Cautiously he reached out and put a gloved hand over Amber's. She was incredible.

"One of my Special Ed teachers noticed that my eyes were not darting every which way like before, but when they took me in for a vision test, they noticed nothing different. I still couldn't read, or distinguish anything on a flat surface. Inside, most auras were muted or invisible, and in their absence I felt blind in a way I never had before.

"Over the next two years, I began exploring the auras and the power I had found. I *knew* it was power of some sort, untapped energy, because of how it hung in the air like a subtle vibration."

"I felt that once!" Tristan said. "One time I think I warmed my hands with magic from the forest, and I felt it hovering there like a web."

Amber gave him a radiant smile. "That's exactly what it was. And I could draw on the web, and tap into it, and change things with it. One day I managed to summon an owl to my shoulder, and another day I drew water from a pond into my hands while I was standing. I could tell when creatures were nearby because I felt the subtle variations in their power; a winged animal was different than a scurrying rodent, which was different again from a timid deer.

"Just before I was arrested, I tried to use the magic to restore my sight. I failed many times. Healing magic is one of the hardest of them all, especially if a body does not know how it feels to be whole.

"Then, one day, I tried to use magic to see—not to fix my eyes, exactly, but to see in the same way I saw auras. I desperately wanted to get out of the Special Ed classes. Before school I went into the forest and took as much magic as I could into me. It didn't feel right. I could channel the power to do as I wished, but pulling it into myself and hoarding it felt as though I had turned myself into a bomb waiting to explode. It was too much power, but once I started, I could not stop.

"At school that day I asked to take the vision test again. But when the nice teacher, the one who had noticed me focusing on objects for the first time, led me to the school's office for the test, I felt nauseous from the effort of holding so much magic inside and had to sit down. I spent the rest of the morning sitting in the nurse's office. I refused to go home.

"When lunch hour came, I pretended I felt better and headed back to the Special Ed classroom. No one was there, so I fetched a book to see if I could make out the letters. I allowed just the tiniest bit of power to escape from within me....

"The next thing I knew, the teachers and kids were standing all around me, and the classroom looked as though it had been blown up. One of the walls was completely gone, nothing left but a ragged hole, and the

furniture had been reduced to splinters. I could see, truly see, but by then it didn't matter.

"They called my parents, and then the police. They thought I could have killed someone with whatever explosives I had set off. I stayed in a police cell for three days, and after that I was transferred to a mental hospital. I didn't even get a trial."

At last she fell silent, looking down at the snow.

Tristan didn't know what to say. Every word of her story was incredible—that she had grasped magic so intuitively on her own, that she had once been unable to see, that she had caused more destruction than Tristan ever had.

"Damn them," he said at last. "Why couldn't anyone figure out how smart you are? I nearly got sent to a mental hospital when I told them about the earthquake Drakewell had sent, and I was terrified!"

"They're not as bad as all that," Amber said quietly. "Though I felt like more of a freak than ever."

"You're not," Tristan said.

Amber stood. "We should go back. They might be worried."

Only as they neared the aspen grove and the edge of the woods did Amber speak. "Do you think I should tell them about the magicians?"

"It's your choice," Tristan said. "I'll pretend I don't know. But if it will keep us all from getting killed, maybe it's worth it. I think Drakewell wanted to apologize."

"What will it take before he realizes he's gone too far?" Amber asked softly.

"If he got his way, I don't think he would stop until one of us died," Tristan said.

Amber shivered.

* * *

Evvie was waiting outside the usual restaurant when Tristan emerged from the forest. He probably looked a mess, his hair sloppy and his face bright red from the cold, but he didn't have time to remedy that. He had booked a table for thirty minutes earlier than he usually ate—not that it was necessary to reserve anything, as the students made up half the town's population—hoping he could evade Leila and Rusty.

As Tristan drew closer, he wished more than ever that he had gotten the chance to tidy up. Evvie must have bought makeup recently, because her eyes were lined and her lashes darkened; she looked exceptionally pretty, especially because Tristan had never seen any of his classmates wearing makeup before. And she was wearing the silk scarf Tristan had given her for Christmas.

"You look very nice," Tristan said, raking his fingers through his hair in an attempt to tame it.

Evvie blushed. "Thanks. It's been a long time since I've had an excuse to dress nicely."

He led her into the restaurant, where the waiter showed them to a table at the back, away from the windows that overlooked the main square. Tristan had requested this ahead of time; here they wouldn't be seen, and hopefully Rusty could come up with some excuse to avoid eating out this once, because he didn't want to see Leila's expression when she saw him with Evvie.

"It's been nice getting away from school," Tristan said, glancing at the fireplace. As the waiter handed them a pair of menus, he tried inconspicuously to shed his top five layers.

"It has," Evvie said. "I lived in Montana for a long time, before my dad died, and I always loved spending time up in the mountains." She glanced at her menu without seeming to see it. "There was a little town, kind of like this, that we'd always visit for Christmas. They had an ice skating rink and a big Christmas feast in the main lodge. It was wonderful." She gave Tristan a sad smile.

"That sounds amazing," Tristan said, unable to think of anything better to say. "I'm sorry about your dad."

She shrugged. "It's okay. That was a long time ago."

Though Tristan knew enough not to press the issue, he could tell from her expression that she still found it hard to talk about. "Do you usually eat back at the lodge, then?" he asked, casting about for something safer to talk about.

"Yeah. Hayley and Cailyn and Trey have been really nice. I didn't expect anyone here to be like that."

"Not Eli?"

Evvie made a face. “He’s so difficult. When he’s in the right mood, he’s fine, but he’s been really obnoxious this year.” She glanced at the menu again. “I guess he’s been okay lately.”

The waiter came by just as Tristan opened his mouth to reply. The menu was limited and mostly built around wild game, so Tristan had already tried all of the main courses. He ordered at random, wishing the food would come soon.

Once the waiter had left, Tristan couldn’t remember what he’d been meaning to say. He asked Evvie how her lessons were going—she had been grouped with Cassidy, Ryan, and Eli—and that conversation carried them through until their dinners arrived.

Just as Tristan took a bite of his venison stew, the door jangled open to admit Leila and Rusty.

He groaned and turned away from the door, but he wasn’t quick enough.

Before Tristan could protest that he didn’t want them here, Leila and Rusty had drawn up chairs to his table, Rusty with an apologetic shrug.

“I was just about to send out a search party,” Leila said.

“Very funny.”

“Amber just confessed something,” Leila said with a dark look. “I think you should know.”

“Does it have to be *now*?”

“Yes,” Leila said pointedly. The look in her eyes said she wished Evvie would vanish. Instead she grabbed Tristan by his scarf and pulled him closer so she could whisper in his ear. “She says she knows where the rogue magicians are hiding.”

Tristan leaned back in surprise, nearly strangling himself on the scarf Leila was still holding. Amber had told Leila and Rusty? Good for her.

“She told me, too,” he said softly. “But I promised I wouldn’t say anything.”

“I think she’s changed her mind,” Leila said. She gave Evvie another unpleasant look. “But I think we should tell the professors. I overheard Quinsley and Alldusk talking about it, and apparently Drakewell and the others haven’t seen a trace of the magicians in weeks. It’s as though they’ve left.”

“They haven’t.” Tristan cast Evvie an apologetic look, which she did not seem to notice.

“I know,” Leila said impatiently. “But why are they hiding? Why haven’t they attacked while the Lair is vulnerable? They must have something else planned.”

“Why’re you looking at me?” Rusty said. “I don’t know anything about the stupid magicians!”

When the waiter returned and asked if Leila and Rusty wanted to order, Evvie begrudgingly shifted her plate and silverware so they had space at the small table. Leila watched Tristan with a frown until he said, “There’s more news, isn’t there? You’re hiding something.”

She shot him a challenging look. “You’re too smart for your own good. I’ll tell you later.”

All in all, Tristan was thoroughly relieved when dinner was over. When Evvie stood and shrugged on her coat, Tristan stood to walk her to the door. Leila made as if to follow, but thankfully Rusty grabbed her arm and forced her to stay behind.

“Thanks for joining me for dinner,” Tristan muttered, one hand on the door. “I’m sorry about them.”

Evvie shook her head. “It’s not your fault. But I don’t see why you like hanging out with Leila! She’s so obnoxious.”

Tristan opened his mouth to defend Leila but thought better of it. “See you tomorrow,” he said. Holding open the door, he waved as Evvie vanished into the dark square.

Then, massaging his aching temples, he strode back to the table where Rusty and Leila waited.

“You idiots!” he snapped. “You did that just to spite me. You could’ve waited another *hour*, surely. Why did you have to ruin the one thing I’ve done right around here?” He threw his gloves at the table, knocking over his half-empty water glass. As Rusty bent over to mop up the puddle on the floor, Leila lowered her head.

“Sorry. I was just—”

“What?” Tristan asked swiftly.

“Nothing.” Leila continued to glare at her empty plate until Tristan threw himself back into his seat. “She doesn’t deserve you, Tristan.”

Tristan made a face. That wasn’t up to Leila to decide, was it? “What were you going to tell me earlier?”

“Oh.” Her expression cleared marginally. “Quinsley said Delair’s worried about the barrier over this village. He says it’s weakened. Some of that snow might have been sent by the other magicians.”

“Do you think we should go back, then?” Tristan asked. “I wish we could stay here forever. The Lair is so dreary.”

Leila shrugged. “We’re farther from the magicians here, but if they have a globe, it doesn’t matter either way. I agree with you. I think we should stay here until we’re forced to leave.”

“But we’re gonna tell the professors what Amber said?” Rusty asked, reappearing from under the table with two sodden napkins.

Tristan glanced at Leila, who nodded. “I think we should,” he said.

On the short walk back to the Aspen Lodge, Leila nudged Tristan and said, “Oh, lighten up. I bet you weren’t having *that* much fun with Evvie. I think you were secretly grateful for the distraction.”

“That doesn’t mean you’re allowed to burst in and ruin things for me whenever you feel like it,” Tristan said, feeling nettled. True, he had dreaded sustaining the conversation with Evvie for the duration of dinner, but that didn’t give Leila leave to do whatever she liked.

Leila grinned. “Hah! I was right.”

“I haven’t forgiven you, though,” Tristan said. “Come on. Let’s find Quinsley.”

Quinsley wasn’t in his room, though, and Gracewright and Alldusk were absent from theirs as well. After searching the common area and the dining hall to no avail, they decided to give up and tell the professors first thing in the morning.

But they never got the chance.

Chapter 18: The Magicians' Hideout

Tristan was sleeping deeply, dreaming he had lost his way in a very thick forest with owls on every tree, when he heard a crackling in the brush behind him. He turned to see who was following him...
...and breathed in a mouthful of smoke. Resurfacing from his dream, he could at first see nothing—the smoke was so thick it compressed the air. Then he saw a flash of light beyond his window and heard an echoing *boom*.

“Rusty!” he yelled.

Struggling for a moment with his blankets, Rusty scrambled from his bed and immediately doubled over coughing.

“We’ve got to get out,” Tristan said hoarsely. He was afraid the magicians were imitating what their own teachers had done to Whitney, and no one had survived that inferno.

Rusty crept over to the door and cracked it open. As soon as he did, he jumped back. “It’s bloody hot out there! We can’t go that way.”

Tristan cursed. “Can we jump out the window?”

“Maybe. But what about the others?”

Tristan’s thoughts immediately went to Leila and Amber. He wanted to run down the hall and warn them, but he didn’t have time.

“Let’s jump first,” Tristan said. “Then we can throw rocks at their windows or something.”

Rusty nodded, eyes wide with terror.

Cracking open the window, Tristan let a burst of icy air into their room. As an afterthought, he grabbed his coat and gloves, Rusty doing the same.

The waning moon was bright enough to light up the square below, and Tristan was relieved to see a pile of snow directly beneath their window. It would cushion their fall.

Not hesitating a moment longer, he sat on the wide windowsill and lifted his legs over.

Then he jumped.

He landed gently, legs sinking knee-deep in snow, and picked himself free so Rusty could follow.

From the ground, he could see that he had been wrong about the magicians. They had not lit the town on fire the same way Drakewell had done with Whitney.

No—they were dropping fire-bombs from a two-seater plane.

Most of the village was already ablaze, and in the confusion, a small group of locals had gathered at the center of the square. Damian and Cassidy had joined the group, and Brikkens stood at the door to the lodge, a blanket wrapped around his shoulders. After a moment’s pause, he ducked through the door and back into the flaming building.

As the tiny plane turned back towards the center of Millersville, dipping low to the ground, the group that had gathered there fled. Tristan and Rusty pressed their backs to the lodge wall, trying to stay hidden.

The plane loosed another bomb at the restaurant they had eaten at only the night before, the small projectile whirring through the air before bursting into flames on the roof. Finley, who had been cowering beneath the restaurant’s eaves, went running into the center of the square with his arms over his head.

Rusty had stepped out of the snowdrift with some difficulty, and together he and Tristan brushed aside snow from a nearby planter, grabbing a handful of the rocks that ringed the leafless bushes.

Moving to the window just left of their own, Tristan drew back his arm and hurled his rock with as much force as he could muster.

The rock glanced off the double-glazed pane without leaving so much as a mark, though it did make a satisfyingly loud *thunk*.

Seconds later, Leila raised the window and shouted down, “Triss! I thought you were still in there!”

Tristan shook his head. “Come down here! NOW!”

Leila didn’t have to be told twice. She sat swiftly on the window and pushed herself over the edge.

Landing with a *whomp*, Leila staggered away from the snowdrift and beckoned to Evvie, who had appeared at the window behind her. Evvie hesitated a long time, her face white with fear, but at last she screwed up her eyes and leapt.

As the plane turned for another sweep over the town, the door to the lodge opened and Quinsley shepherded most of the remaining students into the square.

Amber was not among them.

Tristan jogged over to Quinsley, keeping one eye on the approaching plane. “Where’s Amber?” he yelled.

“She thinks she can hold off the fire long enough for Abilene and Cailyn to get out,” Quinsley shouted back, nudging his herd of students towards the woods. “To the plane. Run!”

“They’re going to drop an effing bomb on her!” Tristan yelled. Shoving Damian aside, he wrenched open the front doors to the lodge. Hot air billowed out, nearly singeing his face, but Tristan lowered his head and forged on.

“Amber!” he bellowed up the stairs.

The top floor was wreathed in flames and smoke, but he thought he saw a figure making its way towards the top of the stairs.

“AMBER!”

“Help!” she called out in a choked voice. “I can’t carry them both!”

Taking a deep breath of half-fresh air, Tristan bounded up the stairs. His eyes stung as he ascended into the cloud of searing smoke; blinking furiously, he saw two figures lying on the ground.

“Gracewright fell,” Amber said, her voice rasping. “And Cailyn breathed in too much smoke. She’s passed out. Can you carry Gracewright?”

Tristan grabbed Gracewright by her shoulders and pulled her to the top of the stairs. She stirred and muttered something, which was followed by a fit of coughing. Reaching beneath her, he hoisted her into his arms. Though she was small, he staggered beneath her weight and had to lean on the banister for support as he started down the stairs.

Amber, who was clearly stronger than she looked, lifted Cailyn around the waist and dragged her down the stairs, Cailyn’s feet bumping against each step along the way.

At the door, Quinsley lifted Gracewright gently into his arms, while Hayley and Eli took Cailyn between them.

“You okay?” Quinsley asked Amber.

She nodded solemnly.

“Then run. *Run!*”

He took off at a full sprint towards the airstrip, heedless of Gracewright’s weight in his arms. Tristan grabbed Amber’s hand and followed, glancing to be sure none of his friends were still lingering in the shadows.

The plane disgorged yet another fire-bomb at the roof of the lodge, which collapsed in a whoosh of sparks, before swooping to the end of town so they could circle back.

“They’re going to destroy our plane,” Quinsley bellowed. “HURRY!”

Their small plane was parked in a shed at the end of the airstrip. Alldusk had already opened the hatch and started the engine, and Quinsley deposited Gracewright in the center aisle before taking Alldusk’s place.

“Everyone here?”

Brikkens made a hurried count. He was still wearing a thick wool blanket around his shoulders. “Fifteen kids, four teachers. All present.”

Quinsley gunned the engine and turned onto the airstrip without so much as checking his controls. Moments later they were in the air, the small plane scrambling to follow.

“We’ll have a head start over them,” Alldusk said tensely. “We might be able to make it into the Lair before they attack.”

Tristan leaned past Leila to see the two-seater plane make a tight circle and set out on their tail, rising to

match their elevation. Even in the minutes that he watched, he could see it falling behind.

“Do you think that was supposed to be another diversion?” Leila asked shakily.

“I hope not,” Tristan said. “How many of them are out there?”

Leila pressed her forehead against the window and didn’t answer.

It seemed like an eternity before they circled down in the valley above the Lair. Though Tristan knew the most recent barrier had created a full illusion to conceal the school, he still found it strange to see the meadow lying empty below, no sign of the longhouses in sight.

To his surprise, Quinsley dropped low over the trees, heading straight for the meadow.

“Are you sure about this?” Alldusk asked tensely, ducking his head into the cockpit.

“No,” Quinsley said, his voice almost inaudible above the roar of the engine. “But we don’t have much choice.”

Tristan leaned close to the window again, staring at the scene outside, but Alldusk turned and said, “Seatbelts, everyone!”

“But what if the plane explodes?” Damian asked. “How are we supposed to get out?”

“You’ll hardly be evacuating if the plane combusts,” Alldusk said sharply. “And you won’t be doing anything at all if you give yourself a concussion first.”

That shut Damian up. Alldusk buckled himself into the copilot’s seat, while Tristan reluctantly sat and fastened his own belt, still trying to see out the window.

As they turned in for the final descent, the plane rattled slightly—Tristan thought they had collided with the tops of the nearest trees. Then they dropped down in one sudden swoop, Tristan’s stomach flying into his throat.

The plane jolted sideways, the longhouses suddenly visible to their left, and roared to a halt just a hair short of the greenhouse.

The students broke into applause when the plane’s engine died, but Quinsley was already ducking out of the cockpit, saying, “No time for that. We have to get inside. Go!”

Alldusk wrestled the ladder free and led the students onto the lawn, keeping an eye out for the rogue magicians, while Tristan helped Eli lift Cailyn before following.

“Quickly, now,” Brikkens said, shooing them off the plane.

Most of the students broke into a run in the meadow, diving through the longhouse entryway and disappearing into the school, but Hayley and Eli walked slowly, Cailyn’s weight awkward between them. Quinsley was carrying Gracewright once again—their tiny professor was awake, but in no shape to walk.

“I don’t see anyone,” Tristan said under his breath, pausing before they passed through the longhouse doors. “What if that wasn’t the magicians?”

Leila pushed open the doors and started down the stairs. “Then we have a whole new threat to worry about. I’d rather assume it was just the magicians.”

Down in the Lair, the rest of the teachers were waiting for the stragglers. Drakewell was the only one absent, and he was undoubtedly in the Map Room keeping an eye on the situation.

“Don’t worry about me,” Gracewright was saying to Grindlethorn, who had brought a stretcher and half of his medical supplies up to the ballroom. “It’s just a broken leg. Look after Cailyn first.” Though she was pale, she was sitting up in a chair and waving off everyone’s concern.

Shaking his head, Grindlethorn stumped over to Cailyn, lowering his stretcher so Hayley and Eli could set her gently down.

“I think she just breathed in too much smoke,” Hayley said anxiously. “She’s breathing a bit easier now.”

Grindlethorn took her pulse and listened to her chest. “She might just have to sleep it off. We’ll take her down to the hospital room in a minute, but first, what happened?” He turned an accusing look on Quinsley. “You were supposed to keep them safe! The barrier is still up. How the hell did those magicians get through?”

Quinsley sat heavily on the platform ledge beside Gracewright. “They didn’t use magic. They must have known the barrier was only effective against magic, because they used an ordinary plane and a bunch of fire-bombs to wreck the town.”

“How did they know about the barrier?” Brikkens asked worriedly, still wearing the blanket like a hideous shawl.

“They probably tried to throw a spell at it first,” Alldusk said. “When that failed, they rightly guessed that we hadn’t taken the time to put a full barrier in place.”

“Has anything happened back here?” Quinsley asked Natasha.

She shook her head, mouth pressed in a thin line. “Nothing. Their silence is unsettling. I know they’re planning something.”

“We should fortify our defenses,” Gracewright said. “Prasidimums at every doorway. We should even put them at strategic points along the tunnels, so we can stage a retreat if they make it past our first line of defense.”

Quinsley stood quickly. “Good idea. But you need to get that leg fixed first. Grindlethorn?”

When the bearded professor gave a grunt of approval, Quinsley lifted Gracewright once again. “Anyone want to help us with the stretcher?”

Hayley and Eli immediately volunteered, following Quinsley and Grindlethorn from the ballroom. They left a taut silence in their wake.

In the stillness, Amber sidled over to Tristan’s side. “I have to tell Drakewell,” she whispered.

Tristan nodded. “I was going to say something to Quinsley yesterday, but I didn’t get the chance. Want me to come with you?”

She nodded quickly.

“We’ll be back,” Tristan told Leila. When she frowned, he said, “Drakewell’s going to be furious. You’ll be glad we didn’t drag you into this.”

When Tristan pushed open the door to the Map Room and crept in, Drakewell did not turn or acknowledge his presence for a long time. His gaze was fixed on the globe as he scanned the entire length of the Canadian Rockies.

“Professor?” Tristan said at last. “Am—I mean, we have something to tell you.”

“I’ll tell him,” Amber whispered, stepping around Tristan.

At last Drakewell turned. “Why have you come?” he asked coldly. “I don’t believe I asked for help.”

“Professor?” Amber said in a quavering voice. “When I was—away—I found something.”

Drakewell narrowed his eyes. “What?”

“I—I found the magicians. I can show you where they are.”

Drakewell’s eyes flashed, but he turned rapidly away from her and clenched his fists at his side, clearly trying to calm his temper. “Show me at once,” he said, his back to them.

As Drakewell positioned the disc over their valley, Amber crossed to the nearest table and eyed the mountains that sprang up. “Here,” she said, pointing to what looked like a scree slope near the base of one of the closest mountains. In this scale, it was barely a hand’s width from their meadow. “They have been hiding in this cave. I think the roof collapsed at some point, but they have dug a tunnel in, which they have hidden. You cannot find it unless you stumble across it.”

“And how did you encounter it?” Drakewell asked suspiciously.

“I was looking for somewhere to shelter from the snow.” Amber traced the distance from the cave towards the burrow Tristan had found her in. “I heard voices from within. I don’t think they expected any of us to be outside the Lair.”

“Thank you,” Drakewell said unexpectedly. “This will make our task much easier.”

Amber looked at the floor.

“Is there anything else you want me to know?”

She shook her head.

“Well, get some rest tonight, because we are about to use the magicians’ strategy against them.”

“What do you mean?” Tristan asked.

“A diversion.”

Though Tristan wanted to ask more, he understood himself to be dismissed. He and Amber left Drakewell alone with the globe, hurrying down the hallway to share their news. They bumped into Leila on the stairs—obviously the suspense had been too much for her.

“What was that about?” she demanded.

“Drakewell took the news surprisingly well,” Tristan said. “And now he’s planning some sort of diversion.”

“You mean we’re going to attack the magicians?”

“I hope so,” Tristan said. He hated feeling like a mouse in its hole just waiting to be pounced on. He just hoped Merridy was not among their enemies.

“Let’s go tell the others!” Leila said. She grabbed Tristan’s arm and dragged him down the hall, Amber hurrying along in his wake.

The others were back in the Subroom already, examining their wounds and bemoaning the possessions they had lost in the village.

“At least we didn’t lose our homes,” Hayley told Eli sternly. “I think you can survive without that Risk board.”

“Where’ve you been?” Eli demanded as soon as he noticed Tristan. “Leila said you were going down to talk to Drakewell.”

“Amber found the magicians,” he said. “Drakewell—”

Tristan had to stop there, because everyone started shouting at once. After the questions and triumphant exclamations had died down, he said, “They’re hiding in a cave. I think it’s the same one that collapsed on Leila last year. And no, I don’t know what Drakewell’s going to do about them, but he mentioned a diversion.”

“I think we’re going to attack them,” Leila said, taking a seat at the table. Her atlas was already sprawled open on the table from when she and Tristan had used it to search for Amber, and she pointed to a contour line marking the cave she had sheltered in during their test the first year. “It’s not far at all. I bet we’d crush them if we all attacked at once. They’ve only had the advantage because they’ve been hidden.”

“Yeah!” Eli said. “We’ll bury them.”

“Do you think they actually have a globe down in that cave?” Hayley asked.

“That’s a good point,” Leila said. “They definitely have some sort of map, but they can’t see auras, can they? So how did they know we were in Millersville?”

“Maybe they rigged up surveillance cameras,” Eli said.

Leila swore. “I bet you’re right.” Spinning on her heel, she marched straight back to the door.

“Where are you going?” Tristan asked.

“To warn someone.”

* * *

When Leila returned an hour later, face pink from the cold, she said, “You were right, Eli. There were five of the damn things hidden in trees all around the meadow! They’ve been keeping track of us whenever we leave the meadow. Gerry and I pulled down all the ones we could find, and burned them just in case they had tracking devices inside.”

“Why didn’t they follow me, then?” Amber asked.

“Because they couldn’t see your aura,” Tristan said. “They didn’t know you were worth following.”

Rubbing her cheeks, Leila sank down into a couch by the fire. “It’s a shame we lost all those marbles we brought to Millersville. We could do with a bit of extra magic right now.”

Eli dug into his pockets and produced two overflowing handfuls of marbles, which he set on the coffee table. Trey did the same, and before long everyone was pulling marbles from their coats and pants and backpacks.

“Wow,” Leila said when the entire supply was amassed. “You’re all very prepared.”

“What do you think we’ll do?” Rusty asked, rolling the marbles around the table with his palm. “We’re probably just gonna hide down here when the teachers are fighting, aren’t we?”

“It’s the safest place for us,” Tristan said. “There are hundreds of doorways in the tunnels, so there’s no reason they would try to break through this one even if they did make it into the Lair. But I don’t want to sit inside while the teachers do everything. Didn’t they teach us those combat spells for a reason?”

“We’ll find out what Drakewell wants us to do tomorrow,” Leila said. “There’s no point making plans until we know what’s happening.”

* * *

Cailyn reappeared at breakfast the following morning, looking worried but otherwise unscathed, and even Gracewright limped up to the ballroom on a pair of crutches. Drakewell and Natasha both joined them for once; Delair must have been left behind with the globe.

As he caught the smell of cinnamon rolls and hot chocolate drifting from the kitchen, Tristan guessed they were about to hear some serious news. He tried to enjoy the meal, but he was conscious of the marbles forming a cold weight in his pocket, aware that they were in danger of attack at any moment.

It was no surprise, then, when Drakewell pushed aside his plate after breakfast and said, “These are perilous times. We know almost nothing about our neighboring magicians, but we cannot ignore them any longer. They have a globe of their own, and a plane, and enough manpower to sacrifice a few of their number in the name of distraction. We have no idea what we’re up against.

“As it stands, we would be wise to act now, before the magicians learn we have found their hideout. But we must confuse them first. Starting today, we will launch a series of disasters around the world—not destructive events, just newsworthy ones—that will reach the ears of these magicians. They’ll be confused, and hopefully they will assume we have given up on finding them.

“In four days’ time, Tristan and Amber will take control of the Map Room while the rest of us attack the magicians’ cave. Tristan and Amber will send a disaster of their own, something that the magicians will hear about immediately and that will keep their attention occupied while we approach their cave. I believe they have some method of following the news, so anything large enough will be sufficient.”

Natasha frowned at the students. “I hope you’ve done your homework diligently, because one of the disasters you were researching for my class would do quite nicely.”

“You have until tomorrow to decide,” Drakewell said. “Amber, would you be willing to send the disaster?”

Eyes widening, Amber nodded very slowly.

Chapter 19: Master of the Globe

Drakewell stood. “If anyone needs to find me, I will be in the Map Room. Natasha?”
She rose and followed him from the ballroom, face hard.
It seemed that everyone began talking at once.

“What the hell?” Tristan said. “I don’t want to do this!”

“Are we gonna help fight the magicians?” Rusty asked. “Isn’t that why we’ve been training?”

“Maybe we should give back our marbles,” Trey said.

Leila pinched Tristan’s arm to get his attention. “You should be grateful. It’s Amber who has to set the disaster, not you.”

In the confusion, Amber slipped away, no doubt to resume her usual wandering in the tunnels. Tristan stood and made a half-hearted attempt to follow her, but he knew she would easily evade him. That was a shame. He wanted to ask her what on earth they were meant to do.

What if they got the disaster wrong? What if nothing happened? Worse, what if it spiraled out of control and caused serious damage?

On their way back to the Subroom, Tristan and Leila spotted Zeke slipping down the stairs towards Delair’s mine. Damian made a rude gesture behind Zeke’s back, causing Cassidy and Ryan to break into unpleasant laughter.

“He’ll be lucky if Drakewell doesn’t murder him on the spot.” Leila’s lips curled.

“Whatever,” Eli said. “I’m going too.” He pushed past Leila and hurried down the same stairs Zeke had taken.

Tristan led the way down the dark passageway and through the Prasadimum, the others shuffling blindly behind him, before dropping into a chair at the slanting table. He couldn’t think straight. A part of him was furious at the magicians for endangering his friends, and couldn’t wait to get his hands on the globe. He would stamp out every one of the bastards.

Another part of him was terrified to be given such power. When he had tried to protect Marcus, he had made the stupidest decision of his life. How could he trust himself to choose the right course here? And this time around, it wasn’t just his brother who he put in jeopardy. If he messed up, he could kill all of his friends. Worse, he might let the rogue magicians escape. And if they succeeded, who knew what destruction they would unleash on the world?

Leila kicked him under the table.

“What?”

“I said, what disaster are you going to set off?”

“I’ve got no effing idea.” Tristan scratched a deep indent into the table with his nail, trying not to think of Marcus. At least Amber would be there. She would be able to handle it.

“You could do a wildfire,” Cailyn said.

“Too slow,” Leila said. “It has to catch their attention.”

“Or a tsunami?” Rusty said.

“Too destructive. Unless it hits an uninhabited island, which no one would care about.”

“You’re impossible,” Rusty said. “I give up. Why don’t you come up with something yourself?”

Leila threw an eraser at him.

It was late at night when Eli finally returned, yawning but satisfied.

“You weren’t bludgeoned to death?” Leila said.

“You know what? Drakewell actually invited us in! I think he’s starting to lose his mind.” Eli flopped back on his bed, shoes still on. “We watched all day, and he did exactly as he said. Small disasters all over the world,

nothing targeting any people.”

“How do you know?” Evvie asked tightly.

Eli yawned again. “Be—because I’ve been practicing. I can see the auras now, when it’s dark.” Looking smug, he dragged his pillow over his face.

* * *

The next day, Amber vanished after breakfast and had still not reappeared by the time Tristan had showered and changed into his pajamas that night. Pretending he had forgotten something in the bathroom, he set an Intralocation spell on her and followed it deep into the tunnels, down a branch he had never taken before. Deep in the earth, he ran across a flight of stairs leading up—he only discovered them when he tripped over the first and fell face-forward onto the steps.

Picking himself up, he continued more carefully, lantern held high. These stairs had caught him off guard—most of the tunnels seemed to burrow ever deeper into the earth, some sloping gently, others descending at a steep incline.

Just past the top of the stairs, he caught sight of a silhouette seated against the wall.

“Amber?” He held his lantern higher.

She turned and appraised him, eyes wide. She did not seem surprised to find him there.

“Quiet,” she whispered. “Sit by me, and listen.”

Tristan heard nothing. They sat for ages, staring at the lamp’s gentle glow, until Tristan was close to falling asleep with his head against the rough stone.

“It’s gone now,” Amber muttered after a long silence.

“What did you hear?”

She shrugged. “A soft tapping. Like a drip of water.”

Tristan frowned at her. “You think there’s a way out? A hidden entrance, or something?”

“Or something.” Amber pressed her fingers to the rock, as though probing for any weakness. “I don’t like it.”

Tristan got stiffly to his feet and stretched his legs. “Come on. It’s nearly midnight. We should get some sleep.”

Amber stood, hands still pressed against the wall. After a moment she shook her head and followed Tristan back towards the main school. “I don’t like this. I feel like we’ve become rabbits trapped in our burrow. I hate hiding underground, and I hate not knowing what we’re up against.”

Tristan hugged his arms across his chest. “In three days, we’ll be safe or dead. Not much longer now.”

“How reassuring.”

* * *

Like a fog slowly rolling over the school, the day arrived when their professors would attack the rogue magicians at last. With each hour, the students grew quieter and grimmer. Tristan could not believe that his greatest concern a week ago had been working up the courage to ask Evvie out. He noticed her trying to catch his eye from time to time, but he looked away whenever that happened.

In the face of everything that was happening, he couldn’t stand the thought of another awkward conversation with Evvie. He wished he had never asked her to dinner.

As if in a daze, Tristan made his way up to the ballroom the morning of the attack, wide awake despite the hour. He was the first one there, and he sank into his usual seat, staring at the wall.

Thank god Amber was the one setting off the disaster. He could not have done it himself.

Each one of them knew their roles.

Tristan and Amber would make their way to the Map Room directly after breakfast, to take over from Drakewell.

At that point, Drakewell would lead all seven professors on a direct assault against the magicians’ cave.

Meanwhile, the Subroom students would hide in their room, and Zeke's gang in Delair's mine tunnel, until the professors returned. Though Leila and Zeke had each made it clear that they hated the thought of hiding while the rest of the school was in danger, Alldusk had not wavered in his decision. This way, if a direct attack was launched against the school, no one would be in jeopardy.

Except the professors, of course.

Before long, the tense silence of the ballroom was interrupted by a rasp of hinges. Quinsley strode in, alert and grim, dressed in hiking clothes instead of his usual chef's coat.

"Tristan." He didn't sound surprised to see Tristan up so early. "How are you feeling?"

Tristan shrugged. "I'll be fine."

"Good. I wanted to thank you. We couldn't pull this off without you and Amber. We're very lucky to have stumbled across two students of such talent. No pressure, of course."

Tristan nodded, a hollow lump forming in his stomach.

"What do you want for breakfast?"

"Nothing right now," Tristan said.

To his relief, Quinsley left him alone then, retreating into the kitchen without any further prompting.

Amber was the next to arrive. She looked whiter than ever, her eyes wide and expressionless.

"You okay?" Tristan whispered as she slid into the seat beside him.

She shook her head.

Tristan reached out and found her hand under the table. Her skin was icy. She blinked at him in surprise and grasped his hand as though it would save her from drowning.

"I'm afraid," she said, so quiet Tristan nearly missed it. "I don't know how to control my own power. I could ruin everything."

"I've never seen a better magician than you," Tristan said. "You'll be fine."

He was glad for Amber's presence. Her fear reminded him that he was not alone.

Little by little, the students and professors arrived, and they all made a show at eating breakfast. Tristan was not the only one picking at his food, though. Eventually Natasha rose to remind everyone of their plan one last time; Tristan watched her closely, but her words did not register.

Eleven o'clock. That was when he and Amber would trigger the disaster that would hopefully distract the magicians enough to allow the professors to attack unhindered.

The only problem was, he still didn't know what disaster they would set off.

As the others began to leave, Natasha summoned Tristan and Amber up to the professors' table.

"We have spoken at length, Rowan and I," Natasha said. "We don't want to force you into setting off a disaster that feels morally wrong, because you'll be less likely to succeed. We've decided that a volcanic ash cloud eruption will be disruptive enough to make world headlines without harming anyone. Rowan will give you more details in the Map Room."

She lowered her voice.

"Remember this. We know that our enemies are capable of wanton destruction, and we don't know how far they're planning to go. If all goes well today, you will be heroes to more than just your professors. And the best sort of heroes are the ones who carry out their work in secret, right?"

Tristan swallowed. He wasn't a hero; he was just following orders.

"To the Map Room, then," Natasha said. "Good luck."

With a last glance back at the professors, Tristan and Amber made their way down from the ballroom. Silence reigned in their wake—Tristan could hear every squeak of his shoes against the marble.

Down in the tunnels, Tristan could almost feel the weight of the earth pressing down on him. Whatever happened today, it would be the end of something. The end of his life here, or the end of his innocence. Today he consciously joined the professors. He could no longer scorn their work, because from today he became a part of it.

And despite everything, he knew he had made the right choice.

Outside the Map Room he paused, eyeing Amber in the yellow light of his lamp. The glow highlighted deep circles under her eyes; clearly she had not slept the night before.

“You’ll be okay,” Tristan said. “And—” He drew her into a rough hug. She looked so lost, so vulnerable. When he let her go at last, her eyes were shining with what could have been tears.

“Let’s go,” he said grimly.

Amber nodded.

Drakewell was waiting for them beside the map. He studied both of them as they approached, perhaps searching for any signs of reluctance or rebellion. When he left the Map Room, he was handing the full power of the school to them. He must realize how much of a gamble he took.

“I believe Natasha told you the nature of the disaster we’ve selected?” He rotated the globe away from Canada until Europe drew into view. “The volcano we chose is one in Iceland—close enough to Europe to cause a bit of havoc, but not dangerous.” He put a finger onto the top of a rounded volcanic cone. “You remember the gesture for a volcano?”

When Tristan hesitated a second before nodding, Drakewell demonstrated. “Imagine you’re drawing something from the center of the earth. The spell is creating a puncture in the magma sheath and drawing the molten earth skyward.”

“But it won’t spew magma, right?” Tristan said. “Natasha said it would just shoot out an ash cloud.”

“Yes,” Drakewell said. “Be careful not to use too much force, or the magma will come along as well.”

“Right.” Tristan gripped his hands behind his back, trying not to imagine the eruption.

“We should return by nightfall. If no one has come to fetch you by then, don’t leave this room. You should be safe in here.” He paused. “I suppose you can try to find the other students and bring them here, but don’t expose yourselves to the magicians. They’ll pick you off one at a time.”

“Is that likely?” Tristan asked.

“I have no idea whatsoever. The magicians are still an unknown entity.” Reaching into the pocket of his coat, Drakewell handed Amber the quill he used to control the globe. “Good luck. You will need it.”

“And you,” Tristan said, his voice cracking.

At that, Drakewell turned and left.

They were alone.

It was ten minutes before eleven. The professors would be waiting at the foot of the stairs until eleven fifteen, when they would leave the Lair and approach the magicians from several different directions. By then, the magicians would hopefully be keeping an eye on the news, wondering what sort of scheme the academy had put into play.

Amber stood turning the quill over and over in her hands. The body of the quill gleamed, occasionally revealing glimpses of the four marbles embedded within.

“I can’t do it,” she whispered at last, hands dropping to her sides. “I’m so afraid. The Map Room is not natural. I won’t be able to suppress the power. It will get out of control.”

“I’m sure you’ll be fine,” Tristan said, feeling sick. “You’re just nervous.”

Amber took a step away from the globe. “No. I know it will go wrong. I’m too powerful. This globe wasn’t designed to be used by someone like me.”

“You have to do it!” Tristan said. “If we don’t distract them, the professors won’t have a chance.”

She shook her head. “It’s just wrong. I can’t. Trust me. You don’t want me to use that power. I’m too dangerous.”

“You’re not,” Tristan said, growing desperate. “Please? I know you’ll be fine. You’re brilliant.”

Amber stepped back farther still, holding the quill in front of her. “I can’t. Don’t make me.”

Tristan swallowed. What choice did he have? “Fine.” With a wave of revulsion, he took the quill from Amber. “I’ll do it.”

Chapter 20: The Flooded Cave

It was time.

Tristan stepped up to the globe, every nerve vibrating. The professors had placed too much trust in him. They had no way of knowing whether he succeeded; they would not know until it was too late to turn back.

He and Amber had practiced the gesture a hundred times in the ringing silence of the Map Room, perfecting the movement. Taking two shuddering breaths to steady himself, Tristan brought the quill to the peak of the volcano and drew it away again, funneling magma from the earth's core to the surface.

Nothing happened.

"You have to enchant the quill yourself," Amber said. "It's just a dead object."

Tristan grasped the quill more firmly in his sweaty fingers and tried to summon up a flare of magic from within.

He couldn't do it. His senses were hyper-alert; he couldn't concentrate.

"It's not working."

"Use a marble." Amber pressed a gold sphere into his left hand.

Tristan swallowed. This time, with the cool weight of the marble to focus on, he was able to draw power from it and send it into the quill.

Again he touched the quill to the volcano, and again he drew it away.

This time, he could feel a thread of heat trailing behind the quill as it lifted free. He could sense the weight of the earth he dislodged.

When he released the spell, a small rain of sand exploded from the mountaintop.

Tristan and Amber jumped back as a cloud of smoke billowed out from the cone, quickly vanishing into the still air of the Map Room.

"Move the globe! Quick!" Tristan said.

One eye on the stream of smoke that continued to gush from the crater before dissipating, Tristan and Amber spun the globe until they could see the mountains near the academy.

No one was outside. Tristan let out the breath he had been holding.

Their professors would have time.

Amber latched the larger metal disc onto their section of the mountains and hurried over to the side table to watch the scene unfold.

Flicking his eyes back and forth across the valley, Tristan spotted a few stray auras belonging to animals. As he watched, one pinprick of light emerged from the magicians' cave and hovered outside for a moment before flickering out once more.

"They're watching." Almost unconsciously, he made a fist around the marbles in his pocket.

Five minutes passed.

Then, in a wave, eight auras blossomed into existence in their meadow—the professors. They were counting on the magicians' inability to track auras.

Tristan and Amber watched in silence, heads bent over the table, as the eight beads of light drifted closer to the cave. The auras spread out as they moved, a few floating into the forest and falling back, while three made a direct line to the mouth of the cavern.

Just before the cave, the three auras stopped. They would be Drakewell, Natasha, and Alldusk.

Whether they called out to the magicians or simply waited, Tristan did not know. But a moment later, a fourth aura appeared before them.

Not one aura moved. The magicians must be sizing one another up, calculating the odds. One against three, except the professors were facing an unknown, unseen entity.

Suddenly the lone aura flared brighter than ever—it was casting a spell.

One of the professors dodged, and another sent a spell in retaliation.

In an instant, the fourth aura blinked out.

It was over.

Ten heartbeats passed.

Just as Tristan was beginning to hope the magicians had given up, three new auras emerged and halted before the professors.

How many were there?

“There are more waiting underground,” Amber said quietly, as though reading his mind.

“We can’t just leave them,” Tristan said. “They’re outnumbered!” He turned away from the map, setting the quill in a river valley north of the cave. “We have to help.”

Amber backed away from Tristan. “There could be fifty magicians waiting. A hundred.”

“So we should just sit here and do nothing while everyone is killed?” Tristan spat.

Amber turned her back on Tristan and bent over the table once more. “No. *We should* help. Down here.”

Her words hit Tristan like a fist.

They had the globe.

They could do anything.

“What are you saying? A cave-in? A rockslide?”

Amber bit her lip. “I don’t know. We don’t know where the cave ends, so a cave-in might not accomplish anything. They could have a back entrance. Or three.”

As Tristan retrieved the quill from where it lay across a turbulent river, an idea struck him. “We could flood the cave. Force them all out. If they’ve stockpiled marbles, they won’t have time to grab them.”

“I like it,” Amber said. “But how do we redirect the river?”

Tristan studied the layout of the valley. The river flowed west for a long way before cutting south past the academy, on the opposite side of the valley from the magicians’ cave. They could either send a flooding rainstorm to the mouth of the cave—and wait hours for enough rainwater to accumulate—or forcefully gouge a new path for the river.

“Can we make a fault line?” he asked slowly.

“Possibly. We can try.” Amber traced her finger along the valley floor from the river to the cave entrance. “It has to be a normal fault, not a thrust fault or a slip-strike fault. These mountains were all formed by thrust faults, so we’ll have to fight against the nature of the area.”

“Can we do it?”

Amber narrowed her eyes. “We should try.”

Numb fingers grasping the quill, Tristan traced the valley floor between the stream and the cave once more. “You do that, right?” He made a jagged slashing movement as he followed the line.

“Yes. But I think I have to help. One of us has to force the sides apart. They will grind together otherwise.”

“You can do that? Without the quill?”

Amber hung her head. “I have no idea.”

Great. They were leaving everything up to chance.

As he hesitated, one of the auras flashed bright as a candle. A second one followed suit.

The magicians were fighting.

“Shit. You ready?”

Amber nodded, paler than before. As Tristan drew on the power of a marble, his numb fingers began tingling painfully.

Hands shaking, he traced the earthquake’s path from river to cave. Beside him, Amber moved her hands over the map, trying to control the map without a conduit. Heat emanated from her skin; Tristan could not tell if it was working.

He reached the cave mouth at last and lifted the quill away, breaking the spell.

The auras were moving now, flickering bright and then dim like fireflies. After a second, Tristan realized there were only five remaining.

Who had died?

In the woods, the remaining five professors circled closer, hidden but watching.

Just then, the ground began shaking. The flashing spells died away as the ground ripped asunder, a long splinter threading down the valley from the river. Before the crack had fully formed, a surge of water broke from the river and shot down the new canyon, careening towards the magicians' cave.

All five auras fled the torrent of water, dispersing in the trees.

A minute passed, the auras darting here and there, clearly trying to survey the damage while avoiding one another.

Suddenly, the Map Room started shaking. Tristan stumbled backwards, clutching Amber's arm for balance. Rocks and dust clattered from the reinforced ceiling, filling the room with a hazy breath of grime.

"We have to get out of here!" Tristan yelled. He took a deep breath and immediately started coughing.

"What about the magicians?" Amber said. "We won't be able to fight them outside."

"We can't fight them anyway," Tristan said. "I don't know who is who."

He glanced back at the table in time to see six new auras emerge from the flooding cave in a disorganized string, some clinging tight to others as though supporting their wounded companions.

"Go!" Tristan shouted.

When Amber showed signs of wishing to linger, he grabbed her hand and dragged her from the Map Room. For all he knew, their earthquake could reverberate against the mountains and send the entire Lair collapsing.

"We have to get the others," he said.

At this, Amber broke into a run behind him. They sprinted down the tunnels to Delair's mine and back into the main school. Zeke's gang was supposed to be waiting in the mine tunnel, but there was no trace of them, so they must have stayed in the bunkroom.

In the lowest corridor of the school, a chunk of marble had broken from the ceiling and shattered on the floor. The walls were still vibrating as Tristan and Amber hurtled up the stairs towards the Subroom. Tristan skidded to a halt in front of the bunkroom. He didn't want to abandon Zeke's gang either.

Throwing open the door, he yelled, "Get out of here! There's an earthquake!"

He was met with silence.

No one was in the bunkroom.

"Where've you gone, you idiots?" he shouted into the empty chamber.

Heart pounding faster, he turned and ran down the tunnel to the Subroom. A wave of foreboding followed him. Something was terribly wrong.

Just inside the Subroom, he stopped, panting.

The room was empty.

He hurried over to the corner where they'd stored their stash of marbles. Only a handful remained.

Had his friends gone up to fight the magicians?

"They're so stupid!" he spat, glaring at Amber. "Did they honestly think they'd be able to help?"

Not waiting for her to answer, he turned and sprinted back down the tunnel towards the surface. The cave was no longer shaking, but he was more anxious to reach the meadow than ever. Where had his friends gone? There were too many magicians. His friends wouldn't stand a chance.

Up at the ballroom, his worst fears were confirmed. The chamber was empty.

"Wait," Amber called as Tristan started up the stairs. "If we leave, the magicians could take over our globe."

Tristan cursed. "Well, we'll just have to hope they won't find it. We can't stay down here."

Amber paused another second, expression torn. At last she met Tristan's eyes and followed him up the stairs. She had chosen to trust him. If something happened to her now, it would be his fault.

The fresh air that gusted down the stairwell past the Prasadimum brought momentary relief—followed quickly by the sharp scent of fear. Tristan had eight marbles in his pocket, and a rudimentary knowledge of defensive magic. How did he expect to go up against a deadly team of trained magicians?

Throwing open the longhouse door, he paused in the shadows to look around. Though he saw flickers of movement in the trees, no one crossed the meadow. For the moment it looked safe.

"Show me the cave," he said to Amber under his breath. "Can you find it again?"

She nodded. Moving carefully, like a deer ready to bolt, she darted to the edge of the meadow and began weaving her way through the forest. Tristan followed as quietly as he could, wincing at each crunching footstep.

As they drew closer, he began to hear muffled shouts and what sounded like a waterfall coursing over rocks. “I bet we got a few of them in the flood,” Tristan said with savage pleasure.

“There are so many,” Amber murmured. She did not look back.

At last they circled around a rocky mound and came upon the cave. The entrance gaped wide and dark, framed by a grassy clearing. Through the clearing ran a swollen, muddy torrent, draining straight into the cavern.

The shouts were louder now. Here they rose, distorted, from the depths of the cave.

Something stirred in the bushes behind Tristan, shuffling leaves in the undergrowth. He jumped and darted aside, hand going to the marbles in his pocket. Again the bushes rustled, more menacingly this time. Tristan saw nothing. Could the magicians make themselves invisible?

In a flash of movement, something rose from the bushes and took flight.

It was just a bird.

Tristan’s shoulders sagged.

“What now?” he whispered. “Do we just wait here until they make it out?”

“Okay.” Amber shuffled back until she was hidden behind a tree.

The shouts were closer now. Curiosity winning out over fear, Tristan edged closer, sacrificing his best hiding spot for a better vantage point. Here and there he could make out snatches of words above the thundering river.

“Goddamn river’s blocking up! It’s—”

“—get them out. No use if they drown.”

“Leave the stash! It’s not worth—”

“Hurry, you bastard! It’s not going to hold much—”

Tristan could see the block they were afraid of. A net of dead branches and pinecones was caught near the mouth of the cave, and behind the dam, a small pond was beginning to swell into the clearing. Before long, the dam would break, sending a raging flood through the cave and sweeping away everyone who had survived the first surge.

“Can you...help it along?” he whispered, glancing at Amber.

“Of course. But we might not have enough time.”

Tristan didn’t care. If the magicians escaped, that would be the end of the Underground Academy and everyone he cared for.

“Please?” he begged.

With a resigned sigh, Amber crept from the forest and approached the cave. Extending a hand, she seemed to inhale power. She grew radiant with magic—she was the most exquisite person Tristan had ever seen, and the most dangerous. Her enchantment was so subtle that he didn’t realize she had begun until he heard screams from within the cave.

“Help!” a voice yelled, cracking with emotion.

Wait a moment. That voice sounded familiar.

Eli?

Chapter 21: Ilana

“Stop!” Tristan bellowed. He hurtled towards Amber and knocked her to the ground. As the spell broke off, a rush of magic buffeted him backwards, slamming into his gut.

How had Eli gotten down there?

Stumbling back to his feet, Tristan limped to the cave. Amber was stirring, as though she had been knocked temporarily unconscious. He couldn't wait for her. At the cave mouth, he could immediately see the gap where a wall of the tangled dam had been dislodged. With the power from one marble, he reinforced what remained of the dam before wading into the cave.

The icy water swirled up past his knees, catching him off-balance. He grabbed the cave wall and held it as he picked his way forward, following the chaos of voices.

Someone else screamed. This time he was almost certain it was Evvie.

The time for sneaking around was up. “Evvie?” he called. “Eli? Where are you?”

“Tristan!” Evvie shrieked. “We're in here! There are a bunch of magicians—”

Her voice cut off abruptly, as though someone had put a hand over her mouth.

“I've stopped up the dam. Hurry up! It's not going to hold much longer.”

Stepping gingerly over a mess of twigs—he didn't trust his spell to hold up against the full weight of his body—Tristan edged into the darkness, following the jumbled voices. They were getting closer now. When he waved his hand forward to find the cave wall, he brushed against someone's clammy skin.

“Who's that?”

“Me,” Trey's voice said from lower than Tristan expected. Tristan realized he had collided with Trey's cheek.

“Are the others okay?”

“I can't tell, can I?” Trey said, with a surprising amount of vehemence. “It's all dark down here. We were separated.”

“Well, get out of here now. I'll—” He realized he had been about to say “hold the magicians off.” Who did he think he was? He would be badly outmatched against just one of them.

As Trey brushed past Tristan, fumbling for the cave wall, Tristan reached for another marble. He had to see what was happening down here. Bending over, he yanked a short, heavy stick from the tangled backlog. He drew on the marble first to dry the end of the stick and then to light it. The whole process took no more than a minute, but it felt like an eternity. In the black abyss before him, students and magicians stumbled and collided and fought one another, exchanging a string of muffled protestations.

When Tristan set a flame to the top of the stick, it flared blindingly for an instant, throwing the entire cave into brilliance. He fell backwards, blinking away the afterglow, and landed painfully on his tailbone. Thankfully he managed to keep ahold of the torch, though he had fallen into water up to his chest.

Once he regained his feet, Tristan held his torch higher to get his bearings. They were in a long chamber that widened in the middle; the flames threw flickering golden beams across the murky water, showing the way forward. Now he could see where the confusion had come from—the chamber split into two branches, and most of the shadowed forms huddled at the entrance to the wrong one.

“This way!” Tristan beckoned to the entrance. In the dimness, he couldn't pick out which shapes were students and which were strangers.

To his relief, most of the figures abandoned their tussle and waded over towards the shallower water near the cave mouth.

Just before he passed Tristan, one of the magicians shoved a student underwater.

“Leave her alone, you bastard!” Not stopping to think, Tristan swung his makeshift torch and slammed it down on the magician's skull.

With a weak yelp, the man staggered back.

Tristan dropped to his knees and dragged the girl up by her shoulders. It was Cailyn.

“You okay?” he asked.

She coughed and spat out a mouthful of water. Her tight curls had gone limp, and her clothes were torn. “I’m fine,” she said hoarsely. “Let’s get out of here.”

“Did they leave anyone behind?”

Again she coughed, sagging against Tristan. “I don’t think so.”

They were the last ones in the cave. Holding Cailyn’s elbow just in case she needed it, Tristan retreated to the cave mouth, clambering over the mess of branches. At the entrance, he tossed the torch back into the water.

By the time his eyes had readjusted to the light, Tristan realized that everyone had fled into the woods—everyone but Amber, who stood facing the cave with her feet planted firmly on the grass.

“What’s happened?” Tristan asked.

Cailyn shook off Tristan’s hand and retreated to the edge of the meadow, where she wrung out her dripping hair and stripped off her coat.

“I stopped two of the magicians,” Amber said. She took a step back, no longer holding the defensive stance. “Three more ran into the woods. About seven students did the same.”

“Where are the others?” Tristan asked, mostly speaking to himself.

Cailyn answered from behind Amber. “A few of them left the cave before you came. I don’t know where they are.”

Tristan rounded on her. “What the hell were you guys doing? Why didn’t you stay in the Subroom?”

Cailyn scowled at him. “We just went to see what was happening. We heard lots of funny noises coming from up in the hallway. The magicians had gotten into the Lair, and they were hauling off Zeke’s gang one by one.”

“So you thought you’d follow?”

“We were trying to help,” Cailyn said coldly. “Exactly like you. What are *you* doing up here, anyway?”

Tristan ignored her question. “How did they get into the Lair? They couldn’t just go down the stairs, could they?”

It was Amber who spoke next. “They tunneled through, didn’t they?” she asked softly. “I heard them. Deep in the tunnels.”

Cailyn nodded grimly. “There had to be ten of them. They just kept coming out of that tunnel near the bathrooms. One of them barricaded the Subroom door, and when we tried to run, they sent spells after us. We were all dragged down a passageway I’ve never seen before. I don’t know how far we went before we got into their cave. The next thing I knew, the whole place was flooding.”

“Shoot,” Tristan said. “That was us. We thought we’d help the professors scare the magicians out of hiding.”

“Great plan,” Cailyn said sarcastically. “Let’s get back to the meadow. I want to find the others.”

Tristan nodded. “You sure you’re okay?”

“*Yes!*”

The three of them broke into a run as they turned back towards the school. Around them, the woods were eerily silent. Even the birds seemed to have been startled away by the commotion. For all they knew, the magicians would be waiting at the meadow to take the rest of them hostage.

Tristan, Amber, and Cailyn slowed as they drew near the meadow. Stepping softly on the dry leaves, they approached the final ring of pines encircling the meadow and peered around the branches.

A small knot of professors and students stood near the school entrance, and the rogue magicians were nowhere to be seen. Tristan breathed a sigh of relief.

“Tristan!” Alldusk shouted when he saw the three of them. “Amber! What are you doing out here?”

“Trying to help,” Tristan said, coming to a stop before the professors. “What happened? Where did the magicians go?”

“We finished a few of them off,” Alldusk said, “but the rest escaped. At least they can’t slink back into their cave. Did the two of you flood it?”

Tristan nodded hesitantly. Drakewell wasn’t going to forgive him quickly for that.

“That was brilliant,” Alldusk said.

Tristan blinked in surprise. From the back of the crowd, Drakewell gave Tristan a sharp look of disapproval. “We didn’t know the others were in the cave,” Tristan said. “We thought it would help flush the magicians out.”

“Messy, but extremely effective,” Alldusk said. “We might have lost the day if you hadn’t acted. And even if we had dealt with the other magicians, we would have come back to find most of our students missing.”

“Where’s Leila?” Tristan asked. He knew a few others were lost as well, but he was too distracted to figure out who.

“She wasn’t in the cave when it flooded,” Eli said. “She might’ve escaped.”

“I think they still have her,” Cailyn said. “She did some tricky spell when they were trying to grab us, and they went right for her. I think they’re trying to *use* us.”

“You are correct,” Drakewell said heavily. “If you will follow me back into the Lair, I can explain.”

Tristan was the last to follow Drakewell down. As the others left the meadow, he dug for a marble and attempted an Intralocation spell on Leila, not expecting it to work. Just as he had feared, the marble dropped uselessly to the ground.

Down in the ballroom, the students and teachers settled into their usual seats. The empty chairs were immediately obvious—doing a quick sweep of the room, Tristan saw that Leila, Rusty, Zeke, Finley, and Natasha had failed to return. He could barely sit still; all of his senses were urging him to run back outside and find Leila. But he needed answers first, so he knew what he was up against. And he needed to find her on the globe.

“Today I encountered someone who should have died years ago,” Drakewell began abruptly. “Her name is Ilana.”

Tristan sat back, startled. Looking around, he realized that none of the other students recognized the significance of the name. Ilana, the woman Drakewell had once loved. Ilana, whose death had turned him cold and uncaring.

“She was once a student here, talented and kind. Then she suffered a brain injury, and entered a coma from which I thought she would never awaken.” Drakewell sighed heavily. “The injury has changed her. I think she has lost her ability to feel empathy. She has certainly forgotten most of her past, though she recognized me.”

Drakewell broke off as two sets of feet appeared in the stairwell. Tristan leaned forward, anxious to see who it was. A second later, Natasha and Rusty emerged, both covered in mud and looking dejected.

“Any news?” Drakewell asked sharply.

Natasha shook her head wearily. “If you’ll excuse me, I have to go down and look for the others on the map. Leila and Finley were taken off by a group of magicians, and our efforts to follow them failed.” Her eyes lit on Tristan just then. “What are you doing up here?”

“Sorry,” Tristan said. He probably would have helped matters much more by staying in the Map Room.

“I’ll talk to you later,” Natasha said. She turned on her heel and swept from the ballroom.

When Rusty sank into his usual seat, Tristan clapped him on the shoulder. “Good to see you’re okay,” he muttered. “How bad is it?”

“They’re still alive, if that’s what you’re asking,” Rusty said. “Leila wasn’t knocked out or anything. I think she’s a bit bruised up, but she was walking off with the magicians last I saw.”

Tristan nodded, still tense with worry. He wanted nothing more than to race off in search of her, but any rash decisions would cause more harm than help at this point. There were still plenty of magicians out there, ready to attack anyone who strayed from the Lair.

“What were you saying about Ilana?” Alldusk prompted.

“My worst fears were confirmed,” Drakewell said. “She has started a school of her own, with a rudimentary globe capable of directing magic without showing auras. And somewhere along the way, she began to see humanity as an evil that has infected the earth. Ilana and her magicians are working to wipe out the entire human population of the earth. Afterwards, she and her followers will repopulate the land with a ‘purer’ race. Of course, she must first eliminate her greatest threat—us.”

“Sounds like a bunch of religious crap,” Eli said.

Drakewell shot him a cold look.

“Why did she tell you all of this?” Alldusk asked, frowning.

“Because she places great value on magical talent,” Drakewell said. “She would rather recruit us to her cause than kill us outright. I believe Swanson and Glenn were taken hostage because they impressed her with their magical abilities. If she could get her hands on Fairholm and Ashton, we would never see them again.”

Tristan glanced at Amber, whose expression was so closed she could have been in a trance.

“Do we know where they’re based?” Alldusk asked.

“No,” Drakewell said, “though I’m certain it is somewhere far from here.”

“Well, at least they won’t be able to return to their cave,” Gracewright said. “With any luck, they’ll withdraw and leave us in peace.”

“Only to build up their strength and try a new angle of attack,” Grindlethorn said sourly. “We haven’t dealt with the threat. We’ve just delayed it.”

* * *

When Tristan went to the Map Room to ask Natasha where Leila had gone, she did not seem surprised to find him there.

“I don’t have any answers yet,” she said before Tristan could say anything. “The magicians have scattered, and they’re deliberately trying to mislead us. There are three groups of four auras in three completely separate parts of the valley; any two of them could belong to Leila and Finley.”

“What about Zeke?” Tristan asked, more out of curiosity than concern.

“He’s on his way back to the Lair,” Natasha said, indicating a stray aura not far from their meadow. “I believe he tracked the magicians for most of the day before they managed to shake him off.”

Just then, Natasha’s words sank in. “There are *ten* of them still?”

“Yes. But we have dealt a significant blow. They don’t have any choice but to retreat.” She glanced at Tristan, her expression softening. “Rowan told me what you did. If you hadn’t flooded the cave, we would have been outnumbered and overrun. Worse, we wouldn’t have realized the rest of the students had been abducted until it was too late. We—Rowan and I—are incredibly grateful for what you did.”

“It’s not over yet,” Tristan muttered. “Don’t thank me now.”

Natasha waved him over to the globe. “Have a good look at these auras. I know you—you’re about to go tearing off in search of Leila no matter what I say, so make sure you know where you’re going first.”

Tristan did not bother to deny this. He took a good look at the three groups, memorizing the location of each. One group was below the school, near the airstrip by the lake; one was following the valley up towards the pass in the north; and the last was making its way east, heading up what Tristan thought was the same ridge where he had gotten trapped in an avalanche the year before. He hoped Leila was not down by the airstrip; the woods below the school were much denser and more difficult to navigate than anything up in the alpine valley.

“See you later,” Tristan said, fixing the contours in his mind as he turned away from the table.

“Best of luck,” Natasha said.

Amber met Tristan in the hall outside Delair’s mine. “I’m coming,” she said.

Though he wanted to argue, Tristan knew he couldn’t go up against the magicians without her. “Thank you.”

Her eyes were still dead, emotionless, and she fell into pace beside him without another word.

“What’s wrong?” Tristan asked softly.

Amber shook her head as though dislodging a fly. “Nothing.”

He continued to watch her out of the corner of his eye as they climbed to the ballroom and out to the meadow, trying to puzzle out what had upset her so much. He wondered what had happened outside the cave while he led the others through.

Out in the meadow, the sky was turning lavender as the sun began to set. Just beyond the longhouse doors, they stopped and looked around.

“Which way do you think it is?” Tristan asked.

“I have no idea.”

Tristan had a funny feeling the magicians would be heading over the ridge to the east; he wanted to try that direction first. But just as they reached the forest’s edge, something emerged from the trees.

Zeke.

“Do you know where Leila’s gone?” Tristan called, racing over.

Zeke’s face was covered in small scratches, as though he had spent all day forcing his way through unrelenting bushes. “No. I lost them a couple hours ago.”

“Where were they a couple hours ago, then?” Tristan asked excitedly.

Zeke pointed up the valley, towards the snowy pass. “Somewhere in there.”

“I saw them on the map a few minutes ago,” Tristan said. “The magicians have split into three groups, but only one of them went that way. I know exactly where they are.”

Zeke’s look of exhaustion dropped away. “Let me help. It’ll be easier with three of us.”

Tristan could not argue with that, but as they began picking their way through the darkening woods, he said, “Why are you so obsessed with Leila? Do you like her?”

“What’s it to you?” Zeke shot back. “Are you jealous?”

“No!” Tristan had to take a moment to sort out his feelings, because dismay was at the forefront. “I just care for her a lot. You’d better not screw her over, okay?”

“I won’t, dumbass.”

“Really?” Tristan snapped. “You’ve done a pretty good job of it so far.”

Zeke glared at him. “I’m not very good at this.”

“I can tell.”

They both fell into a disgruntled silence, Zeke leading the way. Amber was following so far behind that Tristan kept worrying they’d lose her.

Night had properly fallen by the time they reached the last of the stubby trees and crossed into the meadow where Tristan had seen the four auras. Patches of snow still covered most of the meadow, and no trace of spring had emerged. Tristan had a lamp he’d taken from Delair’s mine to light his way, while Amber was creating some sort of soft glow that extended several feet ahead of her; whether she did it consciously or not, Tristan could not tell. Meanwhile, Zeke was left to stumble along in the dark.

“You’re sure they’re here?” Zeke asked.

“Unless they kept going up the pass,” Tristan said. “They should’ve stopped for the night, though.”

“What’s that?” Zeke pointed at a distant flickering light near the ground.

The next breath of air carried a tendril of sweet wood-smoke. “They’re idiots,” Tristan said. “Why would they light a fire?”

“I bet they could’ve gotten away if they wanted to,” Zeke said. “Maybe they’re using Leila and Finley as bait.”

Tristan cursed. “You’re right. Drakewell said they’d taken Leila and Finley because they were the best at magic. But maybe they were just trying to lure me and Amber out.”

“You think Drakewell told them about you?”

“I don’t know.” The more he thought about it, the more likely Tristan thought that was. After all, Drakewell had just seen the woman he had loved and left for dead. He might have misjudged her at first.

“We can’t just walk right up to them, if that’s what the bastards want,” Zeke said. “You and Amber should stay here.”

“Hah,” Tristan said drily. “You think you’ll scare them off?”

“Do you have any better ideas?”

“I don’t think they realize how strong Amber is,” Tristan said. “She could probably hold off all ten of them.” He glanced back at her. In this state, he wasn’t sure she could even keep walking for much longer without fainting. Whether it was exhaustion or something deeper that had affected her so profoundly, Tristan could not say. “You okay?” he asked softly.

Amber blinked several times before focusing on Tristan’s face. “What?”

“I said, are you okay?”

She nodded woodenly.

Tristan knew he would get no further explanation from her, especially with Zeke here, so he would have to trust that she would lend her support when they needed it.

As they approached, Tristan extinguished his lantern, and Amber allowed the glow around her to fade. Long

before the magicians caught sight of them, Tristan knew they had come to the right place. He immediately recognized Leila from her short black braid; she and Finley were bound with ropes on one side of the fire while the two magicians sat across from them.

When Tristan stepped on a snowdrift that gave way with a loud crunch, one of the magicians looked up and met his eyes with an intense, dangerous stare.

Ilana.

Though he had never met her, Tristan recognized her at once. Rising from the rock she had perched on, Ilana stepped forward as though to welcome Tristan and his companions. Even in the dim firelight, he could tell she was stunning. She had deep auburn hair that fell in waves down her back, and a sharply-angled face that commanded great power.

“Tristan and Amber.” Her voice was rich and seductive, and Tristan had to concentrate fiercely to avoid being drawn in.

“How do you know our names?” he asked coldly.

“Oh, I learned all about you from a dear friend of mine.” Ilana gestured them closer, indicating the stones around the fire. “Darla Merridy has been ever so good to us.”

Tristan opened and closed his mouth several times, fumbling for words. *Merridy* had betrayed them again? She was behind all of this?

For a moment, fury overwhelmed his common sense, and he took a step closer to the fire. To his right sat a tall, burly magician who could probably wrestle all three of them into submission before they could summon up a spell to counter him.

“You see, your dear headmaster is terribly misguided,” Ilana said seriously. “Darla has seen the sense in what we do, and she has sought to help us in any way she can. If you give us a chance to explain properly, you’ll understand. I used to love Rowan, but that was before he became a monster.”

Despite himself, Tristan saw sense in her words. “What’re you doing with Leila and Finley, then?”

Ilana nodded to her companion. “Release them. Turning back to Tristan, she said, “We just wanted to ensure you came to speak with us properly. It is you we are interested in, not your friends.”

“Don’t listen to her, Triss,” Leila hissed as soon as her gag was removed.

The larger magician yanked her away from the fire and dragged her into the darkness. Finley followed without protest.

“Triss!” Leila shouted back. “Don’t—” Her next words were cut off abruptly. The man must have put a hand over her mouth.

Though Tristan wanted to flee along with her, he needed answers.

“Why do you want us so badly?” he demanded. Behind him, Zeke turned to follow Leila. Amber remained standing, as though she was Tristan’s pale shadow.

“Because we want to fix things,” Ilana said softly. Her eyes held a fiery intensity. “This world is broken, not long from its demise. We want to turn things around before it’s too late. But to do that, we need proper magicians. Magicians who can take us farther than our limited understanding of magic can achieve.” Now her eyes locked on Amber. “You both have this potential. With the two of you, we can resurrect the dying earth.”

Her eyes narrowed. “Don’t tell me your time at the academy has sat well with you. It’s ugly work, and it achieves nothing. Darla saw this, and she realized our way was the only answer.”

“You’re lying,” Tristan said, though his voice lacked conviction. Everything Ilana had said was true.

“No, my dear boy. You know I’m right. The choice is yours.”

As Tristan opened his mouth to reply, Leila screamed in the distance.

Tristan stood abruptly, and Ilana’s face twisted in sudden fury.

“Get out of here,” he said. “Leave us alone.”

Ilana faced him with a playful smile. “My companion still has your friend. If I give the signal, she will meet a messy end.”

Tristan blanched. Before he could back away, she pressed a slip of paper into his hand. “Consider what I’ve said. When you next feel revolted by what you’ve done, remember that there is another way.”

Tristan crumpled the paper and shoved it in his pocket without looking at it. Fist closing around three

marbles, he stumbled away from the fire. “We’re leaving. If you don’t get out of here soon, you’re dead.”

A sudden wind rammed into Tristan and threw him off his feet.

“You’re very confident,” Ilana mocked. “I like that.”

The ground under Tristan shifted. He tried scrambling to his knees, but something shot from the frozen earth and wound around his ankle.

It was a root. More roots wriggled out of the earth around him, catching his wrists and his legs in a living rope. He writhed and tried to yank his limbs free, but the roots only tightened, until his feet began to tingle as they lost feeling.

“Nothing from you?” Ilana asked Amber, turning away from Tristan at last. “Don’t you care if I kill your friend?”

Amber just met her eyes with a dead stare.

Tristan ceased his struggling, praying desperately that Amber would fight back. She couldn’t just give up!

Ilana raised her arms, summoning up another wind that rustled Tristan’s hair as it passed.

Before the wind hit, Amber lifted one hand and closed her eyes.

At a single gesture, the entire ground burst skyward.

Rocks and dirt and snow flew at Ilana as though caught in a hurricane, the wind whipping through Amber’s hair as it raced to do her bidding.

When the rocks had settled, Tristan saw Ilana sprawled on the ground, barely visible in the dying firelight. She was stirring weakly.

Amber ran to Tristan’s side and severed the roots with a single spell.

“Let’s go,” she whispered. “Ilana is too powerful.”

Tristan didn’t have to be told twice. Stumbling to his feet, he broke into a run, legs aching as the sensation returned.

Near the edge of the meadow, Amber cast her glowing aura once more, shedding light on Leila, Finley, and the hulking magician who restrained them both. Finley had mostly given in, but Leila was still putting up a good fight, kicking and elbowing the man whenever she could.

Not certain if Amber would act in time, Tristan drew on the power of a marble for the most effective spell he knew—fire. With a spark, a small flame flared to life on the magician’s leather sleeve. In seconds, the fire had run up the man’s shoulder to his head, where it burst into a lively blaze.

The magician yelped hoarsely. Releasing Leila and Finley, he dropped to his knees and buried his head in the snow. The fire had spread to his shoulders, though, and he yelled in pain as the flames leapt higher still. Stumbling back to his feet, he sprinted towards Ilana, flames streaking behind him like a comet’s tail. Tristan had a feeling he wasn’t a particularly skilled magician.

“I’m fine,” Leila said grimly before anyone could ask. “Don’t worry about me. We have to get out of here.” She staggered to her feet, gripping Tristan’s arm for support as she straightened.

Finley groped around in the grass for a moment before he unearthed his glasses, which had shattered irreparably. He shoved them into his pocket and stumbled after Zeke.

“Let’s get out of here!” Tristan said. He started running down the slope, darting between the scrawny trees. Leila was favoring her right leg, but she managed to keep up.

They were halfway down the valley when two shapes emerged from the trees before them.

Stopping in his tracks, Tristan thrust his hand into his pocket in search of a marble.

“Hey!” one of the figures called.

It was Alldusk! As they came closer, the second shape resolved itself into Gracewright.

“What are you doing here?” Tristan asked in surprise.

“Natasha wanted us to follow and make sure you didn’t get into any trouble,” Alldusk said. “Obviously we came too late.”

“I don’t think she wanted us to interfere,” Gracewright said. “She seemed to think Ilana would be more dangerous if she felt threatened.”

Tristan nodded. “She wanted me and Amber. I don’t think she was going to hurt us, but she didn’t care about Leila or Finley.”

“Let’s get back,” Alldusk said in a low voice. “There are still ten magicians out there, and we don’t know what they’re planning next.”

In a tight group, Tristan, Leila, Amber, Zeke, and Finley followed Alldusk and Gracewright back to the Lair.

“What happened?” Tristan asked Leila quietly as they picked their way through the shadowed woods. If she was bruised or scratched, he could not tell in the darkness.

“You’ve probably heard everything from the others.” She folded her arms across her chest, shivering slightly. “The magicians tunneled into the Lair, and they came and grabbed us when we left the Subroom. Finley and I tried to hold them off with spells—not very advanced ones, mind you—and they went straight for us. We were dragged up through the cave and into the woods, so we didn’t see much of what happened. Are the others okay?”

“I think so,” Tristan said. “There are ten magicians who got away, but they can’t use the cave now, so Drakewell thinks they’ll go back to wherever they came from.”

“Why can’t they use the cave?” Leila asked, frowning.

Tristan glanced at Amber. “We flooded it. We thought it would scare the magicians out. I had no idea you would all be in there.”

As they walked, Tristan explained what Drakewell had told them. He also recounted Ilana’s words, and her claim that Merridy had joined their side. The moon rose as they walked, illuminating the deer track they followed, and Amber let her glowing light subside. She didn’t need it. In the moonlight, she shone like a star.

No one spoke now, though Leila kept glancing at Tristan with concern. He didn’t relax until they passed into the meadow and down the stairs.

Only Natasha remained in the ballroom to greet them, and she hugged Leila and Finley with relief.

“You’re okay?” she asked. “Is there anything I can do for you?”

Leila shook her head. “I just want to sleep. I’m so tired.”

In the light from the chandeliers, Tristan thought he could see the shadow of a bruise beneath her jaw. How many more were concealed beneath her coat?

Though she looked concerned, Natasha let them go. The entire Subroom had stayed awake to greet them, and they applauded as Tristan led the way through the Prasadimum barrier. When most of their friends tried to hug all three of them, Amber made a face as though she wished she had stayed outside.

Tristan was too exhausted to concentrate on anything, but when he finally reached the comfort of his bed, he lay awake, his mind spinning with unanswered questions. How many magicians did Ilana control? And how powerful were they, truly?

Only hours later, his exhausted brain still churning, did Tristan realize the implications of what she had said. Ilana’s followers had not been able to find the academy for many months.

Merridy had not betrayed that crucial secret.

Chapter 22: Drakewell's Plan

The following morning, the students and teachers straggled up to the ballroom in twos and threes. Tristan woke early, despite staying up half the night, with a pounding headache. He was one of the first in the ballroom, nursing a cup of tea and worrying. It was a Tuesday, but classes no longer seemed relevant.

Quinsley and Alldusk greeted Tristan warmly when they joined him, and even Drakewell pulled him aside to thank him.

"I apologize for allowing you and Amber to face Ilana alone," he said. "I had hoped Ilana would underestimate you. If I had gone myself, she would have put up a fierce defense. She is incredibly talented and terribly dangerous."

"I noticed," Tristan said.

Drakewell grimaced. "I have a favor to ask of you. Will you find Amber and come meet me in the Map Room this afternoon?"

Since when did Drakewell ask favors of people, rather than order them around? "Sure," Tristan said, shrugging.

Leila was one of the last students to appear. Her face was drawn, her eyes red.

"He beat you up, didn't he?" Tristan whispered. "Are you sure you're okay? Maybe you should go to Grindlethorn."

She shook her head sharply. "It's just a couple bruises. I'm *fine*."

Tristan would have pressed her further, but he was more worried about Amber, who had still failed to appear. Now that he thought about it, he wasn't entirely sure she had slept in the Subroom the previous night.

"I'll be back," he told Leila.

She rolled her eyes. "You just can't stop worrying about people, can you? First Evvie, now Amber."

"You didn't seem to mind when I was worried about you," Tristan said. "Something's not quite right with Amber. I don't know what she'll do when she's like this."

"Go!" Leila said, waving him away. "You're too nice for your own good."

Once outside, Tristan set an Intralocation spell to track Amber. To his relief, it worked. She must be nearby.

At first he thought he had messed up the spell, because it was leading him straight back towards the magicians' cave. Then he wondered if it was something that had happened outside that very cave, while Tristan had been underground, that had upset her so profoundly. Sure enough, he saw Amber sitting in the middle of the clearing, arms wrapped around her knees, eyes trained on the river that continued to vanish into the cave.

"What's wrong, Amber?" Tristan sat crosslegged beside her, following her gaze to the water.

"Nothing."

He looked at her sharply. "Don't lie. Something's happened."

Amber buried her face in her knees. "I just want to die." Her voice broke. "I sent a rockslide off that cliff to stop the magicians, and two of them d-died. One of them was a girl. She was eighteen, maybe nineteen. She didn't even put up a fight."

Tentatively, Tristan put an arm around Amber's shoulders. She was shaking.

"I'm t-terrified. It's too easy. I could kill everyone in the Lair, and it wouldn't even tire me. I shouldn't be allowed. I'm t-too dangerous."

Now Amber was sobbing too hard to speak. She turned into Tristan's embrace and pressed her face into his shoulder. He held her tight, hoping he could convey without words that he didn't hate her for it.

"I'm not afraid," he murmured. "Do your worst. I don't care."

Amber just cried harder.

After a long time, her shaking subsided and she lifted her head, eyes swollen.

“P-please, Tristan,” she whispered. “Can you kill me?”

“No!” Tristan pushed her away. “Amber, I—”

Her face crumpled.

“Amber.” He put a hand under her chin and forced her to look at him. “This is what it felt like after I killed my brother. I wanted to kill myself. I—I’d destroyed the only person I actually loved. And it still hurts. Damn it, I still think about Marcus all the time. I don’t know when it will stop. But—” He took a deep breath, fighting back the tears that stung his eyes. “I’ve realized that my life isn’t over. Everything I do, for the rest of my life, will be trying to make up for what I did wrong. But it’s worth it.”

Her lip trembled.

“You’ll be okay,” Tristan said. “We both will. It’ll take a long time to forget, but that doesn’t mean your life is over. And you aren’t just some bomb waiting to explode. You’re smart, and you’ll be careful with your power. This won’t happen again.”

“It will,” Amber breathed. “I know it will.”

Tristan swallowed. “Well, next time you have to kill someone, make sure you’re doing it for the right reason.”

Amber closed her eyes. “Will you help me? Will you keep me from becoming too powerful?”

“I’ll do anything you want,” Tristan said. “Just—promise you won’t do anything stupid. You can’t die.”

After a long pause, Amber nodded. Wiping the last tears from her reddened cheeks, she stood.

* * *

Back in the Lair, it transpired that Alldusk and Gracewright were organizing a new layer of security for the school. Gracewright’s new set of Prasadimums was ready to bloom in the next two days, and most of Zeke’s gang was helping Delair block off the hole the magicians had blasted in the tunnel wall. Apparently that entire tunnel had flooded, so they were building a drainage route for the water as well.

Only Brikkens remained in the ballroom, poring over a set of crude maps someone had sketched of the tunnels, and he barely acknowledged Tristan and Amber’s arrival.

“We’re supposed to meet Drakewell in the Map Room,” Tristan said under his breath, heading for the doors.

“Are we in trouble?” Amber asked.

“I don’t think so.”

Tristan and Amber passed Rusty outside of Alldusk’s classroom; Rusty called out a greeting, saying, “What’re you up to? Trying to get out of work?”

“Course,” Tristan said. “What’ve they got you doing?”

“Just grabbing a bunch of marbles for Drakewell.”

“I’m on my way to see him now,” Tristan said. “Is he in the Map Room?”

Rusty nodded. “See you later.”

Down in Delair’s mine, he saw Leila and Eli shoveling rocks that looked as though they had fallen in the earthquake.

“Where’ve you been?” Leila asked Tristan, pausing to lean one hip against the wall. “We need some help here!”

“I was looking for Amber. Drakewell wants to talk to us.”

“He can’t punish you,” Leila said swiftly. “I’ll fight him. Everyone says you did the right thing, sending that flood.”

“I don’t think we’re in trouble,” Tristan said. “I have no idea what he wants.” He looked at her carefully in the dim lantern-light. “Are you sure you’re okay?”

“Would I be swinging this around if anything was wrong?” Leila asked drily, hefting the shovel over her shoulder.

“Fine.” Tristan would question her more closely later, when Eli and Amber weren’t around.

“Good luck with Drakewell,” Leila said.

“Thanks. We’ll need it.”

Tristan and Amber turned down the familiar narrow passageway, here and there stumbling on rocks that had

fallen free in the tremor.

“What now?” Amber asked. “Will Drakewell give up on fighting the magicians?”

“No, I bet he won’t,” Tristan said. “But I don’t know how we’re supposed to find them. We had a hard enough time figuring out where that cave was. Now they could be anywhere in the world!”

Amber stopped in front of the Map Room door. “Are my eyes still red?”

“No, you’re fine.”

Drakewell and Natasha were both waiting for them, and they turned as Tristan and Amber slipped into the brightly-lit chamber.

“Have the magicians gone?” Tristan asked.

“Entirely,” Natasha said. “They must have taken a helicopter, because they all vanished within the same hour.”

Tristan approached his professors hesitantly, still unsure whether he would be punished or thanked.

“We have something terrible to ask of you,” Natasha said quietly, perching on one of the flat stone tables. “I would never have dreamed of this two weeks ago, but you both proved your loyalty and your talent many times over when we were attacked. Not only did you follow our instructions exactly and create a volcanic eruption that’s tied up flights all across Europe, but you came up with a brilliant way to scare the magicians from their hole at last. It is exactly that inventiveness and daring you’ll need if you’re willing to help us now.”

“What do you want?” Tristan asked slowly. He was afraid to hear the answer.

Drakewell spoke before Natasha could. “Did Ilana speak to you, when you encountered her last night?”

“Yeah,” Tristan said. “She—she wanted us to join her.” And in that dark meadow, he had been tempted by her offer. More tempted than he wanted to admit. Swallowing, he made up his mind. He owed his life and his loyalty to everyone at the academy. “She gave me this.” He reached in his pocket and pulled out the crumpled piece of paper Ilana had pressed upon him.

Drakewell snatched it at once and unfolded it.

“It’s a phone number,” Natasha said, looking over his shoulder. “This is perfect.”

“Do you think you can track them?” Tristan asked.

Natasha shook her head. “No. I am so sorry. I wouldn’t ask you to do this unless we had no other choice. Ilana’s followers are too strong, and we don’t even know where to start searching for her. Tristan—Amber—we need someone to find Ilana, to stop her before she causes irrevocable damage. If you are willing, we need you to join her.”

Amber turned to Tristan, her gaze horrified.

“You mean we’re supposed to call that number and tell Ilana we’ve changed our minds?” he whispered.

Drakewell nodded. “Once you have been taken to wherever they train new recruits, you can learn as much about the establishment as possible. They have a globe. The only way to stop them is to destroy their globe.”

Amber’s lip trembled.

“It won’t be easy,” Natasha said. “We have to stage it well. You’ll have to run away to Millersville, and call her from there. You have to give them a convincing reason why you’ve changed your minds. Once you’re there, they’ll put you through hell. They won’t trust you until you’ve proven yourselves, and that might mean forcing you to attack us. We won’t be able to contact you, or you us.”

She drew a deep breath. “But they can’t see auras on their globe, so they won’t know if we’re in the Lair or aboveground. On the tenth of every month, we’ll spend the day outside the Lair, as far away as we can manage. If you have to attack our meadow, do it then.”

The way she spoke, she assumed he and Amber had already agreed. Tristan swayed on his feet.

It was madness, complete madness. They would never pull it off.

But what choice did they have?

“You must tell no one,” Drakewell said. “Especially not your closest friends. The other teachers will not know, either. It will remain between the four of us.”

“Surely you understand how crucial this is,” Natasha said grimly. “Tristan, you can’t say a word to Leila. If she knew you were putting your lives in danger for the school, she wouldn’t stand for it. She *must* believe this is your choice, your betrayal. Everything hinges on this.”

Tristan swallowed hard.

He would not get the chance to say goodbye. If he died, he would never see Leila again. And she would never forgive him.

“Will you help us?” Natasha asked.

Tristan looked at Amber. After a long silence, she nodded, her eyes full of pain.

“Then it’s time,” Drakewell said. “Pack your bags.”

Lost Magic

Lost Magic

The Underground Academy: Book 3

Chapter 1: Escape

While the rest of the students were upstairs for dinner, Tristan and Amber made for the Subroom, silent and jittery. Drakewell expected them back in the Map Room in thirty minutes. They had that much time to pack their belongings and prepare for the arduous journey through the mountains.

They were not allowed to say goodbye. They had to vanish without a trace.

“Something is going to go wrong,” Tristan muttered as he pulled his fraying backpack open. “I don’t think we’re ever going to see the academy again.”

“You don’t know that,” Amber said quietly, eyes downcast.

Trying to set aside his misgivings, Tristan began throwing as many warm layers as he could fit into his backpack. It was still early spring, so they would be walking through snow as they crossed the high pass to Millersville. The last they had seen, Millersville had been a smoldering ruin. Tristan hoped some fragment of the village had survived.

Once he had crammed all of his clothes into the threadbare pack, along with his compass and water bottle, Tristan bent to lace up his hiking boots. Before long, he and Amber would be trying to persuade Drakewell’s nemesis that they wanted to join her. He couldn’t see how it would work—Iana was far too cunning to be taken in by whatever lie they came up with. But this was their only hope.

Shaking away these grim thoughts, Tristan fetched a handful of marbles from the vase in the back of the room. “How many do you think we’ll need?” he asked Amber.

“As few as possible,” she said. “We shouldn’t give the magicians any advantage.”

Grabbing another fistful just out of habit, Tristan turned to give the Subroom a final look. He had a feeling he would never see it like this again. There were the mattresses crammed haphazardly along the far wall, piled with pillows and quilts; there was the bookshelf, with its carefully scavenged collection; there was the table Tristan had fixed in his first year; and there, in the corner, lay his schoolbag with its unfinished homework and battered textbooks. He would give anything to return to the innocence of last year, when his main troubles had been working through homework and avoiding punishment.

“The others will return from dinner soon,” Amber whispered.

Reluctantly, Tristan slung his backpack over one shoulder and followed Amber through the Prasadimum barrier, leaving their brightly-lit home behind. He half-hoped Leila might return from dinner early, wondering where he had gone, and he would get a chance to give her one last hug goodbye.

Just as they reached the main corridor and turned down the stairs towards Delair’s mine and the Map Room, Tristan heard the clamor of his friends returning from dinner. He quickened his pace, glancing over his shoulder to be sure they had not been seen. At last they escaped into the depths of Delair’s mine, shrouded by the chill darkness.

Drakewell was waiting for them in the Map Room, a bundle of food at his feet.

“This should last you a week,” he said, spilling the contents onto the floor. “If you have not reached your destination by then, you would be wise to hurry. These mountains are unforgiving in spring. Despite our best efforts, you could run across avalanches and flooding streams as the snow begins to melt.”

Tristan and Amber dropped to their knees and began shoving energy bars, peanut butter, and tortillas into their already-bulging packs.

“Ashton, are you capable of boiling water without a stove?” Drakewell asked.

Amber blinked at him. “I suppose. I’ve never tried.”

“Very well.” He added a pack of dried pasta to the stack, along with a bag of lentils and another of rice.

“Guard that phone number with your life,” Drakewell told Tristan. “It is our only hope.”

Tristan reached a hand into his pocket to ensure the crumpled slip of paper Iana had given him was still there.

Crossing to the nearest stone table, which had taken the shape of a craggy ring of mountains, Drakewell

indicated the town of Millersville near the far left-hand corner. "You can set an Intralocation spell to track the town, but do not take the quickest route. At this time of year, the high mountains are safer than the lower hills, since the snow will still be solidly frozen. If you try to head downhill instead of up, you will have to cross two wide rivers that may have already shed their ice." He handed them each a pair of crampons, which Tristan tied to the outside of his pack. "That pass is the most straightforward. You could walk over it with no difficulty in summer, and you should not encounter any problems now. Try to make it to the top before sunrise tomorrow. If you remain too close to the school, we would be accused of letting you go too easily."

Natasha slipped into the Map Room just then, bolting the door behind her. "Leila has been asking after you, Tristan," she said. "I informed her that you're working off a few hours of punishment with Gracewright, but that you should be back by midnight. Best start moving now, before anyone gets suspicious."

To Tristan's surprise, she drew him and Amber into a brief embrace. "Good luck. You'll need it."

Leaving the two professors behind, Tristan and Amber started up the stairs towards the ballroom. Tristan expected at every turn to be accosted by a teacher who demanded explanations, but the halls were empty. Even the ballroom was dim and silent, the tables wiped clean for the night.

Up in the meadow, the first stars were beginning to emerge, dulled by a near-full moon. Though the snow had melted from the meadow, the mountains were still cloaked with an icy sheen that glowed in the moonlight.

"It's that pass, right?" Tristan asked, pointing to a low ridge that lay west of the school.

Amber nodded.

"Let's worry about the Intralocation spell later. For now we can just head that way."

Pulling on his wool hat, which Gracewright had knitted for him the previous winter, Tristan led the way forward along the damp forest floor. The ground was strewn with rotting pine needles, the trees still hiding the odd patch of snow. Though the trees stifled some of the wind, it was still biting cold, and before long Tristan had dug out his gloves and scarf. Amber did not seem to mind the cold; the wind riffled through her white hair and turned her cheeks red, but she did not fetch her own hat.

"They'll never believe us," Tristan said as they trudged past endless rows of pines. "We got away too easily. And why would we leave, after all this time?"

"Maybe we were tortured," Amber said. "If we were punished for using the Map Room without permission, and tied up in the tunnels, it would make sense that we escaped."

"They won't believe that," Tristan said. "Unless we have marks." He gave Amber a sideways look. "Is that what you're suggesting?"

She chewed on her lip. "Well, if we had lines around our wrists where we had been tied up, that would be enough."

Tristan made a face. "I suppose it won't matter if we do anything now. I can't feel my legs to begin with."

"Tomorrow," Amber said quietly. "Once we have left the valley."

Up they climbed, across the gradually sloping valley, while around them the trees began to shrink and thin out and beneath them the snow rose to overtake the bare ground. At last they reached the base of the ridge, where the last of the trees ended and a blank expanse of snow beckoned. Tristan sat on a snow-covered rock and strapped on his crampons, Amber copying him after a moment's pause. They would have to be careful—if they slipped and slashed their legs open with the cruel claws of the crampons, there would be no one to help them. Even Amber's magic might be unequal to replacing lost blood.

Slowly, eyeing the top of the ridge, Tristan started to climb. He felt as though they had already walked all night, yet the sky showed no sign of lightening. Before long he was sweating from exertion, and he peeled off first his hat and then his gloves and scarf. He wished for ski poles, branches, anything to help keep his balance, but it was too late to search for walking sticks. The forest was far behind.

As they climbed, a dark wave of clouds billowed from the western sky and slowly engulfed the stars.

"I bet that's Drakewell," Tristan panted, stopping to catch his. "If he's smart, he'll send a snowstorm to cover our tracks."

Amber nodded, breathing hard.

"I hope he gives us a bit longer before it starts snowing. It'll be miserable if we're stuck up here in a blizzard." Tristan kneaded the knot in his side with his fist.

Before long, the clouds bubbled to the eastern horizon, cloaking the moon in shadow and extinguishing every glimpse of light. Amber did not seem to mind, but when Tristan tried to fumble his way blindly forward, he tripped and fell face-forward into the snow.

“Sorry,” Amber said, the crunch of her footsteps pausing. A second later, the air around her began glowing with a soft radiance, as though she had magnified her aura a hundred times over. Still half-blind, Tristan stumbled to his feet and followed the strange light.

At last they reached the ridge, which had a steeper drop down the opposite side. As they began to pick their way down, the sky lightened. Now that they had made their way safely out of the valley, a wave of exhaustion hit Tristan; he would happily have lain down on the exposed slope to sleep.

Just as he thought this, the first gentle snowflake landed and melted on his icy cheek. Tristan pulled on his hat and gloves once more, the sweat from their climb quickly cooling.

Finally, with the sky growing almost imperceptibly lighter behind the clouds, Tristan and Amber reached the base of the ridge. Here the trees were taller and more densely packed, and they were immediately protected from the wind.

Drakewell hadn’t given them a tent—Tristan supposed that would have looked too suspicious—so they crawled into the sheltered space beneath a pine’s wide boughs.

Without eating anything, Amber lay down on the bed of dried pine needles, hugging her knees. Tristan settled down behind her, his knees pressed into the backs of hers for warmth, and as the night grew later he moved closer until his chest was resting against her spine. He could feel her breathing beneath the layers of her coat, and every inch of his skin tingled with the warmth of her body beside his. A braver version of him would have slipped an arm around her waist and nestled his chin against her cheek, but he was paralyzed. Amber was just barely shorter than he was, and their bodies fit together like puzzle pieces. Every moment he imagined she might shy away, but when she shifted in her sleep, she simply nestled in closer.

Beyond the shelter of the pine boughs, the wind began to howl.

* * *

Tristan woke to a blinding shaft of sunlight. The snowstorm had ended, and their tree-cave was buried deeper than before under a new drift. Amber was still asleep, so Tristan shifted gently, trying not to disturb her. He gulped down half a bottle of water and refilled it with snow, flexing his fingers to see if they retained any feeling.

“Morning,” Amber murmured from behind him, stirring beneath her layers.

“I didn’t mean to wake you,” Tristan said, settling back against his pack.

Rubbing her eyes, Amber sat up. “We should get going now anyway. I don’t want to walk all night again.”

“Me neither,” Tristan said. “Want some oatmeal?”

With hardly a thought, Amber set the icy water boiling and cooked their oatmeal into a sad, lumpy mush. Drakewell had not given them anything to put with the oatmeal, but at least it was hot and filling.

Tristan was still thinking about the way he had slept curled against Amber, sharing her warmth. Although Amber acted as though nothing had happened, a smile played at her lips as she packed away the dried oats.

Once they had stowed their supplies and strapped the crampons to their packs, Tristan set an Intralocation spell to track the town of Millersville. He focused on the Aspen Lodge, where they had stayed for several weeks the past year, imagining its brightly-lit dining room and stone fireplace. Of course, it was likely reduced to rubble now. They could be heading to a ghost town.

“You ready?” he asked Amber, releasing the marble to hover before him and hooking his thumbs beneath his straps.

“Ready enough,” she said. “I—I wish we could just vanish into these woods. Drakewell would never know. We could escape and forget about all of this.”

Tristan’s heart leapt. She had as good as admitted she would be happy just running away and spending the rest of her days with him. “Until Ilana destroys everything,” he said grimly, trying not to think of what could be. “We’re part of this mess. We can’t just ignore it.”

“I know,” Amber said. “It was just a useless wish.”

Tristan gave her a sad smile. "I'd love nothing more."

His legs aching from the previous day's climb, Tristan set out across the crisp new layer of snow. While Amber trod her usual path on the surface of the snow, leaving no sign of her passage, Tristan plodded along through the drifts, occasionally plunging waist-deep through the icy crust hidden beneath the new snow.

They stopped briefly for a cold lunch of tortillas and peanut butter, and Tristan was reluctant to re-shoulder his pack afterwards. His knees had taken a beating from the long downhill slog yesterday and protested with every step through the brittle snow. He was grateful when the sun began setting behind the mountains ahead. With the purple haze of sunset fading around them, they sought out another dry patch beneath the boughs of a pine and began to prepare a dinner of unseasoned rice. Tristan's stomach was grumbling hollowly; he missed Quinsley and Leila's cooking.

As the rice boiled away, Tristan dug in his pack for the length of rope Drakewell had given them.

"Time to give ourselves rope burn," he said with a grimace. If this was to look convincing, the rope marks would have to appear several days old by the time they reached Millersville. "We were tied up for a week before we got out, okay?"

Amber nodded slowly.

"And we were tied to the ceiling, so we couldn't sleep that whole time. Drakewell's gone completely mad—we couldn't wait to get out."

"They'll question us," Amber said. "Torture us, most likely. Were we locked in the same room?"

"Sure," Tristan said. "That's how we got out—you finally drew on your own magic to break us free. But it knocked you out, so I had to carry you out of the Lair. I don't want them knowing how strong you are."

"I can hardly use my powers underground as it is," Amber said. "I have to draw on the life around me. In the Lair, I could only draw on myself and the other students."

"It'll be more believable, then," Tristan said.

Amber hugged her arms unhappily across her chest. "It also means I'll be helpless if we're taken underground again. We will be entirely at Ilana's mercy."

Tristan shivered at the thought. Picking at the end of the rope, he said, "Do you want to tie me up to that tree? If I spend the night tied up, it'll look more believable."

With a grimace, Amber knelt behind Tristan and knotted the rope tightly about his wrists. His skin tingled each time her hands brushed against his. When he stood, she looped the rope over a branch and secured it in place.

Tristan stood like that, arms stretched painfully behind him, for all of fifteen minutes. Then he said, "Forget it. This is miserable. Can you untie me?"

"A week," Amber said, her lips twitching. "We would both be dead by then."

Once he was untied from the tree, Tristan wriggled one hand out of its binding. Grabbing the knot on the other, he gave the rope a sharp tug.

He cursed as the rope bit into his flesh. He gave it another tug, yanking the rope around his wrist so it sliced deeper than before. The fibers were sharp and splintery, and he was sure several of them had embedded themselves under his skin.

Breathing hard, he undid the knot and let the rope fall to his side. Just as he hoped, the rope had left a raw line where it had cut into him. With any luck, that would still show by the time they reached Millersville.

The second wrist was even more painful than the first, since he knew exactly what to expect. Biting his tongue, Tristan tried unsuccessfully to stifle his yell of pain.

When Amber's turn came, she screwed her eyes shut and gave the rope a fierce tug. She let out a quiet gasp of pain but did not complain.

"You're braver than me," Tristan said wryly. "If they don't believe us..."

They settled in to eat their charred rice in silence. Tristan kept flinching as his sleeves rasped against his raw skin, but any efforts to bandage or heal the open wounds would render their efforts useless.

"They might not let us talk to each other once they've found us," Tristan said at last. "It might be lonely as hell. They'll be watching us every second."

Amber nodded, her eyes wide and pensive. "What day are we allowed to attack the Lair?"

“The tenth of every month,” Tristan said flatly. He wasn’t about to forget that soon. That was the day when he would convince his friends once and for all that he had turned against them. Only he and Amber knew how to shatter the protective barriers around the academy; only he and Amber could do any genuine damage from afar. Alldusk’s worst fears would be confirmed. And Leila would never forgive him.

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After that, their days fell into a rhythm. For six days they trudged through periods of sun interspersed with snow flurries, their packs growing steadily lighter as they depleted their rations. Tristan had no idea when they would reach the supply town, but he hoped it would be soon. They would not last much longer.

They spent every night curled together beneath a tree or under a protective shelf of rock, each day plodding through the endless forest. Tristan’s marbles were nearing the end of their supply as well; he went through two a day, and before long they would be reduced to following the sun.

The weight of their task had settled over Tristan, and he was too miserable to spare the energy for conversation, as much as he treasured his time with Amber. They spoke very little, only “Good morning” and “Still have all your toes?” when they woke, and “Does this look like a good campsite?” and “Goodnight” when they stopped each day. His thoughts were fixed on the day they would be fetched by Ilana’s followers. Everything would end then, and it seemed useless to pretend otherwise.

“I’m glad you’re here with me,” Amber said one night as they were washing out their cooking pot with snow.

“I’m glad you’re here, too,” Tristan said, leaning towards her so their elbows brushed together. “And not just because you can use your magic to keep us safe if anything happens.”

Amber smiled shyly. “I think we’ll reach the village tomorrow. I don’t know why I know that.”

“Damn it. I wish we *could* just run away.” His stomach twisted every time he thought of what awaited them in Millersville.

“You know we could,” Amber breathed.

Tristan shook his head. Ever since Amber had suggested it, the thought had tormented him. It would be so easy to turn south and find another town to shelter in. They could find Tristan’s mother and figure out what to do from there. If they had to, they could even move up to the Alaskan wilderness to escape their own criminal records. They were more than familiar enough with mountains and snow to manage that.

But he could never live with himself if he abandoned the academy. In the back of his mind, he would always be counting down the days until the world ended. At the rate Ilana’s magicians were working, it would not take much longer.

This had become his life—this single-minded, insane mission—and he would rather die than see it fall to pieces. He had not become heartless through his work at the academy, as he had feared; instead, he was beginning to care too much.

“If it was just you, by yourself, would you have run off?” Tristan asked.

Amber hung her head. “I think so. You’re a better person than me, Tristan. I’m afraid. I’ve always been so afraid.”

Tristan set aside the slush-filled pot and put an arm around Amber’s waist. He half expected her to shy away—instead she leaned into him, head on his shoulder, and stared up at the darkening sky.

“I’m sorry to be dragging you into this,” he said softly. “But I think you’re incredibly brave to do it.”

Amber leaned in closer still, her silvery hair cold against Tristan’s neck. He wanted to put his arms around her and kiss her and forget everything else, but tonight was not the time.

They sat like that for a long time, while the stars winked to life overhead and the slush in their pot hardened to sludgy ice. With the moon still hidden behind a ragged line of mountains, the Milky Way dominated the night sky, a swath of hazy brilliance strewn with billions of stars.

When a shooting star painted a fleeting line across the sky, Amber lifted her head and turned to look at Tristan. He kissed her on the forehead, her skin soft and smooth. A thrill ran through him, an icy jolt that had nothing to do with the temperature.

Amber breathed in a gasp of surprise.

“For luck,” he said.

He might have imagined it, but her eyes seemed to glisten with tears.

“Goodnight, Amber.”

Chapter 2: Ilana's Stronghold

They reached Millersville far too soon. It was hardly midmorning when the first clue of the town's proximity revealed itself—a whiff of ashes stirred up in the brisk wind. As they picked their way closer, Tristan held his breath, hoping the place was not deserted.

The first thing he saw was the Aspen Lodge, nothing more than a charred frame half-crumbled to the ground. Farther on, though, he saw trails of smoke rising from chimneys. The village lived on.

They picked up their pace as they drew closer still, eager for news and warmth and food. Among the rations, Tristan had discovered a pile of gold dollars, enough to buy them a hearty meal before they were fetched by Ilana.

At the town's only café, the owner greeted Tristan and Amber with some confusion.

"Weren't you here with that school group a month ago?"

"Yeah," Tristan said. "And we've gotten lost. We have to call someone to come pick us up."

"Phone's over there," he said dubiously. "Did you make it out okay after the fire?"

Tristan nodded. "You guys too?"

"More or less. We've had a few people airlifted for treatment, but no deaths."

Tristan was relieved to hear that. Though it had not been his professors who set the fire, it was their school's fault for dragging Millersville into this mess.

Setting his backpack on a barstool, he dug for the pouch of dollar coins Drakewell had slipped him. "Can we get something to eat? We're starving."

When Tristan dumped the entire contents of the purse on the table—some thirty dollars in all—the owner cleared his throat and vanished into the kitchen.

Tristan turned to Amber. "I guess I should call Ilana now. She'll take a while to get here. If she's still planning to take us, that is."

Amber's eyes widened. "So soon?"

When he met her eyes, he could still feel the cold touch of her skin on his lips. He wished he had been brave enough to give her a real kiss. Swallowing, he tore his gaze from hers and turned to the phone sitting on its stand. They probably didn't have cell phone service in a town this remote. With trembling hands, he pulled the phone number from his pocket and dialed.

The phone rang eight times, long enough that Tristan was about to give up.

Then, suddenly, the sound stopped. "Hello?" said a thickly-accented male voice.

Tristan gulped. "I—um—do you know Ilana?"

"Yes," the man said with more enthusiasm than before.

"Well, she told us to call if we ever—if we changed our minds."

"Yes?"

"We've run away." Tristan glanced at Amber, whose unblinking gaze was fixed on him. "We want to join Ilana."

"I see!" The man's voice was triumphant. "Where should I collect you?"

"In Millersville," Tristan said. "That town you burned down."

"Right. And you're sure you're not going to back out of this?"

"No," Tristan said, with more confidence than he felt. "We're never going back there again."

"Brilliant! See you in a couple hours. Stay where you are, 'k?"

"Okay."

The man hung up, leaving Tristan frozen in place with the phone still held to his ear. He had done it. There was no going back now.

“How long?” Amber asked quietly.

“Two hours.” Slowly he lowered the phone back into its stand and returned to the bar, where he sank onto a stool and rested his chin on his hands.

They were just finishing a second round of coffees when the door jingled and opened to admit a sandy-haired young man with a beard and the rough face of a miner. Until he turned straight towards Tristan and Amber, who were sitting in a corner booth, Tristan had assumed he was a local.

“You’re the one who called,” the man said. “Anton.” He held out his hand, which Tristan shook, getting to his feet. “And you are?”

“Tristan,” he said. “And this is Amber.”

The man’s eyes gleamed. “Of course you are.” Now that Tristan could hear him in person, he thought the man sounded Irish. “Ilana said you’d come, but I didn’t believe her. She’s returned to our base, of course. Didn’t have any time to lose. And you’re really hoping to join us?”

“Yes,” Tristan said firmly.

“Very well, then. Let’s get going. Unless you wanted to finish your coffees, that is.”

Tristan pushed his mug away. “I’ve had enough of that to last me two weeks.” He tried to feign friendliness, afraid that his voice would crack at any moment and give away his fear.

With a chuckle, Anton turned and led the way from the café. They walked past sleepy houses—some still showing scars from the firebomb attack—and through a grove of aspens on the way to the familiar airstrip. A tiny airplane stood waiting, emblazoned with some sort of company name in what might have been Icelandic.

“It’s going to be a long flight, I’ll warn you,” Anton said, patting the wing of his plane. “I’ve picked up a bit of food to tide you over, but it won’t be much fun anyway.” He didn’t seem too concerned about this.

Tristan followed Amber up the ladder into the body of the nine-seater plane. He had never flown in a plane this small before, but judging from the flimsy-looking frame, he suspected the journey would be bumpy.

“It’s going to be loud,” Anton said, jumping into the pilot’s seat. “You can wear the headphones on your seat. That way I can talk to you, too.”

Settling his backpack onto the seat in front of him, Tristan sat and clamped the heavy headset over his ears. His pair had a small microphone as well, which he folded out of the way.

“All settled?” Anton asked, his voice buzzing through the headphones. “Comfortable enough?”

Tristan gave him a thumbs-up, while Amber curled her legs beside her on the seat.

As Tristan had expected, the plane was flung from side to side as it climbed into the air. They made it past a low-lying band of clouds, but never broke through the higher clouds. Instead, Anton set a course not too far above the ground—just about level with the mountain peaks they were heading towards—which provided them with plenty of turbulence to jolt the plane at annoyingly regular intervals.

Once they had more or less leveled out, Anton turned and said, “You getting on all right?”

Tristan nodded.

“Why did you run off, then? Change of heart?”

Tristan grimaced and lowered his microphone again. “Drakewell’s hated me ever since I first got there. I don’t know why. He told me and Amber to stay in the Map Room and watch what happened during the fight, and he said we were absolutely not allowed to use the globe. But we flooded the cave.”

“That was *you*?” Anton sounded intrigued. “Blimey, you’re a talented pair.”

Tristan’s face went hot. “Well, Drakewell didn’t think so. He was furious. He locked us up in the tunnels and tied us to the ceiling. It was miserable.” He drew back one of his sleeves to show the rope burn. “We just escaped a week ago, and we’ve been trying to get somewhere to call you guys ever since.”

“Ooh,” Anton said, clicking his tongue. “That looks bloody painful. How’d you get out?”

Tristan readjusted the microphone, letting his sleeve fall back into place. “Amber used her own magic to cut through the ropes. She passed out, so I had to carry her all the way out of the Lair and into the woods. She woke up once we were outside, so we went and grabbed a few things from a store-room and sneaked out. I don’t think Drakewell started looking for us until the next afternoon, so we made it out of the valley before he figured out we were gone.”

“And he didn’t come after you?”

“I don’t know,” Tristan said. “He might’ve tried. If we’d stayed in that town any longer, they probably would’ve found us.”

“Lucky buggers, you are.”

“Yeah,” Tristan said. “Thank god we made it out of there. When Amber passed out, I thought—” He trailed off for dramatic effect, glancing at Amber.

She met his eyes with a cornered look. What was she afraid of? Tristan thought he was doing a very good job with this whole charade. Besides, Anton seemed a lot nicer than Tristan had expected.

They didn’t speak much more after that. Two hours into the flight, they landed to refuel, and again two hours after that. The sun was behind them, and they hadn’t passed over an ocean yet, so Tristan figured they were heading east towards New York. Again and again they landed to refuel, until night fell and Tristan began to doze, his neck cricked at an uncomfortable angle. He lost track of how many stops they made, but at one point he thought he saw the ocean gleaming in the moonlight far below.

It was still night when they landed, and it took Tristan a moment to realize they had reached their final destination, not merely another refueling location. He climbed stiffly down the ladder, trying to figure out where they were in the dim light cast from the lights at the end of the plane’s wings. If he wasn’t mistaken, he thought they stood on a flat expanse of ice with the faint outline of ridges in the distance. Somewhere far north, then. Ilana must have thought of the Underground Academy when she chose the location of her own base.

“You must be exhausted,” Anton said. “Ilana knows you’re arriving. She should be here to greet you in a moment.”

Sure enough, a spot of light appeared ahead of them on the ice and quickly grew larger as it approached.

“Tristan and Amber. Welcome.”

Tristan recognized the voice before he could make out Ilana’s face. This time her tone was soft, almost gentle. Had he been mistaken about her?

“I would love to talk to you both,” she continued, “but first you should sleep. You’ve had a very long flight.”

Tristan barely restrained himself from asking where they were. That would immediately have raised suspicion. Instead he said, “Thank you.”

“Good job, darling,” Ilana told Anton, kissing him lightly on the cheek. “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

Tristan and Amber followed Ilana across the ice—he was sure now that it was ice, because it crunched underfoot—until they reached a round trapdoor that seemed to be carved from the ice itself. Down a ladder, they entered a round tunnel through the ice that made Tristan feel like a rabbit in its warren. Oddly enough, the air that wafted through the ice-cave was warm. From there, he lost track of the twisting, mazelike route they took through the warren, which ended up at a pair of comfortable rooms, the beds heaped with quilts and blankets.

“Sleep well,” Ilana said. “I’ll fetch you in the morning.”

She left Tristan and Amber standing outside their rooms, both a bit dazed.

“Do you think she’s just tricking us?” Tristan whispered. “Or was Drakewell wrong?”

“I think it’s a trick,” Amber said. “But we might as well play along.”

Making a face, Tristan turned to his room. “Goodnight.”

He lay awake late into the night, puzzling over what was happening. This was not what he had expected at all. Anton had been so kind to them, and he hadn’t even questioned their story. Now Ilana was nothing but generous and welcoming. Had they been wrong?

Nonetheless, Tristan got a very strange feeling from this ice-cave. He and Amber would have to tread carefully.

Chapter 3: The Harvest

When Tristan woke the next morning and ventured from his room, still wearing the same filthy clothes he had worn since leaving the Underground Academy, he found a small girl waiting for him in the hallway. She was much younger than any of Tristan's classmates, no more than ten, and she had the fair complexion and pale blue eyes of a Scandinavian.

"Breakfast is ready," she said in a commanding tone that belied her small stature. "Is your friend awake?"

"I'll check." He rapped softly on Amber's door, which opened a moment later. Her hair was tousled and her eyes bleary; she had clearly just woken. Combing a finger through her hair, she joined them in the hallway. Tristan tried not to meet her eyes, wary of revealing how much he cared for her. It was a weapon Ilana could easily use against him.

"Are there any other clothes we could change into?" he asked quickly. "I don't want to bother you, but we're a bit smelly."

The girl blinked at him. "Yes." She took them down two corridors and through three doorways to a side room, where a hundred or so uniforms were piled on shelves. Each uniform was in the same style as the girl's clothes—tan pants and a white long-sleeved shirt, sorted by size. Tristan found a pair that looked as though it fit and changed behind a shelf. The girl indicated a set of heavy fur boots by the wall, which Tristan gladly slipped on, leaving his battered hiking boots behind.

When Amber emerged from behind the second row of shelves, Tristan gave her a fleeting smile. She looked very pretty in the new uniform. They each grabbed a tan coat from a hook on their way out—Tristan had been expecting a heavy parka, but the soft deerskin jacket was light and thin.

"How long have you been here?" Tristan asked the girl as she led them back the way they'd come.

"I've always lived here," she said. "Ilana took me in when my parents died."

"That's generous of her," Tristan said dubiously. "Do you like it here?"

"Oh, yes."

From the finality of her tone, Tristan surmised that she did not wish to answer any more questions.

The dining room was a long chamber with a curving roof—it reminded Tristan of a miniature hangar. About twenty adults shared one table, while nearly fifty students of all ages filled the other five. Tristan swallowed. This was worse than Drakewell had feared.

No one paid them any heed, so Tristan scanned the room for empty seats. There were only two, on opposite sides of the room. Nervous and feeling entirely out-of-place, he slipped into one of the two empty seats between two older boys. Many of the students glanced his way, but none openly stared. As he helped himself to the food he could reach, he realized that no one was talking. Aside from the soft clank of forks against plates, the hall was silent. Tristan didn't know what to look at, so he stared at his plate, wondering what the others were thinking.

From what he had seen in his cursory look around the room, he had been surprised to find that Ilana's students represented what seemed like every race imaginable. Looking out of the corner of his eye, he tried to guess where the nearest students were from, though he couldn't be certain. He thought one kid looked Indian, and another could have been Korean. There were young kids, too, younger than could possibly have been dragged from any juvenile detention center. Ilana must be using a different method to recruit her students, then.

As he finished off his breakfast, Tristan glanced inadvertently across the room at Amber. She sat rigidly, like an ice sculpture, her fork lying untouched beside her plate. He would have given anything to know what she was thinking.

Just then, the students rose as one—breakfast was clearly over. Ilana beckoned Tristan and Amber to join her at the head table, where she gave them each a mug of hot chocolate that helped wash down the taste of oily

eggs.

“I trust you slept well?”

“Yes, thank you,” Tristan said, still trying to puzzle the woman out.

“Good. If you feel ready, I can assign you to work straight away.”

Tristan glanced at Amber. “Okay.”

She handed them each a printed schedule for the week. “My students are separated into five divisions based on talent. You will both join the first division. Each takes a turn at various tasks throughout the week, with lessons interspersed between these.”

Looking down at his schedule, Tristan saw blocks of time labeled with activities such as “Harvesting” (the most common), “Kitchen duty,” “Cleaning,” “Strength training,” and “Lessons.” He wasn’t sure if “harvesting” referred to food or magic.

“Your division is currently harvesting water magic,” Ilana said, answering his question before he had a chance to ask. “If you follow me, I’ll show you where. Every Wednesday and Friday evening, you two will join me for private lessons. I want to see what you’re capable of.” Her smile betrayed the slightest hint of a predatory gleam. “Do you have any questions?”

Tristan shook his head. It was best not to appear too curious.

They were led through the tunnels again; within two turns, Tristan had lost his way. Would they really be harvesting water magic? Drakewell would be amazed to learn the art wasn’t lost after all.

Eventually Ilana stopped at a ladder, where they climbed out of the warren onto a vast, flat expanse of ice.

“Where are we?” Tristan asked. A second later he regretted the question.

Ilana smiled. “I don’t mind telling you. We’re in Greenland, in the far north. I’ve stabilized the ice around our cave so it doesn’t melt. This is the last place in the world your professors would think to look for us.”

That much was true. Who would be mad enough to build a stronghold in a quickly-eroding mass of ice?

Of course, if Ilana’s magicians managed to wipe out humanity before the ice had fully melted, they could relocate to wherever suited them best. They could even move into the White House or Buckingham Palace if they wanted.

Now that he knew how many magicians Ilana had under her thumb, he didn’t think they would find much in the way of opposition.

Ilana pointed to a huddle of shapes in the distance. From here they could have been seals or puffins. “There is the rest of the First Division. You can join them now, and I’ll see you at lunch. Best of luck.”

Tristan and Amber started in the direction of the class, looking straight ahead in case Ilana was watching them. Once they had gone some distance from the school, Tristan glanced over his shoulder and saw that they were alone.

“What do you think?” he asked softly.

“I think they’re just waiting for us to make a mistake,” Amber said. “We must tread very carefully.”

Tristan nodded. “I don’t think we’ll get much time alone.”

“No. That would encourage the students to think for themselves.”

Tristan wanted to linger out on the ice, away from the watchful eye of Ilana’s magicians, but they were close enough that the First Division would be able to see if they delayed. Reluctantly he continued on, straightening his spine and staring straight ahead as he had seen the other students do. So far, this was going much better than he had feared. If they kept quiet and stayed out of trouble, they might just pull this off.

“Welcome,” a burly man called, waving to Tristan and Amber. He sounded German. “Will you be okay on your own?” he asked his division.

Six heads nodded.

Crossing over to Tristan and Amber, the man slapped Tristan on the shoulder. “Fresh blood! Our class is very small. We don’t get enough talented students here. I am Stefan. And I already know all about you.”

Tristan grimaced.

“What was that face? We are very excited to have you here!” He gestured to the students behind him. “There is so much you can teach us.”

Tristan doubted that, though he knew they would go crazy if Amber ever let on how much she knew. “How

are you collecting water magic, then?” he asked.

“Ah! So Ilana was correct! Your headmaster did not rediscover that ancient art.” Stefan leaned closer as though sharing a secret. “This is why we built our base here. Sometime in the past hundred thousand years, the ice sheet in Greenland has trapped a very large quantity of water magic. As the ice melts, it gives off vapor, which escapes from the nearest vent.”

Glancing behind him, Tristan realized the students were clustered around a gap where a stream emerged from the iridescent blue ice. When he looked closer, he thought he could see a hazy blue mist rising from the opening.

“What happens when the ice sheet is gone?” he asked.

“Ah,” Stefan said. “We figure that the only true use for magic is to keep humans in check. When the human population is no longer a threat, magic will no longer be needed. The earth’s balance will not be destroyed.”

“Haven’t we already done that?” Tristan said. “It’s not going to fix everything, is it? Getting rid of people, I mean.”

“No. But the longer we wait, the longer the earth takes to recover.”

In abstract terms, what Stefan said actually made sense. That was the disturbing part about it. There were probably quite a few environmentalists out there who would fully endorse Ilana’s plans—provided, of course, that they were given a place in her new world.

“You can see the vapor, right?” Stefan asked.

“Yes,” Tristan and Amber said together.

“Perfect. Our students can’t pass above the Fourth Division until they learn to collect vapors. You may fetch a jar and begin harvesting.”

Just then, Tristan noticed a wide sled piled with empty glass jars. “How old are the students when they start here?” he asked, thinking about the tiny girl who had led them to dinner.

“Oh, we start them as young as we can,” Stefan said. “We have rescued many of them from orphanages. Ilana told us that, back at your academy, some students with the potential for magic never developed any true abilities. But we found that when you begin before they can walk, the children have no time to develop any mental blocks to magic. Every single one of our students is able to confidently see auras and use magic within a few years.”

It was a smart idea, Tristan had to admit. That way, the children would be so completely indoctrinated that they wouldn’t have any objections to what they were doing. For all he knew, they weren’t fully aware of life outside their rabbit-warren.

No one talked as they worked, but the six students shuffled politely aside to give Tristan and Amber space to access the mouth of the stream. They spent the next hour and a half filling jar after jar, chasing each wisp of vapor until they had filled the glass. It was tedious work, much less interesting than burning things in Alldusk’s class, though it was fascinating to see the pale blue marbles form for the first time.

They remained out by the river until Tristan’s extremities had gone numb and his face was stripped raw from the perpetual wind. Somehow, though they wore no more layers than he did, the other students didn’t seem to mind.

On the tramp back to the ice cave, two of the students pulled the sled piled with jars while Stefan fell into step beside Tristan.

“The other students use a bit of their own magic to keep warm,” Stefan said as Tristan blew on his hands in a desperate attempt to revive them. “This is a good little exercise to get them adept at using their internal strength without losing consciousness. After enough practice, they can perform large-scale spells with no trouble.”

Tristan let his vision blur as he focused on drawing heat from within; after a moment, a bead of warmth blossomed in his hands. When he tried to send it through the rest of his body, his head began to spin. He stopped immediately.

Stefan led them down the ladder, where they abandoned the sled, and towards a room so deep in the ice that Tristan was surprised they didn’t reach solid ground—or the ocean. This one was set up like a small gym, with weights and jump-ropes and pull-up bars.

“Another way to boost your internal magic reserves,” Stefan said, taking a stance at the front of the room,

“is with physical strength training. The stronger you are, the more energy you can safely burn through.”

By this point, Tristan guessed that Stefan was permanently assigned to the First Division. He didn't mind—Stefan seemed reasonable enough. Normal, in fact. This was not at all what Tristan had expected from Ilana's school.

Thinking back to his arrival at the Underground Academy, Tristan remembered being frightened by the magic and intimidated by Drakewell. It wasn't too hard to imagine that Drakewell had tricked them into choosing the wrong side.

Then again, the other professors supported Drakewell. Alldusk and Quinsley and Gracewright and Delair couldn't all be wrong. Could they?

Tristan and Amber took their places at the back of the gym, where they would be able to watch the other students, and proceeded to run through a brutal exercise regimen. The training lasted a full two hours, with brief water breaks every twenty minutes, and Tristan was ready to fall over by the end of the first hour. To his chagrin, the other students seemed unfazed by the endless rounds of weight-lifting and sprints and jumping jacks and push-ups. Even the skinny boy who looked Indian and the petite Chinese girl kept up without trouble.

Amber, meanwhile, was scarlet-faced and gasping. She had clearly never done any sort of physical training before—undoubtedly her years in Special Ed had exempted her from any PE classes. When Tristan gave her a reassuring smile, she made a face at him.

By the end of the class, Tristan doubted he would be able to walk back to the cafeteria. Waiting his turn at the water fountain, he sagged against the ice wall, scrubbing sweat from his forehead.

“Do we do this every time?” Tristan asked a fellow student.

“No,” he said. “Sometimes we go running outside.”

Tristan groaned.

Once again, no one talked at lunch. This time, Tristan wondered if the students had been trained into silence, or if they were simply as exhausted as he was. Over his lumpy, weak fish soup, he tried to imagine what it would be like to grow up here. Some of these kids had never known anything else. And if they hadn't experienced the outside world, they were likely to believe everything Ilana told them without question.

He found he pitied them.

Magic lessons followed lunch, this time with Ilana leading the class. To Tristan's surprise, they were not using marbles—instead, every spell they performed drew from their internal magic.

“Wouldn't it be safer to use marbles?” Tristan asked. He could see no downside to fueling their spells with marbles, while the opposite had the potential of harming them greatly.

“Our base here is relatively new,” Ilana said sharply. “We don't have the luxury of drawing from a centuries-old cache of magic, so we need to conserve every marble we create. Every single one goes to fueling the globe. We use electricity for our lighting and cooking, as you've undoubtedly noticed, and train ourselves until we are fit enough to draw on our internal stores of power without detriment.”

Tristan was so drained that he couldn't summon up even the faintest flicker of magic, and Amber was having just as much trouble. Ilana looked disappointed at their failure, though she did not comment on it.

Afterwards, they had a two-hour supervised study session in the cafeteria, during which they were meant to practice the spells they had learned during the previous class and complete a set of homework on theory. Tristan spent the time reading the same sentence over and over again, trying his hardest not to nod off.

Dinner was a relief, though Tristan was desperate to sit with Amber and puzzle through what they'd seen that day. He kept glancing her way across the cafeteria, and a couple times she met his eyes and blushed. His face grew warm every time this happened.

After dinner, their division was on kitchen-cleaning duty; Tristan was almost unequal to lifting the heavy pots and pans, so he took over the sweeping and mopping. He and Amber followed the rest of their division down the hall afterwards, both fighting to stay awake. It was an hour before curfew, according to his schedule, but he could think of nothing but sleep. He hoped the other students' bedrooms were more or less in the same direction as his, because he could not for the life of him remember the way.

Once five of the other students had disappeared into rooms along the main hall, Tristan cleared his throat and asked the last, the scrawny Indian boy who had somehow kept up with the workouts earlier that day, where

his and Amber's rooms lay.

The boy gave him a surprised look. "Right here." He pushed open the door to Amber's room, and then Tristan's.

"Thanks," Tristan muttered. "What's your name?"

"Rajesh." The boy turned and retreated into his own room without another word.

These students were very strange. From what Tristan had seen so far, the classes appeared normal enough, but there must have been something more happening here, or they wouldn't act so lifeless.

Limping into his room, Tristan collapsed on his bed. He pulled the schedule from the bag he'd been given and tried to make sense of it, eyes glazing over. It was several minutes before he realized that, aside from three two-hour blocks of free time on Friday, Saturday, and Sunday, he would be busy from eight in the morning to eight at night every day.

A soft knock sounded at his door, so quiet he might have imagined it.

"Yes?"

"Can I come in?" Amber asked timidly

"Please," Tristan said. He had been wanting to talk to her properly all day. He leaned against the head of his bed while Amber sat cross-legged at the foot.

"What do you think?" he asked. "There's definitely something weird about this place."

Amber nodded. "All the students act like I did at the beginning of my first year."

"I hadn't thought of that!" Tristan smiled briefly. "I can't tell if they don't think for themselves, or if they're too scared to talk."

"Maybe it's a bit of both," Amber said. "Maybe they were beaten into submission when they were young, and now that they are older, they've lost their independence."

Tristan hugged his knees. "That's a good point. We haven't seen any little kids, have we? If they're adopting babies, where are they all?" After the strangeness of the day, he wanted nothing more than to take Amber into his arms and cling to her.

"Should we do anything yet?" she asked.

"Not yet. First we need to watch and wait. They have to trust us before we try anything."

"Do you think they'll let us use their globe?"

Tristan grimaced. "I hope not. But we'll need to, eventually. I just hope they don't force us to do something horrible first."

"I bet they will," Amber said quietly. "That sounds exactly like the sort of thing Ilana would do. We will have to prove we can follow her orders blindly. We might have to destroy something major."

"And you'll do it, if they ask you to?"

"It's what the professors sent us here for. To prevent the destruction of humanity at whatever cost."

"At whatever cost," Tristan repeated blankly. "What if I can't do it? What if I'm too damn scared?"

Amber crawled forward and grasped Tristan's hand, her fingers warm on his numb skin. "You're incredibly brave. You would not be here otherwise." She gave him a sad smile. "I trust you more than I trust myself."

* * *

Tristan slept as though dead, his utter exhaustion fueled by physical weariness and jetlag. It took a while before he heard the knocking on his door in the morning, and longer still before he registered the sound enough to sit up and mumble, "I'm coming!"

Blearily he pulled on his uniform and boots and fetched his book-bag, stopping at the bathroom to splash water on his face. He knocked on Amber's door and waited for her to join him before turning in the direction of the cafeteria. There were no helpful students to guide them today, and Tristan's heart sank as he realized that the entire school looked the same—rounded white tunnels with white doors at regular intervals.

They turned left down a hallway Tristan thought he recognized, and by the time they had taken two more turns in what he assumed was the direction of the cafeteria, he and Amber were hopelessly lost.

"This is useless," he said abruptly, kicking another one of the blank white doors where the hallway dead-

ended.

“Do you remember the way we came?” Amber asked.

“No. You?”

She shook her head. “Any marbles left for an Intralocation spell?”

Tristan dug in his pockets, but there was nothing to be found. Of course not—the filthy clothes he’d arrived in had vanished, and the three marbles remaining in those pockets were probably sitting beneath this school’s globe by now.

Turning back, they tried to retrace their path to their bedrooms. Before long the hall narrowed; they definitely had not come this way before.

“We’re in trouble,” Tristan muttered, turning once again. He pushed open the door to his right and then the one on his left, neither of which led anywhere useful. “Damn it.” Faster now, he and Amber retraced their steps up the hallway once again, pausing to glance in every room they passed. When the hallway forked, they chose the left corridor, hoping it would take them closer to the dining room.

“We’ll probably just starve down here,” Tristan said.

“Unless Ilana thinks we’ve come here to cause trouble,” Amber said, pausing with her hand on a door. “This one is locked.”

Tristan sighed. “At least we can eliminate that direction.”

Heartbeat quickening, Tristan pushed open another door, and another. He wanted to give up, to sit down and wait for someone to find them, but he was afraid of getting caught where they didn’t belong.

Throwing open the next door for a cursory look inside, he froze.

Someone was huddled against the wall, wrapped in blankets, one ankle fastened to the wall by a pair of heavy chains.

“Do you think they’re dangerous?” Tristan whispered, beckoning Amber to the doorway.

She stared openmouthed at the hunched figure. “Professor?”

A second later, Tristan recognized the thin face and auburn hair.

It was Professor Merridy.

No, not “Professor” any longer. Tristan tiptoed into the room, his heart pounding. “Merridy? What’s happening here?”

Merridy sat up abruptly, eyes wild. “Tristan! You have to get out of here! What on earth are you doing with these magicians?”

Tristan knelt gingerly beside Merridy, half-frightened that she would attack him. She did not seem to be in her right mind. “What’ve they done to you?”

Merridy wrapped the blankets closer about her shoulders. “They found me,” she whispered. “They tracked me down and captured me. Those poor kids, too. They’re here somewhere.”

“It *was* you!” Tristan said, realizing suddenly what had happened. “Last summer. You told them where Zeke and I lived, and they tried to kill us.”

Merridy nodded, not meeting his eyes. “They tortured me. Said they’d hang those beautiful twins. But I never told them where the academy was.”

So she had retained some sense of loyalty—or love—for Alldusk. “They found us anyway,” Tristan said. He found he didn’t blame her, though.

“Will you make sure the kids are okay?” Merridy asked weakly. “I don’t think I’ll live much longer. I don’t want to abandon them.”

Tristan swallowed. “You’ll be okay, Professor.” He still thought of her as his teacher.

Sitting up straighter, Merridy grabbed his wrist. “You and Amber need to leave. Now. They’ll kill you if they find you here.”

“We’re lost!” Tristan said. “I don’t know how to get back to the school.”

“What are you doing here, anyway?” Her grip on his wrist tightened.

If she was behind the attack on his mother’s house, she couldn’t be trusted to keep a secret. “We didn’t want anything to do with Professor Drakewell,” Tristan said. “He’s evil. Ilana offered us a way out, so we left.”

“I may have been wrong,” Merridy said softly. “Drakewell was the lesser of two evils.”

“Too late for that now,” Tristan snapped. “We’re here, and there’s no going back.”

Merridy put a hand on Tristan’s shoulder. “You really have to get out of here. But it was nice to see you again. Some days I think I’m about to lose my mind.”

There was so much more Tristan wanted to know, but he knew Merridy was right. Someone would notice their absence soon. Standing, he turned to the doorway.

Amber was not there. In two rapid strides, Tristan left the room, yanking the door shut behind him.

“Well. What have we here?” Ilana’s quiet voice was dangerous. “Your little friend tells me you lost your way.”

Amber was pinned to the wall behind Ilana, her wrist trapped in Ilana’s slender fingers.

Tristan’s heart leapt to his throat. “We *were* lost,” he said quickly. “I think we turned too soon. I thought we were heading for the dining room, but then we hit a dead end, and we couldn’t find the way back.”

“Then what were you doing, speaking to Darla with such kindness?”

“All last year, I thought she was helping you,” Tristan said. “I wondered if we were going to see her here. Did she do something wrong? Why was she down there?” He realized he was babbling, and shut his mouth with a snap.

“Oh, yes,” Ilana said, still in that soft, deadly tone.

Tristan glanced at Amber, not sure what to do.

“What was that saying?” Ilana took Tristan’s wrist in her other hand, almost gently. “Leopards can’t change their spots? I think you need to come with me.”

Heart pounding, Tristan fell into step behind Ilana. She could kill them without a second thought. Or she could torture them until they told her the truth. Then she could pick off everyone at the academy, one by one. *Forgive me, Leila.*

“This way,” Ilana said, opening yet another of the featureless side doors. “I have something to show you.” She dragged Tristan and Amber in and slammed the door behind her. Two sets of manacles trailed from the wall; silently Ilana chained Amber’s ankles to the wall before moving on to Tristan. Neither of them resisted.

“You’re far too valuable to kill,” she told them, stepping back to admire her handiwork. “But I don’t trust either of you. I might give you a while to think things over, and once that’s done, you can have another chance. You will have to prove your loyalty, though. And I am not a gullible woman. Enjoy yourselves.” With a cold smile, she tucked the key into her pocket and left with a swirl of musty air.

The room was lit dimly by a single bulb on the ceiling, and the ice-carved walls radiated cold.

“Damn it,” Tristan moaned, sliding to the floor. The band around his ankle pinched his skin as he moved. “We didn’t even last two days.”

“She said she hasn’t given up on us,” Amber said dubiously. “But we won’t get away easily next time.”

“Do you think she’s recording us?”

Amber’s eyes widened. “I hope not.”

“Let’s test it,” Tristan whispered. Raising his voice, he said, “I wonder if Ilana found that bomb we planted? If she doesn’t find it tomorrow, it’s going to go off. And we’re going to be screwed.”

“I hope she comes back so we can tell her,” Amber said, catching on quickly.

“I guess we’re just sitting here waiting to die, then.”

Tristan crossed his arms and leaned against the wall, which immediately began draining warmth from his core.

Now they just had to wait. There was still a chance that Ilana would change her mind and accept that their blunder had been just that—an accident. Tristan wasn’t going to jeopardize that slim hope by saying anything incriminating if Ilana was listening.

Amber made a face at him and took a seat, resting her cheek on her knees.

That day was one of the longest Tristan had ever known. He didn’t know whether they would be tortured or starved or just ignored; the worst part was the uncertainty. The light did not change, nor did the temperature. He could only tell that time had passed when his stomach began growling.

“I’m starving,” he said. “Are you?”

Amber nodded sullenly. “I can’t feel any magic down here, either. The only power is mine and yours. It’s so empty.”

“Do you think she’s planning to starve us?”

“Not if she actually wants to use us for anything,” Amber said. “Remember the strength training? We would be less than useless if we lost our strength.”

“Maybe she doesn’t want our magic,” Tristan said. “Maybe she just wants to torture us for information.” He slammed his fist on the ice floor in frustration. “But we don’t know anything that Merridy doesn’t know! Why keep us alive at all?”

Amber did not answer.

Doubts began welling in Tristan as the hours stretched on, questions of loyalty and morality. Who was he doing this for, anyway? For two years he had followed Drakewell’s orders, despite hating and mistrusting his headmaster; was he losing his own free will, or would he have done this even without Drakewell’s instructions?

Either way, Ilana needed to be stopped. Anyone could see that.

But when had Tristan’s hesitance morphed into a willingness to cause whatever destruction was necessary in this dangerous game?

He hardly recognized himself.

Eventually Tristan fell into a doze. How much later he could not tell, the door scraped open to admit Ilana. The smell of food was what hit Tristan first—rich, cheesy French onion soup in two deep bowls.

“Why are you here?” Ilana asked quietly. “Have you come to destroy us? Or to save poor Darla Merridy? Because you’re too late for that. Your professor is dead.”

Tristan went cold. They had just spoken to her hours ago, and now—

“Tell me. I want to hear a good story.”

Tristan couldn’t think. He was struck with an image of Merridy lying on the icy floor of her prison, eyes wide open, reaching out for something she would never have.

When Alldusk heard—

“We told you the truth,” Amber said. Tristan tried to focus, silently praising Amber for stepping up when he had failed. She pulled up her left sleeve and showed Ilana the rope-burn. “Drakewell was furious after we used the globe without consulting him first. He tied us up belowground and threatened to kill us. That was when we realized our school was being run by a madman. We had to leave.”

“Very well,” Ilana said. “And is that the same story you would repeat if only the truth would save you from unimaginable pain?”

“Of course,” Amber said, sounding hurt.

Ilana lowered the soup bowls, giving them an even better smell of the rich onions. “In that case, will you be so kind as to describe the protective wards currently surrounding your precious Lair?”

Tristan almost looked at Amber for support, but he caught himself just in time. “We don’t know about all of them. Mostly they’ve got Prasadimums everywhere, and they fixed that big dome you shattered last year. I think it’s weaker than before, though.” He wouldn’t mention the woven net of branches that they had enchanted just before Christmas; with any luck, it was a spell none of Ilana’s magicians would recognize.

“Lies,” Ilana hissed. “There is something new. That school has recently been camouflaged. It is no longer visible to outsiders.”

“I didn’t know that,” Tristan protested.

Ilana turned the two bowls of soup over, splattering their meal all over the smooth ice. “Enjoy your meal.” Eyes flashing, she left, slamming the door behind her.

“Well, I don’t think she’s recording us,” Amber said weakly.

“Great. Just wonderful.” Tristan crawled forward, unable to feel the hard floor on his numb knees, and pried a melted glob of cheese from the ice. The broth was already freezing solid. Amber copied him, grabbing sodden hunks of bread and translucent onions from the floor and eating ravenously. When Tristan had salvaged all he could from the wreckage of their dinner, he sat back on his heels, licking broth from his fingers.

His stomach felt even emptier than before.

Chapter 4: Ilana's Test

What felt like hours later, Tristan was lying on his side, curled up to preserve as much warmth as possible. The light was still on, and he could not sleep. When he glanced over at Amber, he could see his reflection in her forlorn eyes.

"You can't sleep either?"

She shook her head.

"Do you think you could break out of these?" he asked.

"Definitely. But she would never trust us again if we did."

Tristan nodded sullenly. "And then she'd kill us for sure."

"Sometimes I hate Drakewell for sending us here," Amber whispered. "I never wanted to play a role in something this important."

"You don't hate him because he's sent us here to die?" Tristan asked, incredulous. Their chances of success were so slim it was laughable. He would have stood a better chance against a lightning bolt.

Amber made a face. "I don't know what else I could have done. I have no other place, not in this world."

Tristan knew how she felt. If the Lair was destroyed, what then? Returning to civilization, to a landscape bled dry of magic, would be torture. This world was irrevocably his now. "I just wish we could have said goodbye," he muttered.

Amber crawled as close to him as her chains would allow, and Tristan was struck with a fierce yearning to hold her again. This was nothing like what he had felt for Evvie; in place of awkwardness and uncertainty, he felt such an overpowering, giddy affection that he almost forgot where they were.

Every nerve on fire, he shifted closer to Amber so he could press his shoulder against hers. Their heads rested together, and he reached on impulse for her hand.

And though Amber was so enigmatic he could rarely guess her thoughts, he knew exactly what it meant when she twined her fingers through his and held tight.

"You want to know something?" he said hesitantly.

"Mm?"

Tristan glanced sideways at Amber, whose eyes were closed.

"There's no one I would rather have here with me right now."

Her eyes flew open. "What about all of your friends? Didn't you leave anyone behind when you came to the academy?"

He shook his head, mouth twitching. "You must think I'm a lot cooler than I actually am. But I was always that lame kid who didn't know how to make friends. I thought it'd be a lot worse, after what Juvie was like, and after—" he gestured at his scars. "But it's not true. I was actually happy at the academy, and—"

"I was, too," Amber said unexpectedly.

"I guess we both just—"

A sudden crash echoed down the hall outside, followed by a chorus of shouts.

Tristan and Amber flinched and sprang apart.

The moment of warmth fled as quickly as it had come.

"If Ilana found us like this, she would use it against us," Amber said softly.

Tristan cursed. "I know." Edging still farther away, he curled up again and reached out for Amber's hand.

She squeezed his fingers and gave him a grim smile. "At least we're not alone."

Tristan swallowed. He wished they could return to the days they had spent hiking through the Rockies, silent and determined as they crossed the barren expanse, huddled together at night.

Now they were left with nothing but a desperate longing to survive.

Tristan clung to Amber's hand even as her eyes dropped closed and her breathing grew quieter. At long last, he drifted off to sleep as well, his dreams punctuated with shadows.

* * *

He woke, disoriented and frozen stiff, to Ilana's voice.

"Good morning." Her silky voice spelled danger. "I trust you've slept well."

Neither Tristan nor Amber responded.

"No? That's a real shame." Ilana closed the door behind her. "The rest of my students slept soundly, tucked away in their warm, comfortable beds. It's such a shame you threw away your chance at a better life."

"You're not going to give us another chance?" Tristan asked, hugging his legs for warmth.

"I don't know. Should I? You have to prove that you want it. That it's more important to you than anything."

"How can we do that?" Tristan asked desperately. He was sure Ilana could hear his stomach rumbling from where she stood.

"You can do as you're told without complaining or asking questions," she snapped. "And when you're ready, you can tell us everything you know about the Underground Academy."

Tristan opened his mouth to ask if they would get any breakfast, but he stopped himself just in time.

Just then, he noticed that Ilana was carrying a canvas bag, which she set on the floor in the middle of the room. "You each have two poached eggs and a slice of toast in here. They are hot, but they won't remain that way for long. Enjoy."

She turned and, with a swirl of her auburn hair, retreated.

"It's a trick," Tristan said, looking at the bag. "It has to be." He wasn't sure what to expect—had she poisoned the food? Or was a giant rat lurking in the bag?

Cautiously he crawled over and peeked inside. Instead of a plate, as he had expected, he saw a solid metal box, unadorned, with no obvious latch or lid.

"Damn it," he said as his stomach growled louder than ever. "It's a puzzle. I bet we have to open it with magic."

Amber glanced fretfully at the box. "I can't use magic down here. I have nothing to draw on."

"Can't we draw on our own power?"

"I'm not very good at that," she said sadly.

Tristan carried the box back to the wall, where they both stared at it for a long time, unspeaking.

"This sucks," Tristan said. "I don't even know how to begin getting at it. Unless we're meant to melt the box, or blow it up or something. And I definitely can't do that."

"Do you think we could melt a piece of it together?" Amber asked hesitantly.

"Might as well try. You do the spell, and I'll try to—to send you power, like we did with that barrier over the Lair."

Amber nodded. Tristan reached for her hand without a clear idea of what to do. Back in the academy, they had each drawn the power from a single marble into themselves and sent it along to Drakewell, who had activated the barrier spell with the combined power of everyone at the school. Here, though, Tristan had to reach inside for his own power—something he had only done a few times before, and always by accident.

Closing his eyes, he tried to grasp ahold of any faint piece of magic he could sense; after a moment, he realized he had been daydreaming about the steaming eggs and buttered toast. Shaking his head, he focused on the pressure of Amber's hand in his and tried to direct the heat of his body through his arm to that palm.

After a long time, his shoulder began to tingle, and warmth spread down his arm towards his hand. It was working! He concentrated the warmth into his hand and through to Amber, siphoning off as much as he could from his core. With a sudden jolt, the power left him. Tristan's head began throbbing, and he swayed.

* * *

The next thing he knew, Amber was slapping his cheek.

“Tristan! Wake up! You’ll die on that cold ground.”

“Calm down,” he said, struggling to sit up. His head spun when he raised it from the ground. “I’m fine.”

Amber’s eyes were round and frightened. “Your pulse was so slow. I didn’t know what to do.”

“I messed up the spell, didn’t I?” he said.

“It failed,” Amber said, sitting back against the wall with her hands clasped on her knees. “Are you sure you’re okay?”

Tristan nodded. “Don’t worry about me.”

“But I should,” Amber said, studying him somberly. “Ilana should never have tricked us into trying that. It was very dangerous. Especially when we’re exhausted and hungry.”

“I’m just sad we don’t get any food,” Tristan said gloomily, slumping against the wall again.

Several more hours passed—or a lifetime, perhaps—before Ilana reappeared in the doorway. Her eyes immediately lit upon the metal box.

“You couldn’t open it,” she said flatly. “I’m disappointed. I expected better of Rowan’s star pupils. Could you honestly not figure out such a simple spell?”

“I don’t really know how to do magic without a marble,” Tristan mumbled, feeling very small. Clearly the students here were miles ahead of him in that regard.

“Not even you, Amber?” Ilana’s eyes flashed.

She hung her head. “I can’t use my own power, not much. I usually draw on the network of magic hanging all around, but that only works outside, when there’s enough life nearby. I had quite a lot of power in the forest outside the Lair.”

Ilana’s eyebrows raised just a bit; it seemed she was impressed in spite of herself. Tristan wondered why Amber had chosen to divulge such a dangerous piece of information—was she worried about what Ilana would do if she decided they were dispensable? “Well. This is an unacceptable shortcoming on your part. If you’re going to help us at all, you have to learn to draw power from yourselves, and soon. It seems Rowan is so paranoid that he chose to limit your powers to keep you from causing any damage.”

Tristan glanced at Amber in surprise. After two years of study, Drakewell still didn’t trust his students? Or was it more of a general mistrust of magic in the hands of humanity as a whole?

“You will be less than useless without a command of your internal strength,” Ilana said. “Starting this afternoon, you’ll join the strength training classes—every one that takes place.”

She knelt and put a hand on the metal box; a moment later one side fell off, revealing the plate of thoroughly cooled eggs and toast. “All you had to do was probe the box for weaknesses. There was a fragile clasp on the inside that had to be severed. That was all.” Standing, she kicked the box towards them, toppling their breakfast onto the icy floor. “Eat up. You’ll need all the energy you can get for weight training this afternoon.”

When she left, Tristan and Amber descended on the cold eggs and soggy bread. It wasn’t much, but it tasted like the best thing Tristan had ever eaten.

“I’m not going to survive strength training,” he moaned when the eggs were gone. “I’ll pass out again!”

Amber gave him a fleeting smile. “Don’t worry. I’m even weaker than you.”

They both fell into a doze, Tristan hunched against the wall, Amber curled around her knees.

When the door banged open a while later, Tristan jolted awake. This time it was not Ilana standing there but Stefan, who wore a strict frown entirely at odds with the jovial man he had seemed two days before.

“Are we doing strength training with you, then?” Tristan asked.

Stefan knelt to unlock their cuffs, not deigning to reply. Too happy about leaving their freezing cell to complain, Tristan fell into step behind him as they returned through the maze of passageways toward the gym. He was surprised by this new lack of security—had Ilana decided they were no longer a threat, given their inability to use magic underground?

They received several odd looks when they joined the class in the familiar gym, though no one spoke or showed undue interest. It seemed these students had been trained to act as puppets, to follow orders without question. Tristan wondered how many of them had been put through the same ordeal he and Amber were currently experiencing.

This time, the workout was entirely devoted to weight training. They lifted weights in endless repetition; Tristan and Amber each started with ten-pound dumbbells, while the rest of the class hefted twenty pounds and up; even so, he could hardly keep up. Long after his arms felt like they were about to drop off, they switched to medicine balls, which they held between their ankles while doing leg-drops and hugged to their stomachs for sit-ups. This time Stefan did not go easy on them. He walked around the class, barking out orders and reprimanding any student who got lazy or did a move sloppily. Tristan could barely manage to raise his back off the ground when they started doing sit-ups, so Stefan stood by his side and yelled at him until he sat up properly.

To his left, Amber was having even more trouble, though thankfully Stefan seemed to have chosen Tristan as his target this time around.

“Shoulders up!” he shouted. “Don’t let the medicine ball leave your stomach. *Tristan!* That’s cheating. Ten more.”

At long last, Stefan stepped back and said, “Class over. You have time to shower before dinner.” He shot a look at Tristan. “Not you two. You must follow me.”

His legs trembling, Tristan stood and limped after Stefan. Sweat had glued his shirt to his back, and his hair was pressed in damp strands down his neck. Amber followed, taking small, careful steps. As he had expected, they were led away from the cafeteria—which exuded the aroma of something delicious and roasted—and down the same hallway they had come from. After a week of this, they would at least be able to find their way to the cafeteria if they were ever allowed to go free, Tristan thought wryly.

After he locked them back into their shackles, Stefan drew a paper bag from his gym bag. “I’ve talked to Ilana,” he said. “If you’re going to build up strength properly, you have to eat.”

“Thank you,” Tristan said weakly.

Stefan didn’t acknowledge him. Turning, he closed the door softly behind him.

“We can’t keep doing this,” Tristan said, ripping the paper bag open to reveal two tuna sandwiches and a sad, pale orange. “We have to tell her something.” He took a big bite of the top sandwich before handing the second to Amber. “Something that won’t hurt the Lair, but that will make it seem obvious we’ve given up on them.”

“I know,” Amber said. “I should tell them about the new barrier. I helped design it, you know. Without my help, they would take a long time to figure out its weaknesses and disable it before attacking the Lair. But I know exactly how it works.”

“What are its weaknesses, then?” Tristan asked, an ominous feeling building in the pit of his stomach. The tuna sandwich was almost gone, and it had done nothing to fill the hole.

“The barrier is woven from branches and roots. It holds an illusion spell, and an overall protection spell. But the barrier only serves to ward off spells aimed at the academy as a whole. It is a latticework frame, and if multiple spells were flung at it, one would go through.”

“Wouldn’t it guard against disasters sent from the globe?”

“Some. I suspect if we copied their hailstorm, the hailstones would get through easily. Provided the inner barrier was disabled as well.”

“And how do we get rid of the inner barrier?”

Amber shrugged. “They managed it before, so I guess they could figure it out again.”

“With a month’s worth of rainstorms,” Tristan said darkly. “My god, I can’t believe we’re upset that we can’t figure out a way past their defenses.”

Amber gave him a level stare. “We have to play this right.”

“I know.”

“And speaking of the inner barrier, wasn’t there a tiny piece missing from the glass dome when we put it back on the globe?” she asked.

Tristan thought back to the day they had finished reassembling the puzzle-like shards of glass. “I suppose so. Drakewell might have found it, though. But you’re right—I don’t remember anyone finding that last piece. So...”

“I don’t know where the missing piece is on the dome,” Amber said hesitantly. “But I might be able to find it. I think I should try.”

“How?”

“I don’t entirely know.”

It was a slim hope, but Tristan supposed it was better than nothing.

* * *

That night, Tristan was roused from a heavy sleep when the door clanged open. It was a moment before he remembered where he was, though the ache in his neck was reminder enough.

“Up,” Ilana snapped, kicking Tristan and Amber with her heavy fur boots. Tristan recoiled from her foot, squeezing his eyes shut in hopes that she would go away.

When this failed, he rubbed his eyes and struggled to sit up, his ribs aching from where Ilana’s toe had bruised his already-tender muscles. His legs barely supported him when he stood.

“Hurry!” she ordered. “Lazy, good-for-nothing leeches. Get up this instant!”

Amber stood, shaking, and stared at Ilana. Tristan was surprised to find that nothing stopped him when he took a step towards the door; clearly Ilana had unbolted their shackles before waking them.

All thoughts of telling Ilana about the barrier around the academy fled Tristan’s mind as he staggered after her, his legs protesting with every step. They couldn’t have slept more than three hours; his head ached, his eyes felt dry and itchy, and every muscle spasmed when he moved.

“Where—” Tristan began, then stopped short. Ilana did not want them asking questions.

They stumbled up the icy hallway, past three doors, and up the ladder leading to the snow outside. The wind had died, and the stars were overwhelmingly bright overhead, an embroidered curtain of light. As they started across the ice, Tristan shot a questioning look at Amber, who shook her head, looking just as bewildered as he felt.

It seemed they walked for hours, the sky unchanging overhead, no landmark betraying their progress across the unblemished sheet of ice.

At long last, when Tristan’s mind had gone blank from exhaustion and cold, Ilana stopped.

“Go,” she said, her tone icy. “You’re free. Leave this place and never return. You’re not wanted here.”

“But—” Tristan began, struggling to make sense of what she had said.

“Get out of here. *Now.*”

Without another word, Ilana turned and started back across the ice. Before long her figure had disappeared in the murky darkness.

Chapter 5: The Seminar

“**W**-what’s going on?” Tristan was shivering, the wind slicing across his skin and burrowing beneath his thin coat.

“It must be another test,” Amber said. As usual, the cold did not seem to bother her. “We don’t know what might be facing us if we return. If we had any doubts whatsoever, we would turn and leave that place behind.”

“But we w-won’t?” Tristan asked.

Reaching out, Amber grabbed his hands and sent a shock of warmth through Tristan. His shoulders sagged as the heat flooded through him, thawing his hands and jolting his feet back to life. “She might track us down and kill us if we leave. I could probably fight her off, but what would we accomplish then?”

“You’re saying we should go back.”

“We hardly have a choice,” Amber said quietly.

Tristan thought longingly of his friends back at the Underground Academy. Rusty would be hanging out with Eli and Trey now, and Leila... Tristan was afraid she wouldn’t forgive him if he returned. She didn’t know the truth; she would suspect him of abandoning the academy and then slinking back when he learned that betrayal came at too high a price.

“You’re right,” he said at last. “We can’t give up now. But—” He didn’t know how to say it, but this was the hardest decision he had ever made. Even harder than leaving the Lair in the first place.

This was their last glimpse of freedom.

“You’re the brave one, not me,” he said sadly. He would have given anything to turn away and leave that wretched prison far behind.

Tentatively Amber reached out and took his hands again. He drew her into his arms, seeking her comfort and her warmth.

“Why do you like me?” she whispered, her face against his shoulder.

The wind was ruffling his hair, yet he felt impervious to the cold. “Because you’re the most incredible girl I’ve ever met,” he said. “Why do you like *me*?”

Amber gave a soft sniff, and Tristan realized with a start that she was crying. “Because—because you’re the only person who has ever seen me as an equal.”

Tristan drew away from her, taken aback by the stark vulnerability of her words. The stars were reflected in her beautiful eyes.

He wiped the tears from her cheeks with his thumb, pausing with his hand cupping her chin. How could anyone overlook her beauty? She was ethereal, like one of the fey folk—stunning in the way the moon and the stars were beautiful.

Hesitating, he brought his face closer to hers, hopeful and nervous. When his lips met hers, a shock ran through him like a spark. He thought Amber might flee, but her lips parted and their kiss deepened. As his lips moved with hers, Tristan knotted his fingers through her windswept hair.

Amber was smiling when they broke apart, her cheeks flushed in the starlight.

“Now we have a secret Ilana can never take,” Tristan said, grinning back at her. Nothing else seemed to matter in that moment, not Ilana or her globe or her mindless disciples. Nothing mattered but Amber.

As they turned back towards Ilana’s ice-cave, he took Amber’s hand in his. He saw himself and Amber differently in that moment, two criminals who would forever stand out in a crowd, both lost and directionless until they had stumbled into this terrible, exhilarating world of magic. And he also saw how lonely it must have been for Amber. Before this, she had always been seen as the pitiful blind girl in Special Ed; now she was so

talented she intimidated most of the other students at the academy.

“Do you think we’ll be able to make a difference?” Tristan asked as they retraced their path across the ice. He wanted to show her without words that he saw her for herself, that he loved her because of her individuality, but he didn’t know how. “Are they ever going to let us near their globe?”

“I think they will,” Amber said, her head tilted up to the Milky Way. She watched the stars with a look of hunger, the myriad pinpricks of light reflected in her eyes. “I think they need our help. Maybe they suspect we know how to collect air magic.”

“I don’t know how,” Tristan said, glancing sideways at her. “I’m not that useful.”

“Not that dangerous, you mean,” Amber said quietly. “They must never find out how powerful I am. They would enslave me.”

Tristan gave her hand a brief squeeze. “You’re stronger than them. They won’t be able to hurt you.”

“I hope you’re right,” Amber said wistfully.

As the night grew colder still, the wind fiercer, Tristan slipped into memories of the academy; it was the only way to ward away the discomfort and forget the decision he’d made. Clouds began darting in wisps across the starry heavens, and a slivered moon rose above the flat horizon.

While the wind lifted his hair and swept a low cloud of snow across the ice, Tristan thought of the times they’d baked cookies with Quinsley and stayed awake late into the night by the Subroom fire. He remembered that terrible night after they had visited Whitney, when everyone had gathered by the fireplace in the Aspen Lodge to seek solace in one another. He had fallen asleep beside Leila, her warmth reminding him that he was not lost, that his life hadn’t ended with the sight of that wretched, charred village.

And now...what would they be called upon to do for Ilana? Would they lay waste to a hundred villages like Millersville? Would they ravage entire civilizations?

Tristan had the awful feeling that nothing waited for him after Ilana’s school. He would die here, or remain trapped forever; there was no future beyond this. And it no longer mattered whether his friends could forgive him.

He would not be able to forgive himself.

Before long, Amber changed course, turning ever so slightly to the right. Tristan had no idea where they were going, but he assumed she knew. The Big Dipper hung before them, the North Star beckoning them forward.

“Not far now,” Amber said, her voice ripped away in a gust of wind.

Tristan cursed. “I can’t believe I’m doing this.”

Amber shook her head. “Me neither. But I’ll be here with you. To the end.”

Tristan gave her a shaky smile, holding her hand tighter than ever. Now he could see the trapdoor, the edge outlined faintly in the moonlight. He knelt and lifted the ice-carved door. Then, taking a deep breath, he led the way down the ladder.

A weight of despair settled on him as soon as his feet touched the floor of the tunnel.

This was it.

Amber had barely joined him in the tunnel, the darkness almost complete with the trapdoor closed, when a light appeared around the corner and grew steadily brighter.

It was Ilana, her sharp, regal face glowing in the light of a flickering lantern.

“Are you certain of your decision?” she asked.

“Yes,” Tristan and Amber said together.

“Then welcome,” Ilana said, her tone warmer than Tristan had ever heard. “You have proved yourselves tonight, and you’ll soon have a chance to further demonstrate your loyalty. Was it truly so bad with Drakewell that you had no choice but to join me?”

Tristan nodded. “Like I said, he’s completely unreasonable. I don’t trust him, and he’s hated me since I first got there. Besides, it seems like he was only controlling the Map Room because he had no other choice. But you—you do it because you actually believe in what you’re doing.”

“What praise,” Ilana said with what sounded like genuine warmth. “And such a shame about Rowan. I loved him once, you know. Before he changed. He nearly killed me, and he didn’t have the heart to stay with me when I was hurt.”

"I'm sorry," Tristan said, pretending he was convinced with her story. Natasha had told him the truth—that Ilana had been in a coma for several months, and Drakewell had stayed by her side until the doctors believed there was no hope left.

"Come this way," Ilana said. "Your rooms have been readied. I'm sorry I doubted you."

"It's okay," Tristan said. After seeing how harsh Ilana could be, he didn't trust her newfound kindness. If she thought she could win their devotion with sweet words, she was sorely mistaken.

"Your classes will resume tomorrow," she said, stopping outside the pair of doors Tristan recognized from their first nights in the ice cave. "Sleep well."

With a smile that didn't quite reach her eyes, Ilana turned and left them.

"Hah—sleep well," Tristan said in an undertone. "It's probably four in the morning already. We'll be awake in another hour or two."

"At least she's given us another chance," Amber said. "You were very convincing, you know."

Tristan grimaced. "What does that say about me, that I'm getting better at lying?" He suddenly thought back to Merridy, who had fooled them all. Now she was utterly alone, with no one to mourn her end. "Poor Merridy. I can't believe she's—"

Amber winced. "Goodnight."

After she had disappeared into her room, Tristan stood for a long time watching her closed door, the memory of their kiss replaying in his mind.

* * *

Tristan had barely fallen asleep when he woke with a start, the lights blinding overhead.

"Breakfast is in five minutes," Stefan's voice called from the doorway.

"I'm up," Tristan mumbled, pulling his blankets over his head. After the unrelenting cold of their prison, the warmth trapped beneath his heavy stack of blankets felt luxurious.

Someone must have explained their return to the other students, because no one looked Tristan's way when he made for the seat beside Rajesh in the cafeteria. Amber was already there, looking very small between two giant boys Tristan recognized from their division.

The smell of food distracted him from everything else. After days of eating almost nothing, he was ravenous. He piled his plate with roast potatoes and scrambled eggs and toast, too happy to care that the food was bland and overcooked.

When Tristan paused to gulp down water, Rajesh gave him a fleeting smile. "I'm surprised you're back. Kids don't usually return once they've disappeared."

Tristan froze. "What happens to them?"

"No idea."

Rajesh must have caught a look from one of the professors, because he straightened and quickly adopted a blank expression.

As they climbed the ladder after breakfast and made for the same glacial stream they had been harvesting before, Tristan wondered if all the students were as mindless as they appeared, or if they were simply afraid to speak out. If he could win their trust, they might be persuaded to help overthrow their teachers.

But how could he get the measure of them, with professors watching them at every turn?

Tristan observed the students closely that day, alert for any sign of unhappiness or dissent. He found none. Each worked with expressionless dedication, no flicker of emotion betrayed on their faces. Rajesh was no different than the others; he did not meet Tristan's eye when Tristan fell into step beside him on their way to the afternoon lessons, nor speak a word except when called on.

At least he was beginning to learn the names of his classmates. The two enormous boys were Blake, a blond, broad-shouldered Scot who would have made a good football player, and Ricardo, a curly-haired Italian without an accent—Tristan assumed he had been one of the adopted students. The tiny Chinese girl was Mei Ling, and the rather plain-faced blond girl with a strong accent he didn't recognize was Pavlina. The most inscrutable student was Ori, a chestnut-skinned boy with a soft American accent and black eyes. Tristan could not place him.

With his attention divided, Tristan had found it very difficult to concentrate on his lessons; he was given extra homework to make up for each question he answered incorrectly in his lessons, and was consequently the last to leave the cafeteria following their supervised study time.

Amber was waiting in his bedroom when he arrived, perched at the foot of his bed with a vacant expression.

“What is it?” Tristan asked softly, closing the door. After that night out on the ice sheet, he felt her presence as though she was a campfire burning in his room.

“The tenth of May is in six days,” Amber said. “I’ve been counting.”

Tristan stared at her in alarm, all thoughts of romance forgotten. He had completely lost track of the time.

“If Ilana wants us to attack the Lair, we have to do it soon.”

Tristan nodded, sinking down onto his bed beside Amber. “I’ve been thinking. Are the students all completely brainwashed? Or are they just scared to speak up?”

“A bit of both, I think,” Amber said.

“But how do we figure out which students aren’t brainwashed?”

“We must be patient. We have as much time as we need,” Amber said. “As long as Ilana doesn’t plan a full attack on the academy—”

“Or start sending disasters everywhere,” Tristan added grimly.

Amber bit her lip. “I doubt that will happen right away. I think she wants our complete loyalty first.”

“So we’ll just wait and see what happens?”

“Yes.”

Tristan slouched back against the wall of ice. “I’m afraid something will go wrong if we wait too long. But I bet some of the other students would help us if we asked nicely enough.”

“And some would report us.”

“I know.” He couldn’t see any better way, though. How was he supposed to get the measure of their fellow classmates if every hour of their day was structured by supervised activities? How could he get past their empty, emotionless façades without drawing attention from the professors?

“At least we’re not stuck in that rotten cell any longer,” Tristan said.

“Thank goodness.” Amber yawned and got to her feet. “I think I should get some sleep now.” Just before she disappeared, she turned and gave him a mischievous smile that sent blood rushing to his head.

* * *

Five more days, Tristan thought as he rolled out of bed the next morning. How on earth were they supposed to arrange it so they attacked the Lair exactly on the tenth of May? If either of them suggested it, the whole thing would look like a setup. And if they didn’t, Ilana was likely to spring it on them when they least expected it.

But Ilana was not at breakfast, and neither Stefan nor any of the students called attention to Tristan or Amber that morning.

At lunch, Tristan sat between Ori and Mei Ling—they were the least intimidating students in the First Division—in hopes that he could get a bit more conversation out of them.

“How long have you been here?” he asked Mei Ling in a low voice.

“Forever,” she said flatly.

“What about you?” he asked Ori.

He gave Tristan a long look. “Seventeen years. Why do you care?”

“I’m just curious,” Tristan said quickly. “Don’t you guys ever talk?”

“When we’re supposed to,” Ori said, turning pointedly back to his plate. On Ori’s other side, Rajesh shook his head almost imperceptibly.

Frustrated, Tristan picked at his sandwich. He missed Quinsley’s meals—the bread here was soggy, the vegetables pale and flavorless. What had happened to these kids? Had someone beaten the life out of them when they were too young to protest?

Instead of another study session after lunch, the First Division followed Stefan down a narrow corridor that led deep into the ice cave.

“You don’t have any marbles, do you?” he asked Tristan and Amber gruffly, stopping outside a round metal door that could have come off a bank vault.

They both shook their heads.

“Good. Ilana will murder you if you try anything here, understood?”

Tristan swallowed. He had a feeling he knew where they were.

When Stefan turned the combination lock and pushed the door open, Tristan saw that his hunch had been correct.

This was Ilana’s globe. The weapon they had come here to destroy.

Tristan glanced sideways at Amber. He would have given anything if it meant she could use her full powers underground. If she could draw on the force of nature, she would be able to blow the globe to pieces where they stood. He was surprised Ilana had allowed them into this well-guarded chamber so quickly; she was undoubtedly convinced Tristan and Amber could not harm her globe.

Unfortunately, she was right.

Ilana’s globe was smaller than the one in the Lair, just a foot taller than Tristan himself, and the continents were carved from what looked like rose onyx offset by a shiny black ocean, all of it much cruder than the globe he was accustomed to. There was only one table in this room, and with a shiver of apprehension, Tristan realized it was molded into the shape of a very familiar valley in Canada. Though the buildings of the Underground Academy did not register on the granite surface, he could easily recognize the clearing where it sat.

“Tristan, Amber, stand back,” Stefan said curtly. “Ilana does not want you touching the globe yet. Mei Ling, you’re first today.” Opening a trapdoor that Tristan had overlooked, he cranked a handle that raised a platform and sent a cascade of ten marbles clattering from one vault to another.

As Mei Ling stepped up, determination written into the lines of her forehead, Stefan relocated the disc to one of the islands of Hawaii and said, “I want a ten-marble eruption of Mount Kilauea. Remember to send the lava towards the village this time. And make sure you use ten marbles—anything less is just lazy.”

Mei Ling took a glass quill from Stefan, identical to the one they’d used at the academy apart from its lack of a silver air marble. Tristan felt a savage pleasure at the thought that Amber was the only magician alive who could harvest air magic.

The trapdoor was still open, and when Mei Ling began to draw the complicated gesture that triggered a volcanic eruption, the ten marbles in the vault beneath the globe vanished one by one. When she lifted the quill from the granite table, one marble still remained. She winced.

After a pause, the volcano on the table erupted on one side, the lava hazy and almost transparent on the map. A slew of burning rocks rained onto the nearby village, followed by an oozing tongue of magma that crept down the mountainside, stopping just past the first three houses, which went up in flames as soon as the magma curled against them.

Watching the chaos with a carefully blank expression, Tristan wondered where the people were. Why had no one fled the volcano?

Then he remembered that they couldn’t see auras on this map. For all they knew, everyone might have escaped.

Or the entire village could be dead.

“You’re one marble short,” Stefan said dispassionately as the village continued to burn. “But it was better than before. And you’re getting better at directing the lava.”

He lifted the anchor and spun the globe west, repositioning the disc on an Asian country Tristan couldn’t identify. “Ricardo, you’ll be flooding a town near the eastern border of Bangladesh. Use eight marbles to send rain from each direction, and we’ll check back on the results tomorrow.”

The rest of the class continued in the same vein, though Pavlina and Ori were called upon to monitor the results of previous disasters rather than cause new ones. For those—a mudslide in New Zealand and a tidal wave in the South Pacific—Stefan pulled up a set of news articles on a laptop, from which he rattled off statistics and details.

“Ninety-four, Ori. Well done. No evacuations. But you didn’t use every marble, so that’s a point down. Eight points.” He turned to Pavlina. “The mudslide was badly timed. No casualties. And only four out of five marbles

used. That's a zero."

Pavlina looked down at her feet.

Tristan felt thoroughly shaken by the time their class was dismissed. To his surprise, they had two hours of free time before dinner, so he followed the rest of the students back to their rooms.

"What are the points about?" he asked Rajesh in an undertone as soon as Stefan left their group.

"You need a thousand points to move up through each of the divisions," he said, "and seven thousand points to graduate."

"How many are you at?" Tristan asked, not entirely sure he wanted to know the answer.

Rajesh made a face. "Four thousand, eight hundred and fifty-seven. I'll get a badge when I pass five thousand."

Tristan didn't want to contemplate how many deaths that equated to. He hoped fervently that the points could be won some other way besides causing successful disasters. "And what happens after you graduate? Do you stay here, or go somewhere else?"

"Well, you met the first set of graduates who'd gone through the whole program. They were the ones watching your old school from that cave."

"Oh." Tristan suddenly felt guilty for his school's attack on the magicians. Ilana had forced them into that situation, with minimal training and no real-world experience, and treated them as expendable. "I guess you're not looking forward to graduating, then."

"No." Rajesh glanced backwards to see if anyone else was listening. "I think the rest of the graduates are just harvesting magic all the time. Oh, and a few are pretending to live normal lives so they can keep adopting new kids for us. Some of them are researching air magic, and the rest are just working. Brute labor. It's a bit sad that all our training amounts to that."

"Why don't you just hang back, then?"

Rajesh laughed humorlessly. "What, you mean deliberately fail my classes? I'd be dead before I could say 'it was an accident.'"

"Well, I guess the next few years matter, anyway," Tristan said. "Ilana's just saving you until she can mount a full-out attack."

Rajesh nodded grimly. They had reached their rooms now, and he paused with a hand on his doorknob.

"Are we all allowed in each other's rooms?" Tristan asked.

"I suppose. No one's forbidden it."

"Hmm. See you at dinner?"

"Of course." With a half-smile, Rajesh disappeared into his room.

Tristan followed Amber into her room, wondering what she had thought of their visit to the globe. More than anything he had seen thus far, their casual use of disasters had unsettled him. It was not just one headmaster who was required to sacrifice his morals; no, every student here was tainted by the globe's evil work, and he wondered how they justified it to themselves.

Maybe they didn't realize the full implications of what they did. If they had never been anywhere outside of this ice cave, the greater world would seem like an abstract concept, something irrelevant to their lives and work here.

"You okay?" Amber asked.

Tristan shook his head to clear it. "What?"

"You had a funny look on your face..."

"Sorry. I was just thinking about—about that globe. It's insane, isn't it?"

Amber nodded dully. "They will start asking us to use it soon. You saw how frightened I was last year. I'm not sure I can do it."

"You can always pretend you can't figure out how to do it right," Tristan said. "I'm sure you can 'accidentally' send the disasters off in the wrong direction so no one gets hurt."

"How long will they believe that?" she asked. "And how much longer before they launch the real attack?"

Tristan sighed. "Not much longer, I bet. I'll ask Stefan tomorrow."

Sitting cross-legged on the floor with his back against her bed, he pulled out a workbook with a set of

homework problems they'd been given the day before. He had glanced at them briefly the previous night but, too tired to concentrate, had not given them much thought. Now he realized that the problems referred to the numbers of marbles of each variety involved in disasters of all magnitudes. A complex series of calculations was necessary for each—there was a separate equation for each type of disaster based on force, duration, and range desired.

“My god, this looks awful,” Tristan said, squinting at the first equation. “Why didn’t I pay better attention in Algebra?” It struck him that the disasters they had seen in the past hour had not been a display of haphazard destruction—they had been carefully calculated and planned down to the last marble.

Opening her own workbook, Amber wrinkled her nose at the problems. “I’ve never done a proper math class in my life. I think we might need private tutoring.”

Tristan laughed. “With who? Ilana?”

* * *

Tristan had expected to wait until the next day before he saw Stefan, but after dinner that evening, he and the rest of the First Division were ushered out of the cafeteria and down a long staircase with metal steps embedded in the ice for extra traction. The lights dimmed as they went, until the students each grabbed a torch from its bracket and used for the final descent. Somewhere along the way—Tristan didn’t notice where, since he had been focused on maintaining his footing on the slick stairway—the ice transitioned to rough grey bedrock, inlaid here and there with veins of black.

Though Tristan hadn’t looked at his schedule before dinner, he had a feeling he knew exactly what they were doing. They were harvesting earth magic.

At long last, the stairwell ended in an unfinished hallway that was wider in some places and narrower in others. He followed the rest of the class in transferring his torch to a new sconce on this wall, where the flames lit the chamber with a shifting orange radiance.

As the six other students passed around a bucket of what looked like pickaxes, Stefan beckoned Tristan and Amber over. “We’re aiming for crystalline structures here. Ordinary stone won’t hold any magic. You’ll notice the picks are hollow—once you’ve cracked a stone, hold the pick in place so the vapor floods right in. Then you can cap it off and trade for a new pickaxe.”

“Why can’t you just catch the vapor in a jar, like usual?” Tristan asked.

Stefan gave Tristan a stern look. “Earth magic is very hard to see, as it produces almost no light of its own. Now get to work.”

It took a long time before Tristan began recognizing the crystals within the veins of black rock, some of which were smaller than the head of a pin, and longer still to break open his first faceted stone. When he did, he couldn’t tell if anything had come out of the rock, so he tried to peer into the hollow pick.

“Cap it off, you idiot!” Stefan cried. “You will lose it that way!”

Tristan fumbled in his pocket for the cap, which he shoved onto the end of the pick. He still couldn’t tell whether anything was inside the hollow chamber, but from Stefan’s reaction, he guessed this form of magic was rare and precious.

Two hours later, they packed up their gear and headed back up the endless staircase, sweaty and covered in dust. With a pang, Tristan imagined how ecstatic Delair would have been to learn all of this. Returning their torches to the wall, they tromped off to the showers in a silent pack. To Tristan’s surprise, one of the boys started humming in the next stall over.

* * *

The following morning, as the First Division started across the ice towards their water magic-harvesting spot, a sheen of mist swirling about their ankles, Tristan caught up with Stefan and fell into pace beside the teacher.

“Hey, um...” He realized he didn’t know how to address these teachers—did they insist on formality, or prefer that students addressed them by their first names? When Stefan did not so much as glance in Tristan’s

direction, he plowed on. “I was just wondering—why did you attack Haiti and Chile? Why not somewhere more important? New York City, or something.”

Stefan glanced sideways at Tristan. “Do you really want to know?”

“Yeah.”

“Fine, then.” Eyes fixed on a far-off smudge wreathed in mist, Stefan said, “We’re not ready to attack anywhere obvious yet. That’s all there is to it. It’s why we were so desperate to recruit new students, and why we need you and Amber.

“Haiti was our first large-scale disaster, so we contained it on an island just in case it caused more damage than we expected. Unlike your former school, we don’t have an endless supply of marbles, so we wanted to target somewhere where our work would have a major impact.

“Well, it worked. The Haitian earthquake was more successful than we’d dreamed, so we decided to try something on a mainland continent. Chile was perfect, cut off from the rest of South America by the Andes so we could study it in isolation, and this time we managed to deal a serious blow to a country accustomed to natural disasters. We won’t be ready to attack any major population centers for another couple years; when we attack London, Beijing, and New York City, we don’t want them to get the chance to rebuild. We have to harvest enough power to target hundreds of cities throughout the world in one great string of disasters. If we don’t, plenty of those countries are rich enough to recover and carry on. Which would defeat the purpose of what we’re doing.”

“Which is...wiping out all humanity so the earth gets a chance to recover?” Tristan said, repeating what Ilana had told them.

“Precisely. Though we intend to preserve a few human lives so we can start over again.”

Fighting to keep his face blank, Tristan nodded. It sounded like Ilana was trying to enact some Noah’s Ark scenario, where a few “chosen ones” survived while the rest drowned in the flood. How did she expect that to work? Whoever she selected to survive would be no kinder or more intelligent than the billions she planned to sacrifice in the process.

“It’s funny,” Rajesh said quietly from Tristan’s left.

He jumped. “What?”

“All of Ilana’s ideas are very reasonable, when you think about it. She’s a firm believer in deep ecology, which is a great idea in principle.”

“What’s that?” Tristan asked.

“You’ll hear *all* about it once we’re done harvesting today,” Rajesh said drily. “But the problem is, Ilana’s a psychopath. Maybe someone could put her ideas into play and do it well, but not her.”

“And the rest of the teachers?” Tristan whispered.

“My god, they practically *worship* her.”

Tristan glanced back to see whether Amber had heard any of this, but she was trailing far behind the group. He assumed she was wary of being seen spending too much time with him.

They arrived at the stream for harvesting just then, which meant everyone had to huddle too close together for any conversations to continue undetected. Briefly Tristan wondered if any of the other students used their long daily walk as an opportunity to talk without being overheard. He expected they got tired of the monotony of the ice sheet, the never-ending glare of sun against snow. Right now, though, the entire landscape looked ethereal, bathed in rising swirls of mist.

An hour and a half later, after the haze had lifted and the ice gleamed in the morning sunlight, they returned to the school for something that was labeled on Tristan’s schedule as “Seminar.” He had no idea what that was about, though after what Rajesh had said, he was growing curious.

The more he learned about Ilana’s school, the more conflicted he became. The lines between right and wrong were blurring more with every day—what the Underground Academy did made sense because it sought to maintain a fragile sort of balance between civilization and nature, yet it was wrong because no humans should be allowed to decide who lived and who died. And Ilana’s mission seemed reasonable as well, because even Tristan could appreciate that humans had done so much damage it would take an apocalypse to stop them, but the way Ilana killed with such precision and apathy chilled him to his core.

Stefan led them down a corridor on the right-hand side of the labyrinth, finally stopping at an enormous

circular room with three tiers of benches ringing the center. Surprisingly, the room wasn't empty—Ilana waited on the innermost bench, a tall black teacher across the room from her, the dozen-odd students in his division perched on benches behind him.

Apparently this was a full-school seminar.

As Tristan's division filed into benches directly to Ilana's left, other students followed, taking their seats in a precise, orderly manner. The only sound came from the shuffling of footsteps, and as soon as everyone was seated, silence filled the room.

"Good morning," Ilana said. "Thank you for joining me today. On behalf of our two new students, I thought we might return to the basics and remind ourselves why we're all here."

Tristan's eyes flickered nervously to Amber, who sat two rows ahead of him. Though Ilana was facing away from Tristan, he imagined she spoke directly to him. "What are the five principles on which this institute was founded?"

Ilana pointed at Anton, the bearded pilot, who responded as though reciting from memory, "All life is inherently valuable—humans no more than anything else—and humanity is well on its way to destroying most of that life."

Ilana pointed to another teacher. "Unless something drastic happens, we're about to tip the earth past a point of no return. Our planet is quickly becoming too hot, too dry, and too extreme to sustain a wide diversity of life."

A third teacher: "Human overpopulation is more or less responsible for every issue facing us today."

Stefan was next. "We've got a responsibility to fix this. And us more than most, since we have the power to make a difference."

Ilana added the fifth and final principle. "We cannot do anything, within the bounds of today's political and economic spheres, that will make a difference. It's all too little, too late. The only *true* way to fix things is to drastically reduce the human population." She turned and gave Tristan and Amber a calculating look. "We're not the only ones who support this idea, you know. Others—scientists and philosophers and environmentalists—have come to the same conclusion. Some believe, as we do, that a complete collapse of the industrial world is necessary to allow regrowth."

Turning back to the center of the circle, she said, "What detrimental processes are in place that will not end until we solve our population crisis?"

This time, she began pointing at students for answers.

"Desertification."

"Acidification of the ocean."

"Accumulation of waste."

"Over-use of water, leading to drained aquifers."

"Global warming."

It went on like this, questions being answered by students throughout the room, for the rest of the hour. The worst thing was that a small part of Tristan agreed with Ilana. Her ideals were sound; it was just her method of achieving them that was despicable. He tried not to dwell on this, instead paying attention to the students who spoke. He had never spent time with anyone outside of the First Division before, and he was surprised to find that while the older students had accents from a hundred different places, anyone under the age of about twelve had a vague, lilting accent that wasn't quite European nor quite American.

When the hour was up, Ilana and her fellow teachers passed around a set of books and instructed the students to spend the next hour quietly reading Chapter 8. Tristan opened his book to the right page and pretended to read, though he was thinking hard. Did Ilana actually believe in everything she claimed to uphold? If she was really that concerned for the environment, Tristan would have thought she'd be running some hippie commune that lived off the earth while gathering magic on the side.

Besides, if all lives were equal, why did six billion humans deserve to die?

Tristan had a funny feeling Ilana was just using this philosophy—deep ecology, or whatever Rajesh had called it earlier—to push her own aims. If he wasn't mistaken, she was more interested in getting revenge on Drakewell than on working towards a better earth.

He couldn't wait to talk to Amber and see what she had thought about the seminar. With their teachers

supervising every minute of the day, he had to wait until the evening, when his division was released for one of its rare blocks of free time.

But on his way to dinner, someone grabbed his wrist and dragged him into a side room.

Tristan nearly shouted in alarm; then he remembered this school was filled with his enemies, none of whom would be disposed to help him.

The man who had grabbed him was burly, his neck covered in tattoos.

“I don’t trust you, Tristan Fairholm,” he spat, tightening his grip on Tristan’s wrist. “Something about you smells... *funny*. You can bet I’ll be keeping a close eye on you. One step out of line, and—”

He wrenched Tristan’s wrist backwards. Tristan gasped in pain, terrified of the hungry look in the man’s eyes.

“Run along, now. And be a good boy.”

When the man released his wrist, Tristan fled, breaking into a run when he reached the main corridor. He thought he could hear laughter chasing him along.

Chapter 6: The Storming of the Lair

All through dinner, heart still thudding too fast, Tristan kept glancing over his shoulder to see if the tattooed man had followed him. The man did not join the others, though. Come to think of it, Tristan couldn't remember ever having seen him before.

After dinner, most of their division headed to a room filled with cushioned armchairs and tables, where they pulled out their homework and began working in silence. Blake and Ricardo started a game of ping-pong on the dented table at the back, throwing taunts and insults as they whacked the ball back and forth. They were both very good.

Amber was the last to poke her head into the room, eyebrows raised in surprise. She made for the corner where Tristan sat, dazedly watching Blake and Ricardo.

"I did not expect this," Amber said, settling into a deep armchair beside Tristan. "Ping-pong? And free time?"

Tristan nodded. "Hey, Amber. Have you ever seen a big, scary guy with tattoos here?"

"No. Why?"

In a low voice, he recounted the man's threat.

Amber shivered. "What do you think he's doing here?"

"Nothing good. If I'd seen him in a city, I would've run as fast as I could in the opposite direction." He slumped back in his chair. "What did you think about that seminar?"

Amber was still watching Blake and Ricardo out of the corner of her eye, as though hypnotized. "I think there are a lot of very good people who believe the same things. But I think Ilana is not one of them. Nor are her teachers."

"Stefan doesn't seem too bad," Tristan said, though he agreed with her.

"Stefan was not brainwashed, not raised in this place. He came here of his own volition. I think he is much worse than he appears."

Tristan frowned. "What about the others, then? Is Rajesh just pretending he doesn't like Ilana so he can gain our trust? Is he going to betray us, too?" Rajesh was sitting at the opposite end of the room, smiling lopsidedly as he said something to Mei Ling, who regarded him in stoic silence.

"I don't think so," Amber said after a pause. She had torn her eyes from the ping-pong players at last. "There must be a reason he has turned on Ilana."

"Yeah." Tristan dug out a workbook, wondering if there was an unspoken assumption that he ought to be doing homework in his free time.

"Only three more days," Amber whispered. "What should we do?"

"Maybe we should just wait until next month," Tristan said. "I have no idea how we're supposed to do this."

Amber folded her arms. "Me neither. Oh, I wish I could go wandering again. I feel so trapped here. I'm afraid my power will just fade away if I stay here too long. I might forget how to use it."

"I'm sure you won't," Tristan said. "But I don't like it any better than you do."

Two hours later, the First Division filed off to bed in a tight group, conversations dying as soon as they left the room. Tristan went to bed with his head stuffed full of questions—who was the tattooed man? And how on earth would they persuade Ilana to let them attack the Lair in three days?

He lay awake for hours, trying desperately to think of excuses for attacking the Lair, but none occurred to him. Could he tell Ilana that Drakewell would be putting up a new barrier soon, so they'd have to do something before then?

No, because then she'd accuse him of withholding information. Could he just go to her and ask outright for permission to attack the Lair?

No, that would sound suspicious. She would know something was up.

Tristan slept badly that night, and dreamed that he was trying to fly a small plane through the barrier so he could bomb the Lair. Every time he approached, the plane just bounced off the barrier, while Drakewell stood in the meadow below and laughed at him.

* * *

He had just fallen into a proper, deep sleep when someone rapped on his door.

“Damn you!” Tristan yelled through his blankets.

According to his weekly schedule, this was Sunday morning, but it certainly didn’t feel like the weekend. Back at the academy, Sundays had meant a leisurely brunch with pancakes or French toast or cinnamon rolls, and a bout of enjoyable procrastination before Tristan and most of the other students tackled the homework they had put off.

Here, the weekend schedule was identical to the weekday schedule. Worse still, Tristan realized they were rostered for a toilet-cleaning session that afternoon. On a Sunday. *Ugh.*

Well, he supposed it would be better than getting locked in that cell again. And less painful than their strength training sessions.

Tristan got his chance to speak with Ilana sooner than he expected. They had a two-hour globe session just after lunch, and this time she took over the class, Stefan sitting at the back and taking notes.

Once again, Tristan and Amber were not allowed anywhere near the globe, though Ilana did ask them several questions. Tristan didn’t know the answer to a single one. As Stefan made a note on his clipboard following Tristan’s third incorrect guess, it struck Tristan for the first time just how badly prepared the academy would be if anything went wrong. There were only eight professors, if you counted Quinsley, and most of them had never worked the globe before. If something happened to Drakewell or Natasha, the Lair would be left crippled. The other professors would do their best, but their knowledge of the globe was nothing compared to that of every student and teacher under Ilana’s instruction.

Only a few months ago, Tristan had been revolted at the very idea of touching the globe. If his friends were to learn how to cause disasters, they would be forced to sacrifice some part of their humanity.

Was it worth it, in the name of protecting the Lair?

As the students were packing up their bags and leaving the globe behind, Tristan caught Ilana’s eye. She beckoned him over with a long-nailed finger.

“How are you settling in?” Her smile was dangerous.

“Fine,” he said. “This is all so interesting. We didn’t learn any of those calculations at the Underground Academy—how many marbles it takes for a certain disaster, or anything.”

“That’s because they assume—to their detriment—that their marble supply is infinite,” Ilana said with satisfaction. “They will run out of air and water in a few years, I guarantee it. Oh, if only we could have a share of their remaining air magic.”

“You’re going to destroy the academy someday, aren’t you?” Tristan asked.

Ilana gave him a sharp look. “That’s a rather grave assumption.”

He tried not to betray his nerves. “Well, what if we could steal their hoard of magic before the place was wrecked?”

“And what makes you think we wouldn’t rather move into those luxurious quarters once the pests are gone?”

Crap. He shouldn’t have said anything. “Never mind. Um...who was that man with tattoos all over his neck?”

Looking surprised, Ilana said, “That’s Mordechai. He has a very special job here.”

“He said he doesn’t trust me,” Tristan said, his pulse quickening. “Why not? I’d do anything to convince you we deserved your trust.”

“Mordechai will be rather harder to convince than me,” Ilana said drily. “But if you’re ready, I want you and Amber to plan an attack on your beloved Lair. Would you agree to that?”

“Of course,” Tristan said quickly. “But—I need to practice the equations a bit more first. Can we have a couple days to practice?”

“Next week, then,” Ilana said with a satisfied smile.

“We’ll probably be ready by Tuesday, if you want,” he said.

“Very good. I’ll speak with Stefan. Now, isn’t there somewhere you’re meant to be?”

“Cleaning stupid toilets,” Tristan muttered under his breath.

Smiling smugly, Ilana swept away, leaving Tristan trying to catch his breath as his heart rate slowed.

He hated talking to Ilana. He could never tell what she was thinking.

Though Tristan was late arriving at the boys’ toilets, he received nothing more than a frown from Stefan.

“The last four cubicles,” he said, handing Tristan a rag and a spray bottle. “I want the floor clean enough that I could eat dinner off it.”

As Tristan got to his knees and began scrubbing the tiles in the first cubicle, he contemplated the fact that life here was so devoid of happiness that there was no need for punishments. Just existing was punishment enough.

* * *

“I’ve done it,” he told Amber triumphantly that night, following her into her bedroom. “Ilana’s going to have us attack the Lair on Tuesday.”

She smiled. “I thought that might have been what kept you. Now, how are we going to do this?”

“If you figure out where the hole in the enchantment is, I can send the disaster,” Tristan said. “We’re going to do another ice storm, right?”

Amber nodded vaguely. “Do you think we could ‘accidentally’ use up more marbles than we should?”

“It’s dangerous,” Tristan said, “but it might be our only chance to do something like that. Before long we’ll be calculating all the exact details, and no one will believe us if we say we screwed up.” The problem was, none of this helped with their ultimate goal of destroying Ilana’s globe. Yes, they would hopefully gain her full confidence before long, but...then what? How could they get access to the globe outside of class?

The only ideas that came to him were digging through the walls to the globe—which, given the fact that he still got turned around on his way to the cafeteria, had exactly zero chance of succeeding—or creating a diversion that would send everyone in the room running off while he and Amber remained behind. Their teachers weren’t that stupid, though. They would never leave either of them in the globe room unsupervised.

“Imagine if we’d been spies at the academy,” he said wryly. “We had so many chances to do all sorts of damage! I was sick of those night shifts in the Map Room. If only this were that easy.”

Amber nodded solemnly. “It does seem impossible, doesn’t it? I wish Drakewell had given us a better idea of what to expect. Or sent us a bit of help.”

“What, like a letter with instructions? That would go down really well with Ilana.”

Amber laughed, though without much humor. “I just feel so isolated here. We can’t trust anyone, not even Rajesh, and by ourselves we are so weak. I wish I could use my powers properly up here. I feel almost crippled without them.”

“I know what you mean,” Tristan said. He reached for her hand, feeling hollow inside. “I felt that way last summer. I’m not as good at sensing things as you are, but...there weren’t any auras at my mom’s house, not that I could see, and everything was just so bleak and empty. I missed it so much that I started looking for any scrap of nature I could find.”

“Why did you go home, then?”

Tristan shrugged. “I felt like I owed it to my mom. But I think she’ll be okay now. She’s gotten back with my dad, and I think they might work things out.” He hung his head. “It must’ve been hard for them, losing two sons at the same time.”

Amber squeezed his hand, though she seemed at a loss for words. After a moment, Tristan shook his head and banished the memories. “So. I’m assuming it’s just the longhouses that are going to be destroyed when we send the ice storm? Or do we have to smash the greenhouse, too?”

“Everything, if we want to be trusted,” Amber said. “But they will have to believe us. We cannot see past that barrier on their map, remember?”

“Right.” This was going to be very tricky.

* * *

Tuesday came far too quickly. Tristan still wasn't ready for this, not at all, and was almost certain he'd make a fool of himself in front of the class.

Ilana pulled Tristan and Amber aside at the end of dinner to fill them in.

“I know you won't be fully destroying the Lair. There are too many barriers in place for that, and we simply don't have enough power to get through them. But you somehow know a way to attack through the outer enchantments?”

Amber didn't meet Ilana's eyes. “Yes. There is a hole in the barrier, a piece we could not find when we were fixing it last year. I think I can get through that, if I manage to find it.”

“Could you bring the barrier down again?” Ilana asked swiftly. “I believe it was down for several months the last time we shattered it.”

“I don't know,” Amber said. “But I will try.”

“Very well. It will be an earthquake that destroys that Lair in the end, but for now, we don't have enough power for the magnitude we'll need. So today you will burn down every building in that meadow, and follow it by flooding the school.”

Tristan swallowed. This was going to be much harder than the ice storm they'd planned. “Can we look for that weak spot, then? Before class?”

“Of course.” Signaling to Stefan, Ilana led them briskly down the corridor of ice to the globe room.

“How did you manage to build this?” Tristan asked as he stopped before the roughly-hewn globe. “Drakewell couldn't have done it.”

“I know that,” Ilana said with satisfaction. “You know, Europe had a globe before North America did, though it's long since been destroyed. China had one before it, and Egypt before that. But we dug up the records our European magicians had left, and followed the same method they used. Their globe was constructed in Italy during the Renaissance, but the magicians who inherited it were divided in a political tussle that eventually destroyed them. The survivors fled to North America.”

“Are there any magicians left in Europe?”

“Not that I'm aware of,” Ilana said. “We've gone to great lengths trying to track down anyone who was associated with the old magicians' guild, but it seems most of them died or left the continent without passing down their knowledge. Now, how do you intend to find this weakness in the barrier?”

Tristan blinked and returned his attention to the globe. To his right, Amber affixed the disc to a blank section of Canada, which quickly resolved into the mountains surrounding the Underground Academy. Standing beside the table, she took the glass conduit from Ilana and studied the empty meadow.

“This would be so much easier with a bit of air magic,” she whispered. With a slow, graceful gesture Tristan didn't recognize, she conjured up a layer of fog that hung low over the valley. While Ilana's attention was focused on the swirling fog, Amber reached in her pocket and stealthily slipped a silver air marble into the glass conduit. Tristan stared at the glass quill in disbelief. She must have harvested that on her own.

With the help of the air magic, Amber sent a breeze that pressed the fog lower into the valley, forcing it as close to the dome as it could go. Most of the fog settled around the dome, not penetrating the barrier, but in one corner it began swirling like bathwater down a drain.

“That's the gap,” Amber said, pointing at the funnel. “If we work through that, we should be able to attack the lair directly.”

Ilana's eyes widened. “Very well done, Amber. Just incredible.” Tristan didn't like the greed lurking behind her amazement.

Flushing, Amber dropped her hands. With a glance at the conduit, Tristan saw that the silver marble had vanished. Its power was exhausted.

“And now, should we wait for the rest of the class to join us before the main show?”

Tristan nodded, studying the lingering cloud of mist. If he guessed correctly, the hole in the barrier sat directly

above the longhouse where Gracewright kept her indoor garden. That would be the first to go, unfortunately; he hoped she'd had the foresight to remove her precious plants before joining the others in the forest. Though it was evening here, it would be sometime around midmorning at the academy. He prayed that everyone had enough time to leave.

At least the flood wouldn't be able to get past the stairwell. Would it?

"Rain should go through the barrier, right?" Tristan said.

"Unless your headmaster has put up a new barrier, then yes, it should," Ilana said.

"Why didn't the mist go through, then?"

Ilana's expression darkened. "It *is* that new barrier. You will have to be very creative if you want this to work."

Stefan arrived just then, the rest of their division trailing behind, and Amber took advantage of the momentary distraction to whisper, "Rain should go through. The mist would have counted as a large entity to that new barrier, so it did not get past. But rain will register as many small entities, small enough to pass through."

"Damn. How'd you come up with that?" Tristan asked under his breath.

Amber reddened. "It wasn't supposed to be like that. It should have been a full weatherproof barrier. But I couldn't figure out how to do it."

"Well, good thing you couldn't." Again Tristan marveled at the irony—he was suddenly *grateful* for the weak barrier around the Lair, because he would do anything to bring it down. Without Drakewell and Natasha, who would believe them when they said they were trying to help the academy? He was having a hard time believing it himself.

Once Stefan and the six other students were standing in a half-circle around the table, Ilana said, "Tristan and Amber are going to demonstrate a weakness in the enemy's dome. They will be flooding and burning down various buildings above the Lair, and all of this without being able to see the structures. Tristan, would you like to explain how you're planning to accomplish this?"

"There's a hole in the barrier," Tristan said. "Right where that mist is swirling." He pointed to the gap. "The botany longhouse is right under that, I think, and just a bit above it is the greenhouse. Then there's two empty longhouses to the right, and the third one is the entrance to the Lair. I'm—" He broke off, because he wasn't at all sure how he was meant to start a fire without seeing what he was burning. "I guess I'm going to reach that quill through the hole in the enchantment, and start the fire that way?"

He looked at Ilana for confirmation, and she gave him a sharp nod.

Stepping closer to the table, Tristan cleared his throat and aimed the quill for the swirling patch of mist. He had to act quickly, because some of the mist was beginning to drift away. The jagged motion that summoned up a fire was all too familiar to him after their attack on Whitney the previous year, and with his nerves jangling, he channeled magic into the quill before he even tried.

Holding the quill between his thumb and forefinger, he made a careful zigzagging line that trailed from the Lair's entrance down over the next two buildings to finish at Gracewright's longhouse. When the quill collided with something above the table that he couldn't see, he knew with grim certainty that his spell had worked.

At last he lifted the conduit away, severing the flow of magic. The class waited in silence for several minutes; eventually a wisp of translucent smoke appeared in midair and began to drift up from the top of the dome. Three other columns of smoke joined it—his spell had worked. All four buildings were aflame.

And with all of the professors away, no one would be able to put out the fires.

He wondered darkly how many of them would guess he was involved after today. After all, he did have a rather bad streak of fires to his name.

"And now, Amber, are you ready to begin the flooding rains?"

"Uh...shouldn't we wait until the fires are done burning everything down?" Tristan asked. He had hoped to do this all himself, to save Amber from the crippling guilt he knew she would face.

Ilana frowned. "Your professors will notice very quickly that something is wrong. And if they realize we are behind the rains, they'll blow the clouds in the opposite direction. You know we don't have control over air magic, Tristan. We can't do anything against a stiff wind."

"Oh." Wishing the rest of the class would go away, Tristan handed the conduit to Amber, who took it with

a blank expression. Remembering the way she had shut down completely after accidentally killing two magicians the previous year, he prayed that nothing unusual would happen this time around. If she overdid the spell and killed someone from the academy, she might just snap.

Eyeing the dome, Amber lifted the glass quill and slowly began drawing forth a raincloud. A patch of the cloud hung low enough that it showed up as a new layer of fog lingering above the table, though the top was cut cleanly off where the globe's range ended. As the rain began to fall, the entire valley vanished beneath a haze of water. The rainstorm was trapped between the ring of mountains, which concentrated the deluge and prevented the clouds from blowing away.

"They'll know this was us," Ilana said with a cold smile. "They won't underestimate us again."

"But you're not worried they might guard against our earthquake?" Stefan asked.

"They can't," Ilana said. "I'm positive of it. There isn't any piece of magic in existence that can ward against earthquakes. You would have to construct a barrier through the earth itself to accomplish that."

Stefan grinned. "Beauty."

"It will be, won't it," Ilana said. "Now, how is this flooding going?"

Though it was hard to see through the curtain of rain, Tristan thought he could make out a river gushing off the side of one ridge. If enough water continued to fall, the entire meadow surrounding the Lair could be swamped. Whether or not the Lair itself was harmed, his friends might be unable to make it back through the entrance for several more days.

Amber's face remained carefully blank, yet Tristan thought she was doing her best to burn through Ilana's store of water magic. As he watched, the rain seemed to fall heavier still, the rain clouds expanding until even the peaks of the nearby mountains were trapped in the storm.

At last Ilana said, "That will be enough."

As if coming out of a trance, Amber blinked and lowered the conduit. The rain lessened enough for Tristan to see just how much the valley was flooding—waterfalls cascaded down every ridge and pooled in the valley, and the peaceful brook just west of the meadow had become a swollen torrent. Now that the storm was no longer fueled by magic, it would taper off on its own.

"Very well done," Ilana said, sounding impressed in spite of herself. "You could have been a bit more conservative with your use of magic, but perhaps it wouldn't have been so effective. Now, can someone tell me the volume of water that has accumulated in this valley?"

They spent the rest of the lesson calculating rough volumes of rainwater based on the speed of rainfall and the estimated volume of the rivers that had formed off the hillsides. Tristan couldn't follow most of it; his main impression was that any breach in the Lair would be very badly flooded by now.

It was eight o'clock by the time Ilana released their division. On the way back up to their bedrooms, Rajesh fell into line beside Tristan and muttered, "You're not scared of killing everyone at your former school?" He looked a bit worried.

"No one's died today," Tristan whispered. "We just caused a bit of havoc."

Rajesh gave him a fleeting smile. "I think you've finally convinced Ilana. Well done." Almost immediately his smile was replaced by a brooding expression. "What'd you think of the seminar?"

"Does Ilana really believe all that stuff she was talking about? Because it almost made sense."

Rajesh snorted. "No way. Like I said, she's a psychopath." He dropped his voice further still. "Don't let Stefan hear you, though. He's in love with her. Half the teachers are."

When they reached their bedrooms, Amber drifted off to bed without a word. After his shower, Tristan knocked tentatively on her door and, when she didn't answer, pushed it softly open. He didn't want to disturb her if she was asleep.

But Amber sat hunched against the head of her bed, digging flakes of ice from the wall with her fingernail. She had already chipped away a hole the size of her fist.

"Are you okay?" Tristan asked, already knowing the answer.

"That rainstorm wasn't supposed to be so big," she whispered.

Tristan sat at the end of her bed and put a tentative hand on her knee. "Well, at least you burned through a ton of their marbles. I don't think Ilana can blame you for it, either."

She scratched at the wall more determinedly than ever. “I don’t think they had time to repair that breach in the tunnels. The entire bottom half of the Lair could be flooded right now.”

That was bad. Tristan tried to think of something reassuring to say, but he couldn’t come up with anything short of lying. “Are you sure it’s flooded?”

“I think so. They put a Prasadimum over the gap, but those don’t guard against water. The entrance to the Lair will be fine, since it has a full barrier of some sort, but the rest will be a mess.”

“Well, at least they were outside,” Tristan said. “No one’s been hurt.”

Amber nodded slowly. “And Ilana trusts us now. How can we destroy her globe?”

Tristan glanced at the hole Amber was still chipping away at. “It’s so well-fortified that we can’t get in there alone. So we either have to dig through the walls or cause a diversion. I think we should try to map this place out. Then we’ll know if it’s even possible to dig through.”

“Okay.” Still Amber didn’t meet Tristan’s eyes. He wished he could have sent both disasters in her stead, to save her from such crushing regret. At least if he had messed up, he would have known he couldn’t do any better. But Amber knew so much about magic that she felt fully responsible for anything she brought about.

Too wound-up to distract Amber from her misery, Tristan went to bed soon after that, wondering if he dared approach any of the other students about a map of the school.

But the right moment never came.

Chapter 7: Lost Magic

Five days after the flood, Tristan was harvesting water magic up on the ice sheet along with the rest of the First Division when the low hum of an engine sounded in the distance.

Stefan dropped his jar and jumped away from the stream, eyes on the overcast sky.

Seconds later, a small plane flew over the ice sheet, dropping lower as it approached the class.

“Go,” Stefan said dazedly. “Run!”

Abandoning their jars and wheelbarrow beside the stream, the entire class took off in a dead run for the entrance to the school. Their strength training lessons had clearly paid off, because Tristan was hardly winded as he pounded across the ice close on Ricardo’s heels.

It took ten minutes to reach the safety of the tunnels, and in that time the plane continued to circle, occasionally disappearing into the clouds for a moment before turning and dropping lower still. Tristan clutched a stitch in his side as he ran, glancing back at the plane whenever he dared. Just above the trapdoor, Stefan paused and said, “They’ll see our entrance.”

Blake grabbed the handle and yanked the trapdoor open. “They’ll figure it out anyway.” He jumped into the tunnel, not bothering with the ladder, and the others hastily followed. As soon as Tristan was safely inside, he dragged the trapdoor closed above him and locked the bolt.

Still running, Stefan took off for the globe room, the rest of the class following.

“Someone—get Ilana,” he panted.

Mei Ling slowed and turned down an unfamiliar corridor; an instant later she was out of sight.

Inside the globe room, Stefan whirled the globe around to face Greenland. When he attached the disc to the right patch of ice, the seven remaining students clustered around the table.

“Can you see it?” Stefan asked.

Still breathing hard, Tristan scanned the sky for any sign of an airplane.

“Nothing, sir,” Ricardo said.

Stefan cursed loudly. “They’ve found us. They’ve bloody well found us!”

“That wasn’t the plane from the academy,” Tristan said. “Drakewell’s plane doesn’t have any company logo. That one said ‘Air Zafari’ or something on it.”

Stefan’s shoulders sagged in relief. “Then we may be lucky this time.”

Ilana kicked open the door just then, a tiny red-headed girl in her arms and Mei Ling close on her heels.

“What is this nonsense?” she snapped. “Mei Ling tells me you were *seen*. By a small airplane.”

“We were,” Stefan said darkly.

“And? How did you deal with the threat?”

“We hurried inside,” Stefan said. “They looked as though they were about to land. I thought the plane might belong to the Underground Academy.”

“You idiot!” Ilana snarled.

The girl in her arms, who couldn’t have been older than three, began to cry softly.

Ilana bounced the girl as she yelled, “Why didn’t you throw a spell at the plane? You could have brought it down and saved us all from this mess. Anton’s division wrecked *two* planes last year. His quick thinking kept any planes from flying in this area for fourteen months straight. But you’ve ruined everything.”

“Maybe they just thought we were natives,” Ricardo said.

Ilana gave him a look that said she was not in the mood for jokes. “Come with me, Division One. You will be reassigned.”

Tristan didn't know what that meant, but Stefan blanched.

"Everyone must stay underground until I say otherwise," she continued. "If Rowan Drakewell is half as intelligent as I remember, he will hear about this."

"Do we have a barrier up around this school?" Tristan asked Stefan as Ilana hurried the class back up the corridor.

"No," he said grimly. "And your magician friends are about to figure that out. We aren't safe here."

"Could we put something up?"

Stefan shook his head. "The barrier at your school was erected hundreds of years ago. No one remembers how."

At a cold look from Ilana, he stopped talking. For the first time, Tristan realized how young Stefan was—no older than twenty-five. He looked very much like a reprimanded student as he followed Ilana down the tunnel to the cafeteria.

Though it was still mid-morning, two other divisions had already assembled in the cafeteria, sitting in silence as they awaited instruction. Ilana left Tristan's division there and led Stefan away, her face lined with anger.

Tristan didn't see Stefan again for weeks.

The rest of the school had assembled by the time Ilana returned, the red-headed girl no longer in her arms.

One of the teachers—a short, curly-haired woman—had a laptop open at the teachers' table, and several other teachers were looking over her shoulder, breaking the usual air of tight discipline that prevailed in the cafeteria.

"Nothing yet," the short woman said. "Wait—there. 'Colony of eccentrics spotted on Greenland ice sheet.'"

Ilana pulled a chair up beside the woman and yanked the laptop closer. "Read it, Amelia."

The curly-haired woman cleared her throat. "On a routine flightseeing tour up to Tasiilaq, Air Zafari captain Henrik Rasmussen spotted a group of nine people on the ice cap. The group fled as the plane approached, disappearing underground through a hole in the ice. The group was not dressed in traditional Inuit garb, and is therefore suspected to be part of an off-grid settlement recently suspected of taking up residence on the ice cap. There are no legal records of a non-native population establishing itself on the ice cap, and further investigations will take place to confirm the sighting."

"There's even a photo," Ilana said through her teeth. "A *photo*. Stefan is a complete imbecile. He's ruined everything." She turned the laptop to show the rest of the students, most of whom had abandoned their usual seats and clustered around the teachers' table. Sure enough, there was a blurry snapshot of the ice sheet with nine figures sprinting toward the edge of the frame. Beside Tristan, Ricardo groaned. Tristan's spine tingled with excitement. Did this mean Drakewell had found them? Was the academy going to step in and help?

"We can just stay underground, though, can't we?" Blake asked, huge hands fisted on the table in front of him. "The media will get bored if they don't see anything else."

"It's not the *media* we're worried about, idiot boy. It's Rowan Drakewell. He'll know exactly what that report means. And we don't have any barrier whatsoever around this place. We've lost that knowledge." She looked sharply at Amber. "How did your school put up a new barrier? Who figured it out?"

Amber dropped her eyes, looking terrified. "W-we did it together. The entire school channeled their power into the f-frame. But we used the magic of the forest to feed the barrier. It would not work here."

Ilana swore. "Rowan is trying to flush us out of our hole. And he's succeeded. He really has. We can't stay here and wait to be attacked. It would put us in the same situation your school was in last year. The only question is, where can we go?"

Every eye was locked on Ilana now. Tristan realized with a start that some of these students had been living in Ilana's ice cave since they were babies; their only knowledge of the outside world lay in their experiences with the globe. And setting foot on foreign soils was very different from sending disasters at the roughly-hewn countries on the globe. He could only imagine what a shock that would be.

"Couldn't we just hide in a city?" he asked before he could stop himself. "No one would be able to find us with so many auras around."

"We can't harvest magic in a city," Ilana snapped. "You should know that by now."

Tristan flushed.

“Any other suggestions? Tristan, Amber, we’re counting on you. Where is the place your professors would least expect to find us? We could always head back to Canada, but I have a feeling they will be watching that region very closely.”

He had no idea. “Somewhere in the southern hemisphere, probably,” he said slowly. “They haven’t even finished fixing their maps for most of those countries. You should thank Merridy—she’s the one who wrecked those tables in the first place.” He felt a sudden pang as he remembered that Alldusk still didn’t know Merridy was dead.

When Ilana’s eyes widened in triumph, he immediately regretted his words. He had just ensured, once and for all, that he and Amber were cut off entirely from the academy.

No one would be helping them now. This task was theirs alone.

“So. Where will it be? Not Antarctica, because we run the risk of exposing ourselves like we did here. We have to go somewhere with more people to lose ourselves among, and enough magic to weave our own barrier.” Ilana gave Amber a sharp look. “I expect your help with this, missy.”

Amber swallowed.

A slightly chubby teacher spoke up. “We could always go to New Zealand,” he said hopefully. His nasal accent gave him away as a Kiwi.

“You don’t regret joining me, do you, Tony?” Ilana asked coldly. “You’re not seeking a way to escape my service?”

“Course not. But there *are* lots of caves in New Zealand. Unexplored ones, too.”

Amber glanced sideways at Tristan. For the first time in a week, the faintest smile tugged at her lips.

She was probably starved for magic here. Anywhere but this godforsaken ice sheet would feel like heaven to her.

“I’ll consider your idea,” Ilana said. “We will spend the next four days preparing for our departure, including digging the globe out of its chamber. In the meantime, I would love to hear any further suggestions of where we ought to reestablish ourselves. Tony, you can take over the First Division while Stefan is incapacitated.”

“Good as gold,” Tony said.

“All lessons will be suspended,” Ilana said. “Return to your rooms and pack your belongings. I want to see all of you back here in one hour.”

Just as Tristan was turning to follow Rajesh from the cafeteria, Ilana grabbed Amber’s wrist.

“Not you,” she said. “I need to speak with you.”

“Can I come too?” Tristan asked, worried.

A gust of air pummeled Tristan so hard in the gut that he fell backwards and collided with a table.

“Don’t be so presumptuous,” Ilana hissed, while Tristan struggled to right himself. “Get back to your room this instant, or you’ll regret ever coming here.”

With a desperate look at Amber, whose face was stony, Tristan turned and slunk from the cafeteria.

“What was that about?” Rajesh muttered. He’d been waiting in the doorway.

“Ilana wants to talk to Amber.”

“Uh-oh. That’s never good.”

Tristan grimaced. “I hope Amber doesn’t do anything rash...”

“Doesn’t matter what she does if Ilana’s not happy with her. She doesn’t need an excuse to beat us up.”

Tristan stopped in his tracks. “I should go after her—”

“No,” Rajesh said firmly. “That’ll only make it worse.” They were the last ones in the hallway, so Rajesh lowered his voice and said, “Do you actually think it’s your school that found us?”

“Yeah. I didn’t think they would look for us, but...” He had a fleeting image of Leila sitting beside the globe with the lights off, searching fruitlessly for a set of bright auras she thought she might never find.

Rajesh gave Tristan a reassuring pat on the shoulder when they parted ways. “I think she’s stronger than she looks. She’ll be okay.”

Tristan nodded without conviction. He had nothing to pack in his bedroom, so he just sat on his bed, its end heaped with untidy blankets, and stared at the icy walls. What had Amber done wrong? Did Ilana suspect her of helping the academy in some way—of giving away their location?

He flopped back on his pillows, grinding the heels of his palms into his eyes. What had Drakewell hoped to accomplish by exposing the ice cave? Did he intend to attack Ilana directly, or did he believe Tristan and Amber would have an easier time destroying the globe while it was being relocated?

If the latter was the case, Drakewell had more confidence in their abilities than Tristan did. They had no access to marbles, and he still couldn't perform any sort of magic without them, aside from the time he had done it on accident to stop Merridy from killing everyone at the Lair. Amber was equally powerless without any living nature to draw from, though she might have more luck if they did relocate to New Zealand rather than some barren desert in Africa or Australia.

Lying on his bed, Tristan tried to summon up a spell to warm himself, the easiest magic he could think of. He concentrated so fiercely that his head began to ache, but nothing happened. At last he gave up, throwing his pillow onto the floor in frustration. This cave just felt so dead, so devoid of magic, that he might as well have tried to wring water from a rock.

Unwilling to face what lay ahead, Tristan turned his thoughts to his friends at the academy. Were Eli, Trey, Hayley, and Cailyn still playing poker with their pile of gold discs? Did Evvie miss him at all, or did she resent him for ruining their only date? And had Zeke asked Leila out yet? This last thought had him seething with anger. Zeke didn't deserve Leila. He was a good-for-nothing prick, and if Leila ever agreed to go out with him, she would only get hurt.

But he was dead in Leila's eyes. He had no right to judge her or deny her whatever happiness she could find.

As much as he hoped to distract himself with thoughts of the academy, he couldn't stop thinking about Amber.

Was she hurt?

Was she...

He forced away the terrible thought. Angrier than before, he jumped to his feet and began pacing the tiny room, kicking his pillow every time he stumbled over it.

The end of the hour came sooner than he expected; when someone rapped at his door, he slammed the pillow back onto his messy bed and dragged his hair into place over his scars. "I'm coming," he yelled when the knock sounded again. Yanking open the door, he almost tripped over the same tiny Scandinavian girl who had first summoned him to classes. "Sorry," he said, trying to reel in his temper.

The girl did not reply. Turning with precision, she strode down the hall, stopping to knock at each subsequent door.

In the cafeteria, the students were whispering among themselves, looking more alive than Tristan had ever seen them. Blake and Ricardo kept shooting furtive looks at Tony, while Rajesh was saying something in an undertone to Mei Ling, who was stoically ignoring him.

As soon as Ilana returned, smiling dangerously, the conversation died immediately while every student scrambled to resume their seats.

Amber had not returned.

Tristan wanted to confront Ilana on the spot and demand that she release Amber, but he would gain nothing by making an enemy of her. His position was too uncertain as it was.

"As I said earlier, we will be leaving this place behind in four days," Ilana said, standing behind her usual chair with a hand on the Irish pilot's shoulder. "We will split into fifteen groups, five students with each teacher, and every group will take a different route to reach our new base. Unless anyone comes to me with a different idea, we will take Tony's advice and relocate to New Zealand."

Tony's eyes widened in triumph.

"I will read out your assigned groups today, and over the next two days Anton and I will arrange transportation to your new home." She squeezed the pilot's shoulder. "We will book flights with multiple airlines, each taking a different route to our destination and each arriving at a separate time. I will personally transport our globe on a fishing boat that Mordechai has procured for us, with two of your teachers accompanying me. The globe will not arrive for several months, and I expect your new home to be fit for human habitation by the time I join you."

She looked sharply around the teachers' table at this, waiting until every teacher nodded or said, "Yes, Ilana."

“In the meantime, you’ll be harvesting magic more intensively than ever. We need to act quickly or risk being discovered a second time. How long until the academy’s southern hemisphere is reconstructed, Tristan?”

Tristan straightened abruptly, caught off guard. “Um...at least a year, I think.”

“Good. We needed two years to carry out our original plan, but with your help and Amber’s, I believe we can speed up the process a bit.”

Tristan relaxed marginally. Wherever Amber was, at least Ilana planned to keep her alive.

Raising her voice, Ilana said, “Mordechai!”

The cafeteria doors ground open once more to admit the fierce-looking tattooed man who had threatened Tristan. He was dragging a wagon loaded to the brim with blue, gold, and green marbles.

“Division Five, please stand and form a line behind Mordechai.” Thirteen students from the end of Tristan’s table pushed back their benches and stood, eyeing Mordechai with trepidation. “One at a time, please take ten marbles of each element. These will be yours to safeguard for the duration of your journey. Your teachers will reclaim the marbles when we reach our new home, and you’ll be held accountable for any that are found missing.”

From her tone, Tristan guessed she would not stop at torturing any students who lost a piece of her precious magic hoard.

Once Division Five was finished, Ilana proceeded through the remaining divisions. A sizable stack of marbles remained in the cart by the time Tristan’s division had taken their share, almost half of the original pool, but Ilana did not divide the marbles further. She waved Mordechai out of the cafeteria and took her seat at last.

“Understand this, my precious children,” Ilana said, hands clasped in front of her as she addressed the students. “You will be faced with choices and dangers that you’ve never seen before once you leave the protection of my school. If word of your powers were to reach mortal ears, you would be hated and feared and locked away. Guard your secrets carefully, my children, and prove to me that I have chosen well in my disciples.”

Mortal ears? That couldn’t be right. Tristan frowned at Ilana, unsure what she meant by it. Magicians were no less mortal than anyone else. Had she seduced her followers with promises of immortality? Or had she tricked them into believing themselves *gods*?

They were divided up after that—Tristan would be traveling under Tony’s guard, along with Rajesh and Mei Ling; a scrawny, angry-looking boy Tristan had never seen before who appeared from outside the cafeteria when summoned; and a black girl who could have been no older than five. Tony tickled the little girl when she joined them, and her solemn expression dissolved into helpless giggles.

When Ilana gave Tony a stern look, he shrugged and put on a mock-repentant frown.

“Back to your rooms, all of you,” Ilana said once the students were divided between the teachers. She hadn’t assigned Amber to a group.

* * *

One day before they began to flee, Ilana made her final decision—they would relocate to the Bulmer cave system on the South Island of New Zealand, which was occasionally visited by tourists but remained for the most part unexplored. Tony hardly attempted to hide his glee.

The flights were booked, the groups staggered across a week of departures. Tristan’s group would be one of the first to leave—he suspected Ilana wanted him out of the way—and they were flying Virgin Australia through London, Dubai, and Sydney. He had never flown such a long way before; indeed, he had never owned a passport.

That evening, Anton came around the cafeteria handing out passports to each of the students. They must have accessed some sort of online records, because Tristan’s passport had the same photo that had been on his driver’s permit, with the correct date of birth. The passports circulating through the room were multicolored—red British passports went to most of the younger students, while the older students and teachers were matched with their countries of birth. Rajesh got a blue Indian passport, Mei Ling a rust-colored Chinese passport, and Ori’s was Israeli. Well, that solved one mystery.

On his way back to his room, Tristan flipped through the passport, noticing that it had a Greenland stamp on the first page dated one month prior. He was so absorbed that he nearly ran into Amber, who stood in the hallway looking halfway dead.

Tristan's heart leapt. "Amber! My god, where have you been?"

Her eyes were hollow, her hair lanky and unkempt. When Tristan drew her into a hug, she flinched and tried to pull away from him.

He released her quickly. "Are you hurt?"

She hung her head and said nothing.

Taking her hand, Tristan pulled Amber into his room and said urgently, "What the hell did she do to you? Why did she take you away?"

Amber shook her head. After a long silence, she whispered, "Ilana knew. She knew I used air magic to direct that mist. She—she forced me to gather a hundred silver marbles for her hoard."

Tristan cursed. Amber would not have agreed to harvest air magic easily; she had never revealed her secrets to Delair, and it would have killed her to give Ilana such an edge.

"They *tortured* you." Tristan was horrified.

Amber's silence was answer enough.

"Let me see." Cautiously, Tristan reached out and rolled up Amber's sleeve past the elbow. She held herself stiffly, which meant it hurt more than she wanted to admit.

Bruises mottled the length of her arm, purple and yellow, and a barely-healed cut ran from her elbow down the inside of her arm to her wrist.

"Who did this?" Tristan spat. "*Who?*"

Swallowing, Amber pulled her arm away and turned down her sleeve again. "No one."

"Come on, Amber. I'm gonna kill whoever did that to you."

"That's why I can't say," she whispered. "It will ruin all of our plans."

"Screw them. Screw Drakewell! We have to leave."

"No." Amber sat on the bed, flinching again, and folded her hands in her lap. "There's a reason Ilana needed exactly a hundred air marbles. She found the records of an ancient spell that will eventually cause more damage alone than two years' worth of disasters on the globe. And now she has every piece she needs for it. A globe, and a hundred marbles of each element."

"And she didn't mind telling you about it?"

Amber shook her head. "She'll enact the spell on her way to New Zealand. The globe and the marbles will travel with her, and we will be thousands of miles away, helpless to stop her."

Tristan grabbed the door-handle. "We have to warn Drakewell."

"No. We don't have any way to contact him. We have to destroy that globe. It's the only hope we have."

Chapter 8: Beyond the Map

To Tristan's immense relief, Amber was assigned to his group the following morning. Her empty, hopeless expression lingered; he was worried she would do something rash if she was pushed too far again.

"You okay?" he whispered when he saw her at breakfast.

She met his eyes but said nothing.

He grew restless as the morning passed, desperate to do something that would stop Ilana from enacting whatever horrible spell she had planned, yet unable to think of anything he *could* do. He could try to run for it, but he wouldn't make it far. And there was no way for him to evade the watchful eyes of the teachers long enough to do anything on his own.

Two hours before Tristan's group was scheduled to leave, Tony came barreling into the cafeteria, shouting, "They've sent a bloody ice-storm! Anton's just flown off to keep the plane safe, but he'll be back when it stops. They're using our own idea against us, the bastards!"

Ilana did not look surprised. "It's a warning," she said. "We were right to leave."

Tristan took grim pleasure in the knowledge that Drakewell had discovered their location. Although they were about to abandon this frozen rabbit-warren, he found comfort in the fact that Drakewell was in the Map Room at this very moment, keeping an eye on Greenland. It made him feel just a fraction less isolated.

It was funny—a few years back, he would have given anything to visit New Zealand. One of his wealthy classmates had gone in seventh grade, and returned with grand stories of seeing Middle-Earth in real life. Now, he hated the thought of going any farther from the Underground Academy.

"Fetch your bags," Ilana said. "Tony, wait with your group below the trapdoor until Anton announces the all-clear."

Tristan followed Rajesh and Mei Ling back to their bedrooms, where he grabbed the small backpack Ilana had given him, packed with thirty marbles and enough clothes to convince the airport security that he would be vacationing in New Zealand. Then he joined Tony—who was holding the little girl, Emma—at the foot of the ladder. Amber fell into place beside him a moment later, stony-faced, and Rajesh and Mei Ling arrived not long after. The scrawny, fierce-looking kid—Landen, whom Tristan was still convinced he had never seen before the night the students had been divided up—showed up last of all, with a duffel bag slung over one shoulder.

Anton flipped open the trapdoor before long, mopping sweat from his neck with a handkerchief.

"Bloody close call, that was," he said. "Hurry along. I wouldn't be surprised if that school sent another storm as soon as it caught sight of our auras."

Tristan doubted it. Whatever Drakewell's motives, he would not have gone to such great lengths just to risk killing Tristan and Amber in a storm.

As soon as they had settled into Anton's plane, Tony relaxed.

"C'mere, munchkin," he said, holding out his arms for Emma. She jumped into his lap and consented to be buckled into place, though a moment later she bounced up on the seat, tucked her legs under her, and tried to look out the window. Only then did Tristan realize he had never heard her speak a word. It seemed that Ilana had managed to instill a fearful brand of discipline even in her youngest students.

Tristan couldn't help but stare out the window as well once they had taken off. They rose over the vast, rippling ice cap before cutting south, the mountains growing taller and rockier as they went. Not a creature stirred on the ice below, save a pair of hairy animals that looked like misplaced woolly mammoths. Once the plane had leveled out above a layer of wispy clouds, Tony stood and dug in a bag at his feet.

"You'll have to change," he said, tossing a set of clothes at Tristan. "Tristan, Rajesh, and Landen, you're flying to the semifinals for the junior rugby cup. Emma and Mei Ling, you're with me. I have your adoption

papers. And Amber, you're on your own. Visiting relatives for a holiday. Try not to cause any trouble."

Unfolding the pile of clothes, Tristan found jeans, a rugby team sweatshirt, and a beat-up pair of sneakers. Rajesh and Landen had the same, though Rajesh's sneakers were blindingly white. Tristan didn't like the idea of traveling with Landen, but he supposed Ilana wanted someone keeping an eye on him. There had to be a reason he wasn't part of one of the regular divisions.

They changed on the plane, carefully avoiding one another's eyes. Emma got to keep her fur boots and fur-lined parka, but Amber was given a pair of slim black pants and a dress shirt that made her look much older than seventeen, while Mei Ling had to wear an awful bejeweled Minnie Mouse t-shirt that she glared at before pulling it over her tank top.

As they settled back into their seats, all eyeing one another's new clothes, Emma tugged Tony's sleeve and whispered loudly, "Can you braid my hair again? Like that other time?"

"Sure thing, sweetie."

Emma's hair had been straightened, and it came easily into two French braids under Tony's expert fingers. Clearly he had done this more than once.

Before long they were descending past mountains towards a harbor lined with colorful houses. On the runway, Tristan ran to catch up with Amber. "Are you *sure* you're okay?"

This time she nodded. "I will be."

It had to be enough. They were at the airport doors now, and Anton waved them off from the cockpit of his tiny plane.

In groups, they approached the ticketing counter and presented their passports. Tristan's heart thudded as he waited for the ticketing agent to check his, but he needn't have worried—seconds later, he was handed four boarding passes and pointed toward the bag drop.

"Not much security here," Rajesh said in an undertone. "It'd be a lot different if any of us were trying to get into the U.S. Except for you and Amber, of course."

Tristan nodded distractedly. On the first flight, he sat by himself near the rear of the plane, and he was very relieved to find Rajesh and Landen waiting for him just outside the gate at Heathrow. He, Rajesh, and Landen had middle-row seats together on this flight aboard a Boeing 747, the largest airplane Tristan had ever set foot in.

As soon as the seatbelt sign turned off, Landen was prowling the aisle, returning half an hour later to eat dinner. Then he was off again.

When he vanished for the second time, Tristan gathered his courage and asked Rajesh, "Would you—fight against Ilana? If you could?"

Rajesh raised an eyebrow. "That's dangerous talk."

Tristan waited.

"I would, though. You keep your mouth shut, because I'm dead if she finds out. But yes, I hate it there. I'd do anything to stop Ilana before—"

"Good," Tristan said softly. "Because I'm going to need your help." Glancing furtively down the aisle in search of Landen's return, he explained everything—Drakewell's orders that he and Amber had to destroy Ilana's globe before it was too late; the way Ilana had tortured Amber for a hundred silver marbles; and her plans to enact a spell more powerful than anything the globe alone could accomplish. Rajesh listened, wide-eyed, and did not speak for a long time after Tristan had finished.

Tristan knew he was taking a major gamble in giving himself away, but with Ilana far behind for the time being, he would never get a better chance to speak openly. And his time was growing short.

"I bet Ilana's planning to enact that spell while she's on that boat," Rajesh said at last, picking apart the lamination on his flight safety card. "She knows she's made an enemy of Amber, so this spell must be worth the risk. She's actually scared of you guys, did you know that?"

Tristan snorted. "I'm useless. It's Amber who could probably kill us all with a look if she wanted to. Why don't you support Ilana, anyway? I thought most of the students at your school were brainwashed."

"Some of them are. Especially the younger ones." Rajesh glanced over Tristan's head, also on the lookout for Landen. "But everyone my age, we were five years old when we started with Ilana. It doesn't sound like much, but it was enough to figure some things out."

“What happened?”

Rajesh shoved his flight card back into the mesh pocket. “My baby sister died. Ilana took both of us in, pretended she was doing us a kindness. Fatima was only seven months old when we arrived in Greenland, and she was always a bit sickly. I don’t think she ever got cared for properly. They’re better now, but back then...”

Clearing his throat, Rajesh continued. “When she was four, she got sick. Really sick. She had an awful fever, and she was crying all the time. I begged Ilana to take her to a hospital, but she locked me in my room and refused. By the time I was let out, Fatima was dead and everyone had forgotten about her.”

“I’m really sorry,” Tristan said, his voice shaking. “My little brother is dead, too. It was Drakewell’s fault—he set the whole thing up when he wanted to recruit me—but it was my hand on the steering wheel when the car crashed.”

Rajesh gripped Tristan’s arm and met his eyes at last. There was fear behind his gaze, and unfathomable pain. “Don’t let it destroy you, okay? I nearly did. I almost gave up afterwards. I can hardly remember anything from that time. Then we sent a disaster to India, right near where I came from, and I snapped out of it all at once. Now I’ve just been waiting for the right chance. Ilana can’t hurt me any more than she already has. Whatever you have to do, I’ll help you with it.”

“Thank you.” Tristan swallowed against the lump in his throat.

As he settled back into his seat, he realized that, for the first time in his life, he had spoken the words that he had long denied himself—*it was Drakewell’s fault*. Yes, Tristan had made a rash, idiotic decision on that fateful night, but it was Drakewell who had sent the earthquake, Drakewell who had lit the fire in his father’s home, and Drakewell who had ensured the key sat ready in his neighbor’s car.

With that thought, the heavy weight that had suffocated Tristan for two years finally eased its grip.

He was not a murderer, just stupid beyond belief.

And dwelling on the car crash would solve nothing. He had to ensure that no one else died senselessly, to stop Ilana before she sent any more innocent people following in Marcus’s footsteps. He would honor Marcus’s memory by doing the right thing now.

Just then, a commotion in the aisle sent passengers turning in their seats and unbuckling their seatbelts to look for the source of the scuffle.

Tristan didn’t have to wait long for the mystery to resolve itself. Tony staggered to their row, dragging a limp, scowling Landen by one arm.

“You’re going to *sit still* until the end of the flight, mate,” Tony said. “Rajesh and Tristan’ll make sure you do.”

Landen dropped into his seat without a word and clicked his buckle emphatically into place. “I’m sure they will,” he said sourly.

When Tony had returned to his seat, shaking his head, Tristan gave Landen a curious sideways look. “Why aren’t you in any of the divisions?”

“Mind your own business,” Landen snapped.

“He’s with Mordechai,” Rajesh said. “He gets all the kids who won’t behave. Blake used to be one of them, and look at him now.”

Landen looked as though he wanted to strangle Rajesh, though eventually he dug up a pair of headphones and began watching *The Dark Knight*, gripping the armrests with his bony fingers.

Hours passed. Tristan dozed fitfully, coming awake every time his head dropped onto his shoulder, his dreams filled with scenes of the Lair. Marcus was in one of them, throwing snowballs at Zeke and Damian, and Amber stood behind him, whispering in his ear that they ought to just run away...

* * *

At the Dubai airport, Tristan wished Tony was there to supervise them through customs. Of course, Amber would be going through the airport entirely on her own, so he didn’t really have anything to complain about. Landen followed two steps behind Tristan and Rajesh through the sprawling airport terminal, and when they stopped at the toilets, he took ages to reappear. When he still hadn’t emerged after twenty minutes, Tristan and

Rajesh bent over to check under every stall, but they didn't recognize Landen's shoes in any of them.

"What're we supposed to do?" Tristan asked in exasperation, shoving open the bathroom door for the second time.

"He's not our problem," Rajesh said grimly. "We should head to the gate and tell Tony what's happened."

Tristan didn't need any more persuasion. They shouldered their backpacks and continued down the wide hall toward their third flight. "Why does Ilana put up with kids like that?"

"If she breaks them right, they'll be her most devoted followers." Rajesh looked as though he had eaten a lemon. "Blake was one of them, and now he's as ruthless as she is. She'd probably marry him if she could."

It was hard to imagine that Blake, blond and built like a football star, had once been as much trouble as Landen. Now he seemed the image of sophisticated strength.

When Tony saw Tristan and Rajesh heading his way, he shook his head vigorously to warn them away. They went up to him anyway, and Rajesh broke the news.

"Landen's vanished. Last we saw, he was in a bathroom back that way."

"That little bastard! Emma, can you wait here with Mei Ling? I'll be back in a sec."

Tristan and Rajesh chose seats on the opposite side of the gate. Another half-hour passed before Tony reappeared, Landen marching along before him and kicking everything he passed.

"If you do that again, you're not eating anything for a week." Tony gave Landen a push in the direction of the gate, where he flopped into the seat beside Tristan.

"I hate him." Landen threw his duffle bag at the seat opposite him, nearly whacking an old man on the shoulder.

"He's got to be better than Mordechai, though," Rajesh said.

"I hate him too."

As they waited for their flight, Tristan eyed the gift shop, wondering if he could send a postcard warning of Ilana's scheme to Millersville in the vague hope that someone from the academy might stumble across it. But he didn't have any money, and when he made a circuit of the gift shop just to see if he could steal a postcard without being caught, he was dismayed to see that all of the stamps were hanging safely behind the counter.

Hopelessness plagued him as he returned to his seat. Ilana was thousands of miles away now, and there was nothing he could do to stop her.

* * *

Many hours later, eyes aching and head pounding, Tristan stumbled off their final short flight from Auckland to Nelson. He was too tired to appreciate much aside from the fact that they were finally, blessedly, outside again; with a drizzling fog hiding most of their surroundings, he could only make out snatches of coastline and sections of pine trees growing in such unnaturally straight rows that they must have been planted. Everything smelled so fresh and alive after hours of breathing stale air.

They drove away from the airport in a white tour van on the wrong side of the road, Emma sleeping with her head on Mei Ling's lap and Landen snoring softly in the far back. They stopped once for supplies and a toilet break, and Tony didn't return for several hours. Briefly Tristan considered running for it—this might be his last chance—but instead he fell asleep.

The van now piled with food and camping supplies, they drove on, the road growing narrower with each turn and finally giving way to gravel. At the end of the road, Tony stood and stretched but didn't give any instructions. A while later, he opened the side door and said, "Rise and shine." He had set up a pair of tents in the trees not far from the gravel parking lot, beside a picnic table and an outhouse. "We've got a bit of a tramp tomorrow, so rest up."

Tristan stumbled into the closest tent and crawled into one of the down sleeping bags waiting inside. He was asleep before the tent door was zipped shut.

* * *

He woke in darkness, with someone's arm splayed across his shoulder and someone else's elbow digging into his ribs. When he went outside to relieve himself, the clouds had lifted to reveal a stunning canvas of stars. It was icy out; he wished he hadn't left his parka behind.

Before long the others began to stir, and the sun rose reluctantly in a peach sky.

"Who's going to pack away the tents?" Tony asked. "And we'll need to fit everything in these." He threw a set of five backpacks onto the gravel behind the van.

"Where's mine?" Emma asked, wide-eyed.

"You can use this." He dug in the van and handed her the small backpack Tristan had used for the flight over.

Thirty minutes later, all of their supplies had somehow been shoved into the five backpacks, and with dubious looks, the students tried lifting them for the first time. Tristan could barely get his off the ground, filled as it was with about fifty cans of food and a camping stove. He had to sit on the trunk and buckle himself in before he stood, back and shoulders protesting.

"All good?" Tony asked.

Tristan and Rajesh groaned. As they started off across a swing bridge, Tristan fell to the rear of the group, Amber just in front of him. Her eyes were still glazed over, whether with exhaustion or pain he could not tell, but he did not dare ask her what was wrong. He didn't want to call attention to her in front of the others.

They hiked up a long ridge and down a rocky chute into a valley still dappled with snow—after a moment of confusion, Tristan remembered that the seasons were switched down here, so what should have been a fine spring day in May was nearly winter in New Zealand. Landen must have taken Tony's threat seriously, because he trailed directly behind the teacher without hesitation.

After hours of hiking, Tristan's knees and back ached so much he wasn't sure he could continue much farther. He was just about to beg for a water break when they came to a small hut in the middle of a snowy valley.

"What's that doing there?" Rajesh asked.

"It's just a backcountry hut," Tony said. "The second group's going to join us here, and we'll head to the cave tomorrow morning." He looked happier than Tristan had ever seen him. "And after that, we're going deep into the wilderness. No one will ever find us here."

Chapter 9: Earth Magic

Late that evening, the second group joined theirs. Headed by the curly-haired teacher, Amelia, it consisted of Blake, Ricardo, and a pair of identical twin girls no older than twelve who looked as though they came from somewhere in South America.

The following morning, they donned as many layers as they could find and started up the valley. After passing carefully over a set of marble bluffs riddled with treacherous crevasses half-hidden beneath the snow, they descended to a grassy shelf with an opening into the Bulmer cave system. Tristan's back hurt more with each step, the heavy cans threatening to crush him, but aside from his knees, his legs were hardly sore. Evidently their strength training was paying off at last.

"There won't be any tourists this time of year," Tony said. "It's a good time to get set up." He dropped his pack with a loud clank of cans and tossed around a set of headlamps. "Be really careful. I don't want to explain why we're a few students short when Ilana gets here."

Blake laughed. Dropping his pack at the back of the group, Tristan scrutinized him, wondering how he could possibly have been as bad as Landen.

"There's a big chamber off to the right, I think. Follow me."

Abandoning his supplies, Tony ducked into the cave and switched on his headlamp. The others fell into line behind him, Tristan and Amber taking up the rear. As he picked his way over rubble and uneven ground, Tristan kept tripping and catching himself on the wall. The pale beam of his headlamp was woefully inadequate in such a vast cavern.

Down a short slope, the cavern narrowed to a tunnel, finally forcing everyone but Emma to drop onto their hands and knees and crawl through the final stretch. On the other side, the cave widened again to form a wide, almost flat chamber ringed with stalactites and stalagmites.

"We'll stay in here," Tony said. "There's a lot more to explore, but we'll play it safe for now. Grab your bags, and we'll see if we can make this place a bit cozier."

As they began unpacking their supplies, stacking food in one corner and spreading mats and sleeping bags along the far wall, Tristan felt a wave of homesickness for the academy. How excited he and his friends had been when they first discovered the Subroom—it had been a refuge, a place to call their own, and it had brought them together as never before.

A small part of him wished he could recreate that here, with Amber and Rajesh and anyone who chose to support them, but he quickly discarded the idea. If he started treating Ilana's followers like friends, he might have a hard time remembering why he'd come here in the first place.

Once their supplies were more or less organized and most of the sleeping mats had been unrolled, Blake and Ricardo vanished down a new tunnel to explore the depths of the cave.

Glancing at Amber, Tristan asked Tony if they were allowed to explore outside.

"Don't go running off," he said.

"If I was planning to do that, I would've left at one of the airports," Tristan said. "You couldn't do much if we decided to leave anyway. I guess you'll just have to trust us."

"Very funny," Tony said drily, though he let them go.

They switched off their headlamps as soon as they could see the pale light streaming in from the cave mouth, and when they stepped into the sunlight, Amber tilted her face to the sky.

"I feel like I'm alive again," she said weakly. "Let's go for a walk, shall we?"

Tristan agreed at once, mostly because he wanted to talk to her where there was no chance of being overheard. The grassy flat was riddled with stones, and scrawny bushes poked from the snow here and there. As they circled

around the hill, leaving the cave behind, Amber lifted her arms and breathed deeply. Tristan almost thought he could see her aura returning, a glow that strengthened as they moved.

“You’re okay now?” he asked with a smile as she stopped to perch on a rocky outcropping.

“I think so.” There was more life in her eyes than he had seen in weeks.

“And your arms?”

From the way she winced when he sat beside her, he realized it was more than just her arms that Ilana had damaged. After a long pause, she rolled up her left sleeve to show that the bruises were beginning to fade, the long gash turning to a scar.

“Ilana can’t hurt me here,” she said bravely. “I have all of this to draw on.” She spread her arms wide as though to embrace the mountains and forest below. “She thinks she’s taken us away from Drakewell’s protection, but she’s actually just given me back my powers.”

Tristan was so relieved that he drew Amber into a fierce hug. She flinched but eventually relaxed into his embrace, arms tentatively slipping around his waist.

“I was so damn worried about you,” Tristan whispered. “I could barely sleep all week. If Ilana was here right now, I’d kill her. I swear I would.”

Amber shivered in his arms. “I hate her. She would do anything for revenge.”

“Do you think that’s what this is all about? Revenge?”

Amber shrugged. “I have a hard time understanding most people, but Ilana I don’t understand at all.” She disentangled herself from Tristan’s arms and looked pensively back at the cave. “We only have two months before Ilana arrives. And she will have more than enough time to work her spell before then. The whole way to New Zealand, I was trying to think of some way to stop her, but I don’t think we can. We just have to destroy the globe as soon as we see it again.”

“Definitely,” Tristan said. “And I couldn’t think of anything either. Rajesh will help us, by the way. And I bet some of the others would, too.”

“That would be too dangerous!” Amber said. “If anyone reports us, we’re finished.”

“We’ll have to be careful, then. I don’t think they’re all bad. Rajesh can probably help us figure out who we can trust.” Tristan hesitated. “How are we supposed to finish off the globe? Ilana’s not stupid. She’ll know if something is up.”

“I’m not sure.” Amber dug her toe into a snowdrift. “Let me think about it. If we had a barrier, and a few hundred marbles rigged to explode...”

* * *

Over the next two weeks, students and teachers continued to arrive. They brought news in waves—Ilana, Anton, and a teacher named Cody had started their voyage; storms continued to wrack the Greenland ice cap, enough that they made headlines; and Stefan would be flying down with the last group, which apparently meant he had been forgiven.

Life here was rougher than Tristan had expected. At least they no longer had to worry about cleaning toilets, because they didn’t even have a toilet to clean. It was a week before one of the teachers brought back a composting toilet and installed it near the cave entrance, and not much longer before it began to reek.

To his surprise, Tristan liked it much better than living in Ilana’s ice-cave. Mostly he enjoyed being away from her all-knowing glare, but he also liked the comfort of being surrounded once more by living nature.

“It’s amazing,” Amber told Tristan one night, lying back on her pallet and looking up at the glowworms that dotted the ceiling. “I feel as though I can see properly again after months of living in the dark. Everything here is so *alive*. It’s incredible. Even the cave! Look, the rock is full of magic. It’s alive, not like the Lair. And those glowworms!”

Tristan laughed. “Maybe we’d be better off just staying here.”

“Funny,” Amber said.

The students had let their guard down in Ilana’s absence, and dinners that had once been held in silence were now lively with chatter. Even Mordechai’s scowling presence was not enough to dissuade the students from

enjoying themselves.

Of course, most of the students did not seem to know *how* to enjoy themselves. The younger ones especially were prone to sitting or lying in silence as though their brains had shut off without instructions. Mordechai's band of troublemakers were often caught wandering into the forest or up the mountainside, and Landen was apprehended in the midst of running away not once but three times. After Tristan saw him limping back into the main cave following yet another of his failed escape attempts, he found he pitied the boy, as difficult as he could be. At least Landen was smart enough to protest.

Out of the whole First Division, Mei Ling and Ori were the only two who remained quiet and tense. Tristan often caught sight of Pavlina entertaining Emma and a few of the other younger students when Mordechai was away, and Rajesh loved poring over a stack of maps that Tony had amassed of the entire South Island. Another of Rajesh's favorite pastimes was trying to get Mei Ling's attention; as much as he tried talking to her and telling jokes that only he laughed at, she never once replied or even acknowledged that she was listening.

Tristan watched this all with envy; he and Amber were afraid to speak to Rajesh or each other any more than necessary, for fear someone would accuse them of scheming.

No longer were they devoting their time to lessons and homework. Almost all activities had been halted in favor of intensive magic-harvesting—they had a quota to meet before Ilana arrived, and it seemed their teachers would be in deep trouble if the target was missed.

For days at a time, ten students and two teachers would disappear on a long hike to the nearest glacier to harvest water magic. Surely there had to be an easier way, but this was the only one Ilana knew. The First Division was never selected for that particular duty—Tony admitted that his students were too valuable to risk. Stefan was no longer teaching the First Division; he stood in for Ilana in her absence, and had already become nearly as harsh and unforgiving as her.

Several times a week, Tristan's division would spend the day deep in the caves, chiseling likely-looking crystals from the wall and siphoning auras from stalagmites. It was Pavlina who had come up with this brilliant idea, and after a great deal of testing, they discovered that stalactites and stalagmites would release magic if they were tapped like a maple tree. Their vapor content was so high that two marbles instead of one would often congeal in the plastic bottles they were now using to trap magic. Occasionally one would shatter, which made Tristan wince. He hated seeing the beautiful shapes destroyed.

One day his division was deep in the cave, harvesting a section of finger-sized stalactites interspersed with glowworms on the ceiling, when he found himself alone in a side chamber with Pavlina. He had never spoken a word to her before.

"What do you think about Ilana?" he asked in a low voice.

Pavlina jumped, dropping her water bottle. The lid popped off and vapor spilled out. "Look what you did," she said coldly. "Why do you want to know about Ilana? Is this a trick?"

"I'm not trying to mess with you."

Bending down, Pavlina retrieved her water bottle and tucked a strand of coarse blonde hair behind one ear. "We should rejoin the others."

"Wait," Tristan said. "Have you always lived with Ilana? Do you remember where you came from?"

"Of course I do," she snapped. "If you want to know, Ilana stole me off my Baba Sofiyko when I was seven. Baba had a stroke, and when I ran off to get help, Ilana grabbed me. Are you happy now?"

She turned and marched away, leaving Tristan in the dark, the dying batteries in his headlamp hardly bright enough to illuminate the water bottle in his hands. Of course, he had expected this. Why should anyone trust him? This school was their family, their home, and he was a stranger who had come to take that all away.

As he gathered his empty water bottles and clambered down the rocky shelf to rejoin the group before his flashlight died, he realized that Pavlina had given him a sign. She was not happy here; she was terrified to speak openly against Ilana, but brave enough to admit that she did not believe the lies she had been fed. He just needed to speak to her again when the time was right, and approach it more delicately the next time around. *Imagine how you'd feel if Blake started telling you Alldusk was evil.*

For the first time in years, Ilana's students had hours of free time at night. It grew dark around six this time of year, so they ate early dinners and spent the evening lounging around in the main cavern or just outside the

cave. Rules had slackened, though Tristan still felt Mordechai's eyes on him whenever he strayed from the main chamber. At first the students didn't seem to know what to do with their spare time. Most of them—the younger ones especially—lay on their bed-rolls and stared at the high cavern roof until they fell asleep. Blake and Ricardo started challenging different boys to wrestling matches on the grassy shelf outside, which Stefan did not discourage. More than one boy returned with a bloody nose or an ugly bruise across his face.

Landen and the twenty-odd kids who had been in Mordechai's care were suddenly free from wherever they had been locked up, and they seized the opportunity to cause an ungodly amount of trouble. Unharvested stalactites were cracked off with a shovel, the composting toilet was smeared three times with feces, and sleeping bags and mats were constantly going missing. Everyone evacuated the cave in a frenzy when they heard a *boom* like dynamite deep in the bowels of the earth; only when a grimy girl came running out of the cave, shrieking like a banshee with blood dripping from her hands, did they learn what had happened. She had apparently dropped a fuel canister and a smoldering stick down one of the shafts to see what happened, and the entire thing had exploded, weakening the cave walls and shredding her skin to pieces in an eruption of rocks.

Watching the girl stare defiantly at Mordechai even as he yelled at her, heedless of the blood now staining her shirt, Tristan filed the idea away as a good way to detonate the marbles they would need to destroy the globe.

In the confused aftermath, Tristan beckoned Amber and Rajesh into a narrow, high-ceilinged side cavern to discuss their plans.

"Have you talked to anyone?" Tristan asked Rajesh.

He nodded. "Ori's game, I think, but he's a bit hard to read sometimes. I don't think he'll report us, though... And I talked to Mei Ling, but she won't have a bit of it."

"She won't turn us in, though?"

"No," Rajesh said immediately. "She's just scared. I don't think she likes Ilana any more than I do, but she's so used to obeying that it's hard to think of anything else."

Tristan was surprised by how vehemently he defended her. Did he secretly like her? "I've talked to Pavlina," he said. "I'm not sure she'll agree, but she's not a fan of Ilana. She's just a bit touchy."

"You could say that again."

Amber said, "I have an idea."

Tristan and Rajesh looked at her eagerly.

"I think I could recreate the barrier I put over the Lair, only I would fasten it to the cave mouth instead of the globe. It doesn't allow anyone unfamiliar to pass through, so when Ilana arrives, she will be trapped outside. As she tries to figure out how to enter and move the globe into the cave, she will delay at the cave mouth long enough for us to set off a pile of marbles hidden there. The explosion will destroy the globe and possibly Ilana as well."

"Wow," Tristan said. "You've been thinking about that a lot!"

Amber smiled shyly. "I feel as though this is my responsibility. Stefan will call on me to help with the barrier, so this will be the perfect way for me to do my part."

"How do we get enough marbles?" Rajesh asked. "And where do we put them?"

"It's easier to steal marbles than you'd think," Tristan said. "Especially with Ilana away. We'll have to dig a hole and start hiding them outside. Maybe we can make a trapdoor or something."

"Out of what?"

Tristan shrugged. "I'll figure it out. Leave that to me. I'll get the hole dug this week, and then we can start hiding marbles. We'll take turns going to the toilet in the middle of the night, and we can add a few marbles each time." He glanced at Rajesh. "You think Ori will help? The more people, the better. They'll notice if we start sneaking off every third night."

"He will," Rajesh said. "No guarantees he won't turn around and betray us someday, but right now he'd be happy to help."

"Right." That would have to do for now. "I'll talk to Pavlina again. Even five of us is a lot better than three. We'll have plenty of marbles by the time Ilana gets here. Amber, will you start working on the barrier?"

"Okay. Stefan already asked me to help with it, so I'll just change it to keep Ilana out."

"You haven't already started it, have you?" he asked in surprise.

Amber looked away. “Just two days ago. I didn’t want to get your hopes up—I’m afraid it won’t work.”

Footsteps were crunching across the cave floor as the students returned, so Tristan, Amber, and Rajesh slipped back into the main hallway before anyone noticed their absence. Mordechai was dragging the scrawny girl down a steeply-sloping side passage; her hands had been hastily bandaged with strips of someone’s shirt.

While the other students settled down to their usual nightly routines—some lying motionless as always, others playing cat’s cradle with a set of ropes, still others braiding each other’s hair—Tristan settled against the wall near their food stash, looking around for anything that could function as a trapdoor.

Their supplies were still painfully limited. Despite several trips to the nearest town for resupply, they were still eating canned beans, pasta with canned tomato sauce, and lentils and rice, all cooked on a mix of tiny backpacking stoves and larger square camping stoves. There were pots and pans he could ostensibly steal, but their absence would be noticed.

Getting to his feet, he edged toward the cavern entrance, where he crawled through the narrow gap into the main hallway. In a side chamber just below the composting toilet lay their dump-heap, which was carried out in pieces each time another group hiked out for more supplies. Most of it was comprised of empty cans and cardboard boxes, with a few empty gas canisters added to the mix. He sifted through the junk, grateful that most of it had been cleaned before being discarded. Near the bottom he found a narrow sheet of corrugated metal which looked as though it had been hewn from the roof of the composting toilet. It was longer and skinnier than he would have liked, but it would work better than a heap of mangled cans.

With a jagged rock, he banged at the metal until he had weakened it enough to bend it sideways along one of the grooves. Then he folded it back and forth until the crease snapped in two. Hiding one of the halves under his shirt—not the best idea, as the edges threatened to tear at his skin—he crept from the junk-room, wary of discovery.

No one stopped him on his way to the mouth of the cave, where the sun had just dropped below the nearest mountaintop. To the left of the entrance stood a clump of bushes, and it was here that Tristan measured out a line in the ground where he would dig. Once the outline was scratched in the dirt, he hid the metal under a rock and returned to the main cavern before anyone noticed his absence.

Stefan was waiting for him, arms folded to emphasize the bulk of his muscles. “Where have you been?”

“I’m not allowed to walk around outside?” Tristan asked innocently.

“Not on my watch.”

Good thing he had hidden the corrugated metal outside rather than under his mat, which he’d considered. “What about Blake and Ricardo? Are you going to start locking them inside, too?”

Lowering his voice, Stefan hissed, “You know perfectly well that Ilana will have my head if anything goes wrong. Especially where you and Amber are concerned. If you’re going to start disregarding my orders, you might as well hang me and get it over with.”

A niggling feeling of guilt tugged at Tristan, but he ignored it. Stefan had been in Ilana’s pocket for too long. “Don’t worry,” he said coolly. “Ilana won’t have anything to complain about.”

Defiantly, he stepped around Stefan.

As he sank onto his sleeping mat, he realized that several pairs of eyes had followed him across the cavern. He had just stood up to a teacher and gotten away with it. They *envied* him.

The following morning, Stefan and Amber were both absent for several hours after breakfast. Several other teachers were gone as well, so Tristan assumed they were working on the new barrier.

He and the rest of the First Division spent the time seated around a campfire built atop a flat rock as large as a table, where they collected fire magic by throwing scraps of bark and dried leaves into the flames. It was Tristan’s favorite time here—the flames helped ease the chill that had settled deep in his bones, and the familiar smell of wood smoke brought back wonderful memories of bonfires at the academy.

“I wonder where Ilana’s at now,” Blake said offhandedly, scooping up two jarfuls of vapor with a flourish.

“A month away still,” Ricardo said with a twinge of annoyance. “And Amber’s going to be her new favorite student by the end of that, not you.”

“That freak?” Blake snorted. “You wish.”

“Well, she’s the one putting up the new barrier, dimwit. And rumor has it that she’s helped Ilana gather *air*

magic.”

Tristan’s grip on his jar tightened. Who had told them that? Not Rajesh, surely?

But Rajesh was pointedly ignoring Blake and Ricardo, who were widely acknowledged to be good-for-nothing showoffs.

“You’re just jealous,” Blake said, flexing his biceps as he screwed on the cap of his jar.

“Blake thinks he’ll be promoted to teaching when Ilana gets back,” Rajesh whispered dismissively.

Blake shot him a warning look. “I’ll crush you someday. Watch your step.”

“That’s why I don’t wrestle,” Rajesh said. “I’m not an idiot.”

“Oh, knock it off,” Tony said, stretching his arms over his head.

Blake, Ricardo, and Rajesh subsided into a disgruntled silence. Gazing out at the dark sea of beech trees below, Tristan reflected that Ilana’s death wouldn’t come close to mitigating the harm that these magicians could cause. He would have a set of very dangerous enemies before long—Blake and Mordechai alone could finish him off, and as powerful as Amber was, she couldn’t fight close to a hundred impeccably-trained magicians. Almost every one of them could draw on their own power, a skill which remained a major handicap for Tristan. He had drawn on his own strength once, and another time on the forest’s power, but it had been a long time since he had managed either.

Even Helene, the tiny Norwegian girl who had first summoned him to the cafeteria, could probably overpower him when it came to magic.

When noon came, the sun pale behind a thin sheath of clouds, Tony left the fire smoldering for the next division to use and led the way back to the cave for lunch. Tristan tapped Pavlina on the arm; with a sigh, she bent over and pretended to tie her shoe so she lagged behind the class.

“I know what you want from me,” she said flatly. “You’re going to try something, aren’t you? You and Rajesh. I’ve seen you scheming together.”

“Maybe we are,” he said in a low voice. “Would you join us?”

“No,” she said at once. “I won’t report you, but it’s too dangerous. You should know that.”

“What if it meant stopping Ilana? What if we could save everyone?”

“I’m not a hero,” Pavlina said. “You’ve got the wrong person.”

“I’m not, either,” Tristan said desperately. “But I’m doing this because I have to. Because no one else can.”

The rest of the division had already reached the cave. Looking over his shoulder, Tony noticed that he was missing two of his students and waved them over.

Pavlina straightened. “I’m sorry. I can’t help you.”

“Fine. But I’m not giving up yet.” Tristan watched her go, fanning smoke away from his face. He wasn’t very good at persuasion; where was Rusty when he needed him? Disgruntled, he started after Pavlina.

That night, Tristan sneaked out with a trowel that had served as their original toilet and, shivering in the fierce breeze, began digging out the pit for their marbles. He uprooted a hunk of soil and grass, which he laid carefully atop his corrugated metal lid. Then he started digging deeper, forming a narrow rectangular hole that would barely have fit his two feet, one in front of the other.

A morepork owl called from nearby as he worked, the distinctive *ru-ru* sound moving from branch to branch, and clouds scudded across the face of the moon.

He lost track of the time as he worked, enjoying the simple labor and the solitude. Over an hour passed before a rustle in the bushes startled him from his daze.

Dropping the trowel, he whirled, but it must have been nothing more than a mouse or a possum. Nervous now, he fitted the metal top over the rough hole, arranged the dirt and grass convincingly over the top so he couldn’t see where the ground had been disturbed, and hurried back into the cave. He deposited the trowel behind a sack of rice and crept to his bed, trying not to step on anyone or blind anyone with his headlamp.

“You’re crazy,” Pavlina whispered from two mats over.

Tristan wriggled into his sleeping bag, only then noticing how cold his extremities had grown. “Are you sure you don’t want to help?”

“*Yes!*”

His hands still smelled of dirt and rusting metal. Tucking them under his arms to warm his fingers, he tried

to sleep. Pavlina was right. They were completely insane if they thought this would actually work.

* * *

In the morning, Pavlina cornered Tristan on his way back from the toilet and said, "I've changed my mind. I'll help you. But only if you swear you'll be careful."

Tristan was taken aback. "Of course! Why did you change your mind?"

"Something Mordechai said." She gave him an icy look. "Don't mess this up."

"I won't."

She left Tristan feeling a bit rattled. His promise felt empty. He couldn't *not* mess things up; this whole endeavor was almost guaranteed to turn into a disaster. At least he had one more ally to call upon.

"She'll help us," he whispered to Rajesh on their walk down to a new cavern to harvest stalagmites. Tony had given every third student an extra-powerful flashlight, which did not entirely cut through the gloom; they were heading into a less-explored section of the cave today, which meant they had to keep a sharp eye out for bottomless shafts and loose rocks.

"I'm impressed," Rajesh said under his breath. "I wouldn't have even tried her, if you'd left it to me."

"I've dug the hole, too. I'll show you where it is tonight."

Rajesh turned his flashlight down to reveal a pothole that opened into a black abyss. "Careful. Does that mean we're collecting marbles now?"

"Yeah." Tristan pressed his back to the wall as he sidled around the dark pit. He wasn't going anywhere near that. Compared to this, the unfinished tunnels in the Lair seemed safe and familiar. As a breath of air stirred from the depths of the cave, goosebumps slithered up his arms.

"What're you whispering about, traitor?" Ricardo hissed from behind Tristan.

"Trying to decide if we should push you down that hole."

Ricardo shoved him in the back so hard that he lost his balance and toppled forward, grazing his knees on the rough stones.

"Watch where you're going, scar-face," Ricardo spat, kicking Tristan in the ribs as he passed him.

Blake stepped on Tristan's pinky as he followed Ricardo. Once the group had passed, Tristan stood and brushed dirt from his jeans. His left knee stung. Hurrying to catch up to Mei Ling, who followed at the back of their division, he wondered if Ricardo and Blake had always been like this, or if they had kept their heads down and minded their own business until now, biding their time.

By the time they reached the new cavern, which was dripping with more stalactites than Tristan had ever seen in one place before, he was feeling more than a little claustrophobic. The tunnel had narrowed, the ceiling so low that they had to crawl at times, and the stale, musty air was thick enough to taste.

"This would be a real winner if they ever found it." Tony shone his light around the walls, illuminating a great clump of stalagmites that formed what looked like a great spiky throne. Ribbons of cave bacon, striped and translucent, girded the far wall, and a small pool lay in the center. "Don't break anything. I'll skin you alive if anything happens."

"The entire aura of that formation is contained in one piece," Amber said, pointing to the throne-like mass growing from the floor. She had never spoken out in class before.

Tony joined her. "You mean the whole bloody thing'll come gushing out as soon as we tap it?"

She nodded. "If we turn off our lights, we can all collect pieces of it. We might be able to get twenty or thirty marbles out of there."

"I'll surrender to your expertise," Tony joked. "C'mon, guys, we don't have all day."

The rest of the First Division clustered around the clump of stalagmites, infusing the formation with a golden halo from their flashlights and headlamps.

"Would you like to do the honors, Amber?" He handed her the delicate pick with its hollow center.

She waited until everyone had their jars ready. This was the only brand of magic Stefan had deemed valuable enough to use their precious glass jars on; fire and water magic were fine in plastic bottles. "We should turn off the lights," she said. "It will be easier to spot the aura in the dark."

Tristan switched off his headlamp at once, and the others reluctantly followed suit. Blake was the last to turn off his flashlight, eyeing Amber with deep mistrust. In the darkness, a smattering of glowworms suddenly came to life across the ceiling.

“Ready?” Amber asked.

A murmur of assent ran through the group.

Tristan heard a faint tapping, and he leaned closer, brushing against someone’s elbow. Silence hung in the air for a long moment.

Then, with a final *crunch*, green light billowed from the rock. The aura twisted and flickered like the Northern Lights, illuminating the ghostly surface of the sculpted limestone.

Caught up in wonder, Tristan almost forgot he was supposed to capture the green vapor. Shaking himself, he reached for the top of the cloud and scooped a swath of green light into his jar. Capping the jar, he watched the others catching pieces of the magic cloud. It was an ethereal scene, the light playing across the cave formations while a cluster of glowworms shone like stars overhead.

Most of the students reached for the densest part of the vapor, though Amber quickly filled three jars with the trailing tendrils of haze, her face ghostly in the green light. That was his one advantage over these students, Tristan realized—he could not use magic with the ease they could, but he could see auras far better than most. It seemed a useless gift, but perhaps he could find a way to use it to his advantage.

At last the green vapor dissipated. Silence hung in the air long after the last jar had been capped and sealed.

Finally, with a sigh, Tony switched on his flashlight once more. “Cheers, Amber. That was a day’s worth of magic right there.”

Pavlina turned on her headlamp next, staring at the stalagmite throne with longing.

“Let’s keep this a secret,” Tony said. “We’ll harvest everything we can today, and the others don’t have to know a thing.”

“You’ve been here before, haven’t you?” Tristan asked as the others dispersed.

Tony gave him a sad smile. “I grew up in Nelson. My mum *hated* when I went off caving, but I was obsessed. I started exploring this cave when I was ten, and by the time I was sixteen, I could find my way through most of it in the dark.”

“Why’d you join Ilana?” Tristan whispered.

Tony shot him a look of warning. “You’re treading on dangerous grounds here, young mister.” Twisting the flashlight on and off in his hands, he said, “I was in Europe on my OE. Spent a year in Barcelona, practicing my really awful *español*, and then headed up to London to visit family. That’s when I met her.” His eyes grew distant at the memory. “She’s a good ten years older than me, but holy crap was she beautiful. Yes—I, being a complete fool, promised I’d do anything for her. And she’s never forgotten that promise.”

“What’s an OE?”

“Short for Overseas Experience,” Tony said. “It’s what all of us Kiwis and Aussies do. See a bit of the world before we tie ourselves down. I wish I’d bloody well stayed in Barcelona.” He blinked and seemed to remember suddenly where he was. “Get back to work. I can’t keep talking treason or someone’ll finish me off.”

As Tristan selected a hollow pickaxe and went to harvest more auras, his mind was still far away. How many of the teachers regretted joining Ilana? And how many students remembered a better life before she had taken them in?

If Drakewell had his way, he would wipe out the entire school’s population just to be safe. But Tristan couldn’t do it. Ilana had to be stopped, that much was certain, and Mordechai was, if anything, even worse. But the rest of them...

Was Stefan hiding his resentment of Ilana behind his harsh demeanor? Did tiny Helene remain silent because she was afraid, or because she had been trained to obey? And would Emma lose her childish innocence as she grew older, or did she have a spark of independence that could never be extinguished?

Five more jars joined his collection as he mulled over the question of who was genuinely loyal to Ilana. Was it worth sacrificing her innocent followers to ensure the academy was safe?

Of course, it was bigger than that. The whole world was at risk if Ilana wasn’t stopped soon, and Tristan couldn’t afford to be soft-hearted if it jeopardized their mission.

On the walk back, he followed the group in a daze, still thinking deeply about what Tony had said. The aura they had released from that cluster of stalagmites had been so beautiful, so hypnotic, that it felt like something out of another world—he suspected Tony had brought them down to that particular cave for a reason, and it had nothing to do with the amount of magic available for harvesting.

He was still walking as though half asleep when someone shoved him to the side. He stumbled two steps to his right as Blake said, “Whoops!”

The ground dropped out from under his feet.

He had stepped right into the empty shaft.

Chapter 10: What Lies Beneath

Tristan screamed, arms flailing wildly as he plummeted into the darkness.

As he howled, fear blinding him, something deep within him stirred. The air rushing past slowed as he yanked a burst of power from inside him.

A fierce gale swept up from the depths of the cave, slamming into him. It supported his weight, and little by little, tossed about on the wind, he was lowered to the bottom of the pit.

At last the wind stilled. Thoroughly shaken, Tristan lay on the uneven ground, staring at the tiny circle of light far above. He felt drained, his entire body bruised and wrung out, his vision swimming with haze.

“Tristan!” a voice called from far away.

It was Amber.

“I’m—down here,” he shouted back, winded.

“I’ll—”

Her voice faded to emptiness.

* * *

When Tristan regained consciousness, every inch of his body screamed in pain, only slightly dulled by the numbing cold. His headlamp was still glowing softly, though it had dimmed in the hours he had lain unconscious. Soon it would die, and he would be left in absolute darkness.

Where had the others gone? Had they abandoned him to his fate?

Why hadn’t Amber saved him?

Beside him lay the shattered remains of one of the jars he had been carrying. He must have dropped the other one in the passageway far above.

The bottom of this hole was less than two paces wide, though when he looked around a second time, he spotted a narrow slot leading off in a different direction. Praying his headlamp didn’t die on him, he stood gingerly and turned sideways to squeeze through the slot. His muscles screamed at the movement. This hurt more than any strength training session he had ever done, though he could see at once that physical strength would help mitigate the damage caused by such a reckless use of magic.

On the other side of the slot, the tunnel widened once more, the air of this cavern staler and thicker than the one he had just left. As Tristan started walking cautiously down the corridor, his muscles protesting with each step, he found that he was oddly triumphant. He had used his own magic again, and this time he had done something incredible.

Of course, that did nothing to help the fact that he was trapped in the depths of the Bulmer cave system with a dying flashlight and hardly enough warm layers to get him through the night.

Afraid that his headlamp would die at any moment, Tristan kept a careful eye on the passageway, looking for any side tunnels or pits that would trip him up if he lost the light. There were no diversions from the main route, though, aside from a few twisting side-passages close to the height of his head.

As he rounded a corner, he heard a faint trickling sound like a small stream flowing through the cave. He found the source of the noise before long—instead of hitting solid rock, his foot fell through the darkness and splashed into a puddle of water. Standing ankle-deep in the black water, he could feel the gentle stirring of a current. The wall to his right was wet; evidently the water was seeping down the rock and then flowing through the cave. Which meant there had to be a back exit of some sort.

Now his flashlight had reached its last minutes of life. The beam was hardly bright enough to illuminate his hands on the cave walls. Turning and stepping out of the stream, he started back the way he had come, his right sock squishing with each step. Ten steps later, the flashlight was nothing more than an irritating halo of light on

his forehead, so he switched it off and continued blindly. A more complete darkness he had never known—at once he felt suffocated and vertiginous, as though an endless drop waited before him and narrow walls were beginning to press in around him.

When he reached the narrow slot, he panicked for a moment, unable to figure out which way was forward. Trying to steady his breathing, he groped around the walls in search of a way through. At last he felt a narrow gap in the rock, farther to the left than he had remembered, and he slotted his shoulders into the opening, squeezing his hips through as an afterthought. It was very eerie down here with no light; he couldn't help but imagine he was sliding into his own tomb in a musty catacomb. The whole world could have ceased to exist up above, and he would never know.

As soon as he escaped into the round chamber at the bottom of the pit, he let out his breath.

Someone would find him eventually. Amber wouldn't just leave him down here. She must have been forced to continue with the class, but she wouldn't leave him down here for too long.

Would she?

There was nothing to do but wait. If the night passed without any sign of a rescuer, he would return the way he'd come and follow the underground stream to its exit.

Sinking down with his back against the uneven limestone wall, he wrapped his arms around his knees for warmth, his muscles still aching. Before he knew it, he had fallen into a doze.

He woke with a start to the sound of his name.

"Tristan! Where are you? Turn on your headlamp!"

It was Rajesh. His voice echoed oddly down the shaft, much farther away than he had realized.

"Tristan! I can see you down there." This time it was Amber who called.

Scrambling to his feet, Tristan shouted, "My headlamp is dead! Do you have a rope?"

"Yeah," Rajesh called back. His head appeared over the hole, face glowing in the light of a flashlight. "But how are you going to find it in the dark?"

"I'll figure it out," Tristan said.

A loud clanging echoed down the pit, metal thudding against metal, and after the sound had died away, Amber dropped a bundle of rope down the shaft. The rope uncoiled as it fell, disappearing beyond the reach of her headlamp, but Tristan heard it strike the floor beside him with a soft *whump*. He waved his hands before him until he found the rope, which he grasped like a lifeline.

"You ready?" he called. Even raising his hands over his head made his muscles scream.

"It's bolted into the ground," Rajesh shouted back. "You're good to go."

Hand over hand, Tristan began hauling himself up, blindly walking his feet up the wall and seeking purchase on the smooth limestone surface. People in movies made this look so easy; just a few feet off the ground, his arms were shaking from the effort of holding the rope, and his palms were raw and sweaty.

Slowly, ever so slowly, the light at the top of the hole grew closer. When he paused and risked glancing up, he could make out Amber's wide eyes and Rajesh's worried frown illuminated in the single flashlight.

Stopping had been a mistake. When he started hauling himself up again, his arms felt like they had turned to jelly. He was going to drop the rope; any second now he would go plummeting back into the darkness.

"I can't go much farther," he said. "Can you pull me up?"

Amber and Rajesh took hold of the rope, vanishing from the circle of light as they positioned themselves. All at once the wall was grazing Tristan's knees as he soared upward faster than he had been climbing. He clung desperately to the rope as he was dragged to the top of the pit; Amber and Rajesh only stopped when his hands had reached the rim.

"Can you pull yourself up?" Rajesh asked. "I don't want to hurt you."

Tristan kicked at the wall until he found a small slot for his feet. Straightening his legs, he heaved his body up until his chest flopped onto solid ground again. He rested for a moment, panting and bent double, until he had summoned up the strength to haul his legs over the lip of the hole onto the cave floor.

Cursing under his breath, he rolled over and stared at the ceiling. It was so good to see again.

"Sorry we took so long," Rajesh said, kneeling beside Tristan and untying the rope from a bolt he had driven into the cave floor. "I didn't know you were missing until we got back to the main cave. Stefan wouldn't let us go

off searching for you, but after dinner Tony slipped us a rope and that bolt, and Amber knew exactly where you were.”

“Tony seems like a decent person,” Amber said.

Tristan nodded. “I was talking to him earlier today. He wishes he’d never joined Ilana. I bet he’d help us if he had the chance.”

“Don’t count on it,” Rajesh said. “He won’t turn us in, but he definitely won’t stand up against Ilana.” He helped Tristan to his feet. “I chucked a few marbles into that hole you dug, by the way. We went looking for it on our way down here. You did a good job with it.”

“Thanks,” Tristan said. “I lost a couple marbles down there. The jars shattered when I fell.”

“Whatever,” Rajesh said. “We got plenty today. Tony won’t notice if any went missing.”

“Are you okay?” Amber asked. “You must have done a powerful spell to keep yourself safe.”

Tristan lifted his chin with pride. “I didn’t know what I was doing, but somehow I summoned up a big gust of wind that stopped me from falling. I passed out afterwards, though. And now everything hurts like hell.”

“Very impressive,” Amber said, giving him a brilliant smile.

Rajesh looped the rope over his arm. “Come on. Let’s get back before the teachers decide they’d rather do without us anyway.”

As they started back along the tunnel, Amber leading in the dark while Tristan wore her headlamp, Tristan glanced back at Rajesh. “You shouldn’t have come after me, you know. I’m glad you did, but the others won’t forget that you helped me.”

“I don’t care,” Rajesh said. “They’ll figure it out soon enough. As soon as Ilana gets here.”

“If they don’t catch us sneaking out every night first,” Tristan said.

“Speaking of which,” Rajesh said, “I talked to Pavlina. She’ll start stealing marbles for us tomorrow. We can take turns hiding them, once every five days.”

“Perfect,” Tristan said. “Be careful, though. We’ve stolen marbles before, and it’s easy to accidentally take too many. They’ll notice if the bottles aren’t producing as many as before.”

“You stole marbles before?” Rajesh sounded impressed. “Not from Ilana, did you?”

Tristan shook his head. “No way. When we first started at the Underground Academy, none of us knew what the marbles were being used for. We were afraid the teachers were doing something horrible, so we started hoarding our own marbles in case we needed to fight them someday.”

“And now you’ve agreed to risk your lives for them?”

“We’re not just doing it for them,” Tristan said. “Ilana has to be stopped, and we were the only ones she wanted to recruit.”

When they reached the cave entrance once more, Tristan and Rajesh lagged behind while Amber slipped into the main cave.

“I’ll pretend I wasn’t with you guys,” Tristan said. “Go on.”

He waited another ten minutes before crawling through the gap into the tunnel; when he dropped to his knees, he gasped in pain as his raw skin began to bleed once more. Blake looked up from his dinner in surprise, though his incredulity soon turned into a taunting smile. He had gotten away with his little prank, and had nearly killed Tristan in the process.

Tristan scraped up the last of the lentil-rice stew from the bottom of one of the camping pots, spooning globs of it into his metal cup before retreating to his bedroll to eat. Blake looked up at him with a knowing sneer, but the other students hardly spared him a glance. As warmth began to return to his stiff limbs, the ache in his knees intensified. He gritted his teeth and tried to ignore it until he had finished his dinner; at last he gave up and went in search of band-aids and antibacterial cream.

Tony was inspecting their day’s haul of marbles from his seat near the first-aid kit.

“You okay?” he asked in an undertone.

Tristan nodded.

“Stefan wouldn’t let anyone go after you. I told him Ilana would be furious if you vanished, but he wouldn’t have a word of it. Miserable bugger.”

“It’s fine. We didn’t come here to win Stefan’s friendship.”

Tony studied Tristan, who stuck two band-aids to each knee with unwonted concentration. “You’re playing a very dangerous game, young man.”

“I know what I’m doing,” Tristan said. “And I don’t want to get you involved.”

Getting to his feet, he shoved the paper scraps into his pocket. “I’m glad you took over our division, though.” He left Tony in the corner, examining the magic vapor that was just now congealing into green marbles. One of the jars held six marbles—Tristan knew whose that had to be.

* * *

The next two weeks passed far too quickly. Ilana drew closer by the day, and in the meantime they had only managed to stash fifty-odd marbles in the hole beside the cave mouth. It would hardly be enough to cause even a minor explosion. Amber was making good progress with the barrier, though. The frame had almost entirely taken shape, and all that remained was infusing it with magic so it would expand to guard the entrance to their cavern. Stefan would have preferred to seal off the entire cave mouth, but Tony pointed out that a bunch of tourists would notice if the cave that had starred as the Mines of Moria in *Lord of the Rings* suddenly vanished off the slopes of Mount Owen. And media attention was exactly what had ruined everything the first time around.

“Can you distract them with the barrier for a while?” Tristan asked Amber when she announced that the frame was done at last. “We need more marbles. I have to take some from the main pile, or we’ll never get enough in time.”

“I can try,” she said, pushing her dinner around on her plate. “There is a way to change it so animals and people with weaker auras are still able to pass through, and I can ask everyone to join me outside to help.” She looked terrified at the thought.

“Would you?” Tristan asked. “That would be amazing.”

“Don’t steal the marbles yourself,” Amber said urgently. “You’ll get caught. Ask one of the others to help you.”

“I’ll see,” Tristan said. He felt guilty asking anyone to take that risk.

“Tomorrow afternoon,” Amber said. “I’ll do it then. Make sure you use the time well. When do they think Ilana will arrive?”

“Ten days from now,” Tristan said flatly. “We’re dead.”

Amber bit her lip. “We’ve gotten too far to give up now. We can only try our best. Tomorrow.”

Tristan grimaced at her. Ever since that first week in New Zealand, he had barely had a minute alone with her. Even now, they were sitting off in a corner of the main cavern with their dinners on their knees, trying not to appear too much like they were scheming. That night up on the ice sheet was beginning to seem like nothing more than a dream.

He wanted to tell her how much he missed going for walks with her, how desperately he wished everyone else would just disappear, but their mission had consumed them both.

* * *

As soon as Rajesh heard their plan, he volunteered to steal as many marbles as he could get away with while Amber distracted the rest of the school.

“They already suspect you,” Tristan said. “It’d really be better if one of the others did it.”

“You think *Pavlina* is going to risk her life for us?” Rajesh made a face. “She hardly agreed to join us. And I don’t trust Ori.”

“Why not?”

Rajesh glanced at the other side of the room, where Ori was bouncing a rubber-band ball off the wall again and again. “He’s completely closed-off. Hasn’t revealed a thing since the day he arrived here—he won’t even talk to me now. I don’t know anything about his past, his family, his *anything*. He could be an alien for all we know.”

“At least that means he won’t talk, right? He seems trustworthy enough.”

“You think too highly of everyone,” Rajesh said drily. “You’re a fool to have trusted any of us.”

“You’ve already proved that wrong,” Tristan said. “It’s your choice—you or Ori. I’d do it myself, but Stefan’s going to notice if I’m missing.”

The following afternoon, right after lunch, Amber disappeared in the company of Stefan, Amelia, and two other teachers Tristan didn’t know. Before long, Stefan returned to summon the rest of the students onto the grassy shelf outside the cave.

“The barrier will go up tomorrow,” he announced. “Amber has suggested that we should program it to exclude any unfamiliar magicians but still allow tourists through. We have to acquaint it with our auras.”

It sounded like nonsense to Tristan; he had a funny feeling that Amber was just messing with Stefan. He followed the crowd through the narrow exit, unable to spot any of his allies in the melee. When he emerged into the sunlight, he spotted Pavlina, Ricardo, Blake, and Mei Ling, though as far as he could tell, Rajesh and Ori were both missing.

“Where’s Rajesh?” Blake asked pointedly, looking Tristan’s way.

He knew. He must have seen Rajesh helping Amber save him from the pit.

“Helene, please go fetch Rajesh,” Amelia said.

The tiny blonde girl turned mechanically and headed back into the shadow of the cave. Before she had disappeared around the corner, a shadow emerged.

“I’m here,” Rajesh said. “Sorry. I lost my shoes.”

It was Ori who would be doing their dirty work, then. Tristan had spoken with confidence, but he hardly knew Ori. He had no idea whether or not he was to be trusted.

“Good,” Stefan said with mild irritation. “Let’s begin.”

Forming a line that circled around the flat space, they approached what looked like an intricately-woven basket and took turns infusing it with their auras. It could be that this would exclude everyone who was not currently present from passing through the barrier, or it could be a farce designed for distraction and nothing more. Just after Tristan had taken his turn, Ori sidled out of the cave to join the line, his forehead damp with perspiration.

For better or worse, the job was done.

It wasn’t until late that night that Tristan got confirmation of Ori’s work. Rajesh challenged Tristan to a game of chess with a makeshift board drawn on a flattened cardboard box, and as they were setting up, he whispered, “He’s done it. They’re in a pair of boxes in the dump-heap.” He raised his voice. “That’s supposed to be a bishop, not the king. See the pointy hat?”

Tristan raised his eyebrows at the dried-up mushroom he was using as a chess piece. “Which one’s the king, then?”

“That funny piece of bark.”

The game ended quickly—Tristan won, to his surprise, though that might have been because he couldn’t tell the difference between his queen and his left-hand castle.

“Nine days until Ilana’s here,” Rajesh said offhandedly as they swept the remaining chess pieces off the cardboard box.

“It’s not enough time.” Tristan crawled into his sleeping bag, searching the room for Amber, Pavlina, and Ori, who were each wrapped up in their own pursuits—Amber was lying on her back and studying the glowworms with fierce concentration, Pavlina was reading something she must have picked up at an airport, and Ori was braiding a set of thin cords together. “I shouldn’t have dragged you into this. Any of you.”

Rajesh ran a hand through his short hair. “I’m glad you did. I would’ve snapped someday if you hadn’t, and they would’ve killed me.”

* * *

The following night, Tristan waited until several hours had gone by since the last person had stirred. Then, holding his breath, he slipped out of his unzipped sleeping bag and tiptoed along the narrow gap between mats, trusting the glowworms to light his way. He couldn’t afford to turn on his flashlight.

Outside, he let out his breath and made for the trash heap, where he rummaged through boxes and cans and

plastic wrap until he found a mangled cereal-box that weighed more than it should have. Inside, more than a hundred gold, green, and blue marbles were packed close together.

Cradling the box in his arms, he crept to the cave mouth, where the moon seemed as bright as daylight after the darkness of the cavern. He wondered if he was beginning to acquire Amber's ability to see in the dark; when he had first arrived in New Zealand, he was almost certain the glowworms had not cast enough light to see by.

The rectangular hole was as well-hidden as always. Scanning the clearing for any sign of movement, he dropped to his knees, lifted the corrugated metal lid, and dumped the entire box of marbles into the depths of the hole. It was getting close to half-full now; they were still miles from finishing, but with any luck they would be able to do some damage with what they had here.

Leaving the night as still as ever, Tristan sneaked back into the cave to retrieve the second box of marbles. This one took more digging than the first, but at last he shoved aside a worn-out backpack filled with rocks and found a square box that had once held a set of camping pots. It was twice as heavy as the first box—Ori had done a brilliant job.

Outside, he knelt and added this second pile to the first. The stash of marbles nearly doubled as he overturned this box, and he winced at the clatter.

Then something caught his attention.

Footsteps.

After a pause, a scrawny figure emerged from the cave with a backpack on his shoulders that had been stuffed near to bursting.

It was Landen. Tristan had nearly forgotten about the irritating kid from the plane. "Where are you going?" he whispered.

"Nowhere," Landen said coldly.

"You're not running away, are you?"

"What's it to you? You won't report me. What're you doing, anyway? Doesn't look right." He crept closer and peered into the hole Tristan had dug.

"Nothing."

"Can I help?"

"No. If you want to run away, go." Tristan grabbed the trowel he had left under the bushes and started scraping dirt over the marbles.

"Are you sure I can't help?"

"Yes! Now get away from here!"

Landen gave Tristan a spiteful look. "You'll wish you hadn't said that."

"What d'you—"

Opening his mouth, Landen gave a horrible, inhuman scream that startled a few bats hanging in the cave entrance. As the bats took wing, Landen turned and sprinted off into the darkness, his backpack clanging with each footfall.

A second too late, Tristan realized he couldn't hide the marbles in time. Someone was already approaching the cave mouth, headlamp splitting the darkness. Throwing his trowel aside, Tristan kicked the trapdoor closed and straightened, pretending to do up his fly.

"What are you doing out here, boy?"

Tristan froze. It was Mordechai. "J-just watering some grass," he mumbled.

"Like hell you were. Get away from there." With one beefy hand, he shoved Tristan away from the trapdoor. Raising his voice, he yelled, "Backup! I've got trouble!"

Someone else must have heard Landen's scream, because three more figures were already emerging from the cave mouth as he shouted. Another ten came scrambling up behind them; before long the entire school's population was clustered around Mordechai and Tristan, outlines blurred in the moonlight.

Tristan couldn't think straight. He had just ruined his only chance to stop Ilana; if he didn't flee, he and Amber would likely be killed. But though his feet itched to set off running into the wilderness, he stood his ground. Too much had gone into this plan to let it fall apart so easily.

"What is it?" Amelia asked, hands on her hips. "I hope you haven't made a fuss for nothing."

A hazy plan was beginning to take shape. As Mordechai dropped to his knees to feel for the trapdoor he had seen, Tristan backed into the crowd of students until he was no longer at the center of attention. Amber grabbed his sleeve.

“What now?” she breathed in his ear.

“Is that barrier ready?” he hissed.

“Yes.”

“How fast can we put it up?”

She was silent for a long time. “In five minutes, if we do it right the first time.”

Tristan ground his teeth in frustration. This would be impossibly dangerous, and their chances of success were so slim as to be nonexistent. But he had to try.

“Get the others into the cave,” he whispered. “I’ll come last.”

Amber’s eyes widened in understanding. She slid between Ricardo and a short girl to reach Pavlina, whose expression was as closed as always.

In the middle of the circle, Mordechai had just found the trapdoor and lifted it triumphantly free of the ground.

“That’s what this must be for,” Stefan said, kicking the trowel.

“What’s in it?” Blake asked, shoving his way to the front of the group.

Out of the corner of his eye, Tristan saw Pavlina conferring in an undertone with Ori, who then moved off to speak to Rajesh. Ducking down, Pavlina extracted herself from the group and melted into the shadows of the cave. Amber must have been waiting there already, because there was no sign of her outside.

“Marbles,” Mordechai said harshly. “*Someone* has been stealing from us.” He leaned over the hole and dragged out a handful of gold marbles, which he flung across the trampled dirt.

Tristan thought it would be prudent of him to vanish before Mordechai drew attention his way once more. As the students crowded closer to the pit, he ducked between them and slipped into the cave. The shadows swallowed him at once, and no one looked his way. Breathing as softly as he could, he felt his way forward.

“Amber? Pavlina?” he whispered.

“Here,” Amber said. She reached for his elbow in the dark. “We can’t risk lights. Can you feel this?” She pressed the frame of the barrier into his hands. “There’s Rajesh and Ori.” She could see in the dark just as well as she could in broad daylight.

“Got it. Do we all have to be holding it?”

“Yes.”

Another shape approached, and Tristan froze in fear.

“It’s okay.” The voice was soft and frightened. “I want to help.”

Mei Ling? Rajesh must have grabbed her at the last minute.

“We need to hold hands, and I will direct our power into the barrier,” Amber whispered. “Theoretically this should work, but—”

“Just tell us what to do,” Tristan said. They were running out of time.

“Send me your power,” she said. “As much as you can spare. Use a marble if you must.”

Tristan grabbed a marble from his pocket before linking hands with Amber and Rajesh; he didn’t trust himself to call upon his own power. Just as he had done at the academy, he closed his eyes, took the marble’s power into himself, and sent it to Amber. Her hand grew warmer as the combined power began to build within her, until her skin was so fiery Tristan almost released his grip.

His part was done. The rest was up to Amber.

Opening his eyes, he turned to look at the clustered students just outside the cave.

“What’s this about?” Tony was asking sleepily. “Why would anyone bury heaps of marbles here, anyway?”

“Ask Tristan,” Mordechai growled. “He’s the one I caught here. I *told* Ilana he was trouble. That bastard’s had it in for us from the start.”

Tristan stiffened. How much longer would Amber take?

“Where’s he gone?” Stefan asked, scanning the heads of the students.

“He was just there,” Mordechai said. “Find him! He must’ve run off. He knows we’ll slaughter him if we ever

see him again.”

“Don’t be so dramatic,” Amelia said. “He’s Ilana’s to question. No one’s getting killed tonight, understood? Students, please stay where you are. Teachers, spread out and search the hillside.”

“What if he’s inside the cave?” Blake asked.

“Then he’s an idiot,” Mordechai growled. “But go on, search if you want.”

Tristan looked desperately at Amber. Though he couldn’t make out her features in the darkness, he knew she stood unmoving, the heat slowly draining from her palm.

Headlamps were turning on all throughout the crowd outside, and one outline detached itself from the group, moving towards the cave mouth.

Tristan held his breath, nerves tingling, and willed Amber to work faster.

As Blake lifted his face, his flashlight beam fell on Rajesh’s feet.

Tristan tensed, ready to run if he had to.

Straightening in triumph, Blake strode forward into the cave. “I’ve got you! Don’t even think about running.” When he was close enough to cast light on every student in Tristan’s circle, he turned and yelled, “Mordechai! He’s here! And he’s not alone.” He whirled back to face Rajesh and the others. “Traitors. You’ll pay for this.”

“Amber,” Tristan said urgently. “Amber, they’re here. Are you almost done?”

Still she did not move. She might have turned to stone.

“We’ve got to run,” Rajesh said, his face drained of color. “They’ll kill us.”

“Wait,” Tristan said. “Don’t let go yet. We have to give her a chance.”

Mei Ling stared at him in horror.

Tristan wished she had saved herself and stayed outside. With one fatal decision, she had lost everything.

Mordechai was lumbering toward the cave mouth, brandishing the muddy trowel as though he intended to use it as a weapon. Some of the younger students scattered, while a few others inched forward in curiosity.

Suddenly, he ran headlong into something that Tristan couldn’t see.

With a yowl of pain, he reeled backward, nearly crushing Emma as he fell.

“What’s wrong?” Stefan called from farther down the slope.

Ricardo ventured forward two steps, hand outstretched, and stopped abruptly. He slapped his hands against something in midair but could go no farther.

Drawing in a sharp breath, Tristan turned to Amber. “It worked!”

Her eyes flew open, and she released his hand. “Yes. I think it did.” In the light from Blake’s headlamp, he could see a faint smile growing on her lips.

All at once, Blake realized he was alone. Tristan, Rajesh, and Pavlina turned on him, and he stumbled backwards, nearly tripping over a broken stalagmite.

“Cowards,” he spat. “Traitors and cowards!”

Seconds later, he had slipped past the invisible barrier onto the grass outside.

“You did it!” Tristan said. He hugged Amber and punched Rajesh in the shoulder. “I can’t believe it. We’re safe!”

“Apart from Blake,” Amber said. “He can get through.”

“Who cares?” Tristan said. “He can’t hurt us.”

Chapter 11: Into Darkness

Suddenly everything had turned upside down. Ilana's followers were left with nothing but the meager stash of marbles Tristan had managed to bury outside, while he, Amber, Rajesh, Pavlina, Ori, and Mei Ling had access to thousands of marbles stored in the deep wooden frame Stefan had nailed together.

The only problem was that they couldn't leave the cave without risking their lives. Several times they had gone to the cave mouth to spy on the rest of the school, and every time there had been a minimum of ten students and teachers guarding the entrance. The students on the outside could see through the barrier, but they couldn't get through no matter how hard they tried.

The rest of the school must have relocated into the forest far below, where the patchy snow didn't cover the ground, because no tents or supplies materialized on the shelf outside the cave. He assumed they would head back into Nelson and resupply at once, since they would otherwise be left with nothing but the clothes they had been wearing when Mordechai called them outside.

For the first day they spent alone in the cave, Tristan and Amber made plans with their allies and took stock of their supplies. It was such a novelty to be able to talk in the open that they piled up most of the sleeping mats together and sat in a circle simply discussing what they should do. Though he said nothing about it, Rajesh looked quietly elated; Tristan caught him grinning to himself whenever he thought no one was looking. And the source of his newfound joy was evidently Mei Ling, who had at long last given in to his persuasion. She must have been listening to his whispered commentary all along, sitting in stony silence so she could not be blamed if someone noticed his subversion.

"We've got a year's supply of food," Tristan said. "That's not a problem. And there are still twelve gas canisters here. Seven of them haven't even been used."

"The only thing we're in danger of running out of is flashlight batteries," Rajesh said. "Everyone brought their headlamps out last night, and we've only got six spares."

Tristan immediately flicked his headlamp off. "Well, we don't need them while we're just sitting here."

The others followed suit.

"Is this why you came here?" Mei Ling asked shyly. "To overthrow Ilana?"

"Yes," Amber said. "We were the only ones who stood a chance against her."

"That's so brave it's stupid," Ori said. "Ilana doesn't just get rid of anyone who threatens her. She tortures them until they're begging to die. Then she turns them into her most loyal pets."

Pavlina made a small noise of assent. "Stefan was one of them. He may act like he cares about us, but he's lost his own free will. He would do anything Ilana asked of him in a heartbeat."

"It's true," Rajesh said. "People just don't go against Ilana. If someone even hints at rebellion, they'll vanish. Some of them return, and some of them just—don't. I don't know if she kills them right away or tortures them slowly to death, but I'm sure she enjoys it. No one would willingly risk that."

"Except all of you," Tristan said. He couldn't see the others, but he knew they listened in rapt attention. "Why did you change your minds?"

"I've been waiting for this chance all along," Rajesh said flatly. "I don't care if I die. I won't sit and pretend I agree with her any longer."

"Ilana being away has made us reckless," Mei Ling said softly. "It was a mistake to listen to you and Rajesh, but—"

"But this life isn't worth living," Ori said.

Rajesh shifted to Tristan's left. "Exactly. So, what are we going to do? We're stuck in here, and they're stuck out there. And once Ilana gets here, there's no way in hell we're getting past her. Once she's done killing everyone

for disobeying her, she'll finish us off."

Tristan looked up at the glowworms for inspiration. "We have to do something they won't expect. And we *have* to destroy that globe. That's the only reason we're here. To stop Ilana."

* * *

That evening, clouds began to gather just before sunset, and a howling gale picked up overnight.

A damp chill had settled in the cavern while they slept, and when Tristan ventured to the cave mouth, he discovered a fresh blanket of snow that had robed every rock and bush in two inches of white powder. The clouds lingered through the day, soft flakes drifting down to settle on the white ground, and the students tasked with guarding the cave entrance were wrapped in every layer they owned, socks taking the place of gloves on their hands.

Even inside the cave, the temperature continued to drop several degrees as the day lengthened, the wind swirling through the low entrance to chill the main cavern, which no longer benefitted from the heat of nearly eighty bodies. Tristan and his allies spent the day huddled in their sleeping bags, only venturing out to cook meals and visit the composting toilet.

As they settled in for dinner, discouraged after a day of fruitless brainstorming, Tristan remembered something important.

"Remember when I fell down that hole?"

Rajesh laughed. "None of us are going to forget that easily."

"Well, there was a little stream down there. It must lead out somewhere, right? So there has to be a back exit."

By the light of Pavlina's single headlamp, Tristan saw Rajesh grimace. "I really, *really* don't like tight spaces. What if we get stuck down there? What if it's such a tiny exit we can't get through, and we get lost on our way back?"

"We'll be careful," Tristan said. "Do we have any extra-long ropes we can use to guide our way?"

"Just the one we used before," Rajesh said. "All the others are tiny. They probably wouldn't stretch the length of this cavern, even if you tied them all together."

"What about that bolt you used to secure the rope? Are there more of those?"

Amber nodded. "At least ten of them, I think. Tony thought we might be rappelling deep into the cave to collect earth magic before long."

Tristan grinned. "I bet he just wanted an excuse to explore. He knows this cave inside out, apparently."

"He might know if there are any back entrances," Ori said worriedly. "You don't think he'll tell the others?"

"No." Tristan was certain of it. "He won't give us away."

* * *

The following morning, they gathered every headlamp and battery they could find and started down the widest tunnel, Tristan carrying the rope over his arm and Pavlina resting the sledgehammer on one shoulder.

"I still don't want to go down there until we know we won't get lost," Rajesh said.

"We only have six days until Ilana gets here," Tristan reminded him. "No time to lose."

"It's just another cave," Mei Ling said softly. "Why is that one so much worse than this?"

"Because it's down at the bottom of a bloody pit," Rajesh grumbled. "You can't just walk out if you're sick of being underground."

"Fine," Tristan said. "We won't go down today. We'll set up the rope, and that's all. But we don't have time to waste. Someone has to figure out a guide-rope by tomorrow. Otherwise, I'm going down alone."

"I'm coming with you," Amber said.

Silently, Tristan thanked her for the vote of confidence.

Working together, they were able to hammer three anchors into the rock and thread the rope through all three before dropping it down the pit.

“Sure you don’t want to try it out?” Tristan teased Rajesh.

“Oh, shut up.”

They spent all night brainstorming, while Ori undid the twine he’d braided and tied together every scrap of rope and fabric he could dig up. It wasn’t nearly enough, but the following morning Rajesh agreed to follow them into the abyss to explore.

“Five days,” Tristan reminded the others as Ori started down the rope.

“That wasn’t an exact date,” Rajesh said. His temper had been shorter than usual these past two days; he was clearly dreading their little expedition more than he let on. “Maybe she’s been delayed. Or maybe she’s already here.”

“If she were here, we’d know,” Mei Ling said.

Her voice seemed to quiet Rajesh’s fears better than anything Tristan could say. “Right. Let’s get this over with.” He raised his voice. “You at the bottom yet, Ori?”

“Yeah!”

Paler than usual, Rajesh grasped the rope and lowered himself over the lip of the hole. As he began inching his way down, he squeezed his eyes shut. Ten minutes passed before he called, “I’m down!”

Tristan let Mei Ling descend next, hoping her presence would keep Rajesh from panicking. When Pavlina had gone, Tristan shared a look of worry with Amber.

“This isn’t going well,” he whispered.

She shook her head. “Everyone knows we’re traitors now. We no longer have surprise on our side.”

“Do you think it’ll work?”

Amber bit her lip. “I doubt it.”

Tristan slid down the rope then, because he didn’t want to think about their impending doom, and Amber joined him within minutes. Rajesh had tied their knotted-up assortment of strings to the end of the rope, and as soon as Amber touched the ground, he said, “Let’s get this over with.”

Ori led the way through the narrow slot into the passageway beyond. The whole tunnel looked much less dreary now that there were six of them filling it, their headlamps casting the curving limestone into gentle relief.

“I can hardly breathe,” Rajesh whispered. “The air is so thick.”

“You’re just making that up,” Pavlina said.

“I know what you mean,” Tristan said. “It does seem mustier down here. But we’re fine.”

Around the next corner, their pieced-together line ran out all at once.

“That’s it,” Rajesh said. “I’m going back.”

“The stream’s just a little farther,” Tristan said. “There aren’t any side passages down here. Last time my headlamp was dead, and I found my way just fine.”

“No way.” Rajesh backed up, clutching the end of the last piece of twine. “I’m not going anywhere.”

“Fine.” Tristan squeezed his way to the front of the group. “We’ll meet you back here, then.”

Amber and the other four followed Tristan up a short rise and along a high-ceilinged passageway.

“Not much farther,” Tristan said.

Though he had been expecting it, he still gave a start when his foot splashed into the stream.

“Humph. I guess we’re here.”

Stepping back and shaking water from his pant leg, he let the others crowd forward to take a look at the stream.

“Turn your lights off,” Amber said. “I want to see if any sunlight shows through.”

They obeyed, standing in silence as Amber crept forward in search of light. Tristan had a feeling she was stepping on the surface of the water now, just as she did with snow. Was there any limit to her ability to walk on water? Could she stroll across the entire ocean if she tried?

“Nothing,” she said at last. “It must come out somewhere, but we’ll have to follow it to see the end. And I think the water gets deeper here.”

As she returned to the water’s edge, Tristan turned his headlamp on again and examined the inky black pool at his feet.

“We should get back before Rajesh goes mental,” Ori said wryly.

“Good point. Come on.”

They retraced their steps through the tunnel; Tristan knew they were approaching Rajesh long before he came in sight, because his ragged, panicked breathing filled the tunnel.

“You okay?” Ori asked brightly when he spotted Rajesh.

Rajesh glared at him. “Let’s get the hell out of here.”

Though he said nothing, Tristan had to admit it was a relief when he reached the top of the rope and flopped back onto the rocky floor of the main cave. The weight in his chest eased slightly, and somehow the gloom seemed less overpowering.

That night, they debated their options with more intensity than before. Ilana would arrive any day now, and still they lacked a true plan. Amber argued that she would be able to find her way through the underground labyrinth without trouble, but Rajesh refused to go down the shaft again until they had a proper rope to guide their way.

“There has to be something we can use,” Pavlina insisted.

While they talked, she sorted through the piles of clothing the other students had left behind. It wasn’t until hours later that Tristan realized what she had been doing—as he handed her a cup of soggy pasta, he spotted a pile of bent-up yarn beside her and a single piece of fabric on her lap. She’d been unwinding someone’s sweater so they could use the string to mark their way.

“Rajesh!” Tristan beckoned him over. “Look at this! You ready to find a way out tomorrow?”

Spotting the messy pile of yarn that Pavlina was just beginning to wind into a ball, Rajesh shook his head. “You win. I’ll do it.”

Tristan grinned. “Thanks, Pavlina.”

She gave him a half-smile as if to say, “I told you so.”

“What are we going to do if we find a way out?” Rajesh asked.

“We have to figure out some way to ambush Ilana when she arrives,” Tristan said. “I have no idea how. Hopefully she’ll be distracted with the barrier, so we’ll be able to get close enough to destroy that globe.”

“How will we do that?”

“Throw a sack full of marbles at the globe, with a lit match and a fuel canister,” Ori suggested from the other side of the cavern.

Tristan nodded. “That’s probably our best chance. Then we run like mad.”

“What happens afterwards?” Rajesh asked. “Can we come with you? Or would your headmaster kill us?”

“He wouldn’t,” Tristan said. “You have to come. If you want to, I mean.”

“I will,” Rajesh said. “I don’t have anything else to go back to.”

“Same,” Pavlina said.

They looked at Ori. He pretended to take great interest in his lumpy pasta. “I’ve got a family who still remembers me,” he muttered. “I’ve never said a word, because I was scared Ilana would kill them off if she knew. I have to go home to them.”

“You should,” Tristan said. “You’re very lucky to have them.”

“Are you sure your headmaster won’t hate us for what we’ve done?” Mei Ling asked. She sat against the far wall, hugging her knees with a mournful expression.

“Of course not,” Tristan said. “We couldn’t have managed any of this without you.”

Rajesh cautiously approached Mei Ling. “You don’t regret joining us, do you?”

She shook her head fiercely. “Never.”

* * *

Tristan had hardly drifted off to sleep when he heard a commotion. Struggling to rouse himself, he reached for his headlamp and switched it on.

Someone yelled.

“What’s going on?” Rajesh shouted.

Two voices were yelling now, and in the weak glow of his light, Tristan could make out a tangle of bodies

locked in some sort of struggle.

One of the yells turned to a scream.

“Get off me!”

It was Ori.

Struggling out of his sleeping bag, Tristan bounded over to the wrestling pair. Only when he got closer did he recognize the second boy—Blake.

And he was holding a knife to Ori’s throat.

“Leave us alone!” Tristan shouted. He reached in his pocket for a marble, but found none. Unable to summon up any magic, he hurtled into Blake and slammed his fists into the bigger boy’s ribcage.

Blake twisted and threw Tristan off as easily as if he was swatting away a cat. He released Ori’s neck in the process, though, and Ori took advantage of the opening to drag himself away.

“Traitor,” Blake growled. Turning away from Tristan, he thrust his knife at Ori’s thigh and sunk the blade in up to the hilt.

Ori howled in pain. As Tristan threw himself at Blake once more, Ori curled his leg to his chest, tears spilling from his eyes.

Rajesh came barreling into Blake just then, and for the first time he was overpowered. He crashed onto his side, but he recovered quickly.

“You’ll pay for this,” he yelled, jumping to his feet and facing down Tristan and Rajesh. As he raised his bloodied knife and lunged for Tristan, something moved in the shadows.

With a short gasp, Blake toppled to his knees. His eyes bulged, and he seemed to be struggling for air.

Amber stepped into the light cast by Tristan’s headlamp, watching Blake with regret.

“You had to be stopped,” she said softly.

With a final convulsion, Blake grew still.

“You killed him,” Rajesh said in awe.

Tristan studied Amber for a long time; when she noticed, she gave him a small, grim nod. She would not retreat into herself again. The time for that was over.

No one remembered Ori until he choked out another sob and rolled onto his side.

“Ori!” Pavlina ran to his side. “Ori, are you okay?”

The others crowded around him, Blake already forgotten. Blood was pooling beneath his legs, dripping from between his fingers where he had clamped them over the deep wound.

“Amber,” Tristan said in a low voice. “Can you help him?” He didn’t want to get their hopes up if she couldn’t.

“I can try. This is—worse than anything I’ve healed before, though.”

Kneeling smoothly beside Ori, heedless of the blood that was now soaking into her pants, Amber lifted his hands aside and touched the skin that showed beneath his torn jeans. Though Ori howled in pain, he held himself motionless while Amber examined the wound.

“Can you give me a bit more power?” she asked Tristan. “I don’t have enough to draw on down here.”

He didn’t have time to fetch a marble this time. Ori’s face had gone pale and his heartbeat ragged. Grabbing Amber’s hand, he reached deep into himself, shutting out everything until he thought he could feel the well of power waiting to be called upon. He drew on as much of it as he dared and sent it spiraling towards Amber, whose skin gave a jolt like static electricity as she received the power.

Tristan could hardly believe it had worked.

All four of them waited, motionless, as Amber bent her head over Ori’s wound. For the longest time, nothing happened. The only sound came from a steady drip of water pattering onto the stone floor.

At last, Amber slumped back, her already white face completely drained of color.

“Will he be okay?” Mei Ling asked nervously.

“I don’t know,” Amber said. “I’m sorry.”

Pavlina handed Tristan a sock, which he wetted and used to sponge blood away from the wound. Ori didn’t flinch this time; he had lost consciousness. As the blood cleared, Tristan thought he could see a line of raw, barely-healed skin beneath. The scar was pink and angry-looking, but at least Ori was no longer bleeding.

"It looks like he's going to recover," Tristan said, dabbing away the last of the blood and tossing the filthy sock aside.

"If he hasn't lost too much blood," Rajesh said. "I guess we just have to wait until he wakes up."

"I healed the skin," Amber said, "but the knife cut right through his muscles. Those I couldn't fix. Not here. He might not walk again for a long time."

Pavlina's eyes widened in horror. "But Ilana's about to return!"

"We'll wait until morning to decide what we do," Tristan said heavily. "Hopefully he'll be awake by then."

While Tristan and Amber went off to rinse their hands with a discarded water bottle, Pavlina shifted Ori's head onto a pillow and nudged him gently onto a sleeping mat. Then she unzipped a sleeping bag and tucked it around his still form.

"Should we do something about him?" Rajesh asked, jerking a thumb back at Blake's lifeless body.

"He'll be fine here," Tristan said coolly. "They'll see him if we drag him anywhere else, and they'll probably blow this place up if they find out what we've done."

"Maybe," Rajesh said. "I don't think Ilana loved Blake as much as he thought she did."

Tristan didn't sleep at all that night. Despite his feigned nonchalance, he was uneasy with the thought that they were sharing the room with a dead body. He kept imagining he saw shapes moving around the room—Blake's ghost, or even Ori's—and had to turn on his headlamp twice inside his sleeping bag to remind himself what was real.

He woke with a pounding headache to find that Rajesh and Pavlina were already awake and tending to Ori. Rubbing his eyes, he joined them by the mountain of canned food. Ori was awake, propped against four sleeping bags in their stuff-sacks, and he had regained his normal color.

"Rajesh says you and Amber saved me," he said, smiling wanly as Tristan took a seat beside him.

"It was j-just Amber." Tristan yawned hugely. "How are you feeling?"

"Effing miserable. I can't move my leg—it hurts too much." All of this was said in an incongruously light tone. "Look, Tristan. These guys won't listen to me, but I'm going to have to stay behind. I can't move, damn it! You're *not* allowed to just sit here with me and wait to die."

"You're not staying behind to die, either," Rajesh said fiercely. "What about your family?"

Ori blanched, but he quickly smoothed his expression. "They think I'm dead anyway. They can cope with it."

The noise had roused Mei Ling and Amber, who stumbled over to join the others beside Ori. Amber had dark circles under her eyes, and her face was still drained of color—clearly she had pushed herself harder than she would admit.

And it still wouldn't be enough.

Tristan wondered if it would have been kinder to let Ori bleed out on the cavern floor. He was likely to die no matter what they did, but at least that way it would have been a horrible accident rather than the result of someone's decision.

"You're not doing very well, are you?" Amber asked softly as she took a seat beside Ori. Though he tried to brush her away, she untied the bandana he'd knotted around his leg and examined the puckered pink scar. "I healed the skin, but everything else is still broken. You might not be able to walk yet."

"It's fine," Ori said offhandedly. "What's a bit of mobility when I'm alive?"

"How long until he recovers?" Rajesh asked.

Amber didn't meet his eyes. "If I could get him outside, I could finish the job. But without help, he will take weeks to heal."

Ori sat up straighter than before and tugged his jeans down so the wound was no longer exposed beneath the hole Blake's knife had left behind. "Listen. You've got to leave me here. I'll be *fine*."

"And what happens when the teachers get in?" Pavlina said coldly. "Are you just planning to smile at them and pretend we kidnapped you?"

"What happens if they blast their way in and we're all here?" Ori countered. "They won't even stop to ask questions. We're dead if they find us."

"Maybe we could carry you," Rajesh said.

“Don’t be stupid. How are you going to get me down that pit? Or through any of the narrow bits? What if you have to climb something while you’re down there?” Ori shook his head. “I’d rather be stuck here than down there.”

Tristan folded his arms. “We can decide later. Right now we have to pack. Each of us should grab enough food to last the group two days, and then take as many marbles as you can carry. Don’t forget your sleeping bags.”

“What about tents?” Rajesh asked.

“I have a feeling we’re going to be on the run as soon as Ilana gets back. Tents will be too hard to set up, and too obvious.”

With great reluctance, the others left Ori’s side and began packing. Tristan wished they would move faster; Pavlina seemed to be deliberately taking her time, perhaps hoping Ori would make a miraculous recovery in the extra minutes she was affording him.

At long last, Tristan and his four allies had snapped their bags closed and tied their shoelaces.

“Does anyone have a map?” Tristan asked, trying not to look at Ori.

“I found one in Tony’s stuff,” Rajesh said. “I’ll show you once we’re outside.”

Tristan nodded.

“I don’t want to leave him,” Pavlina said, her backpack lying neglected at her feet.

“You’d better go,” Ori snapped. “I’m going to start throwing rocks at you if you don’t leave soon.”

“Come on,” Tristan said heavily. “We have to get out of here.” Hoisting his backpack onto his shoulders, he leaned over and clasped Ori’s hand one last time. Ori nodded, his expression closed-off.

Then, not waiting to see who followed, he turned and left the main cavern.

Amber joined him in the cave mouth immediately, and they both kept to the shadows so the students outside wouldn’t catch sight of them. Five minutes passed with no sign of the others.

“If they don’t come, we’ll have to do this alone,” Tristan said quietly.

“I know.” Amber leaned against a large rock, resting her backpack on the stone. “I thought it would be this way all along.”

“Why?”

She glanced back at the cave mouth. “I don’t trust people. No one is as good as their word.”

“I trust them,” Tristan said. “They’re not betraying us if they stay behind. I don’t blame them if they don’t want to leave Ori for dead.”

Just as he turned and started down the tunnel, flashlight still off so he wouldn’t attract attention, he heard soft footsteps behind him.

Rajesh, Mei Ling, and Pavlina had emerged from the cave, backpacks on, faces lined with sorrow.

“I hardly even knew him before we came here,” Rajesh said softly as he fell into step behind Tristan. “I never actually talked to anyone before this. But—losing someone, so soon after I started caring again...”

“I know,” Tristan muttered. “It’s the worst thing I could imagine.”

He thought he could imagine how it felt. Leaving the Lair, knowing he would likely never see his friends again—it had hurt more than he could say.

Around another bend, Amber switched on her headlamp and the others followed suit. They were silent apart from the clanking of their overstuffed backpacks.

When they reached the pit, Tristan slid down the rope first. The others took turns tying their backpacks to the end of the rope and lowering them to the bottom, where Tristan undid the knots and stuffed the packs one at a time through the slot. Once the others had joined him, they squeezed through the slot and started along the narrow passageway. Though Rajesh moved stiffly, he didn’t utter a word of complaint.

At the underground brook, Amber led the way forward, this time allowing the water to flood her shoes. Tristan followed reluctantly, bracing himself for the cold. It was chilly, but not numbingly so, and after a few steps he grew acclimated to the temperature.

Then, all at once, the ground dropped out beneath him.

“Damn it,” he said under his breath, feeling for the ground past the shelf.

“Oh, no,” Rajesh said. “I don’t like the look of this.”

Sinking up to his waist, Tristan finally touched solid rock. “We’ve come this far already. Do you want to go

back?”

“No!” With a scowl, Rajesh followed, his face screwed up as the water rose to his hips. Poor Mei Ling had water up to her ribcage—her sleeping bag would be soaked. Of course, they didn’t know what lay ahead. They might all be swimming before long.

Little by little, they made their way through the water, each breathing a sigh of relief as it began to recede.

“How much longer is this going to go for?” Rajesh asked darkly.

“Don’t ask me,” Tristan said. “I’ve never been this way before.”

Around one corner, Tristan heard a sudden splash.

“What’s that?” Pavlina said in alarm.

Tristan jumped at the sight of ten writhing forms like tiny snakes hovering just beneath the surface of the water.

“I think they’re eels,” Mei Ling said, bending forward with interest.

Pavlina scrambled backwards onto a ledge safely out of the water. “What if they’re poisonous?”

“I’m sure they’re fine,” Tristan said. He was already on edge without Rajesh and Pavlina making things worse. As he forged on past the eels, Pavlina and Rajesh climbed onto the side shelf and edged over the pool. One eel escaped the indentation in the rock where it had hovered and darted upstream, and Mei Ling giggled in surprise as it wriggled past her. He had never heard her laugh before.

It seemed that a lifetime passed in that narrow tunnel, the walls echoing with the sloshing of water. If Tristan hadn’t been so worried about what would happen once they made their way out, he might have enjoyed the adventure; as it was, he couldn’t tear his mind from Ilana and Stefan and poor Ori. He could no longer feel the cold of the water, though his body temperature was steadily dropping; he would start shivering before long.

Would Ilana be waiting for them outside? Surely Tony knew about most of the back entrances; had he betrayed them to Stefan?

At last, Tristan was shaken from his stupor when Amber said, “Look! Up ahead.”

Squinting through the darkness, he thought he could make out the faintest white glow on the limestone ahead.

“Please tell me that’s the end of this goddamn cave,” Rajesh muttered, pushing past Tristan to see what lay ahead. A minute later, he gave a whoop. “I can see outside!”

“Not so loud,” Tristan said, though he was just as excited. Trying to walk more quietly than before, he joined Rajesh just before the mouth of the cave. A clear brook ran from the darkness into the pale sunlight, fed by clumps of melting snow. Unfortunately, they were in a grassy bowl of a valley littered with rocky outcroppings, with no shelter to speak of. If anyone went looking for them, they would be spotted at once. Worse, he had no idea where they were in reference to the main entrance to the cave.

Rajesh didn’t seem to care about the danger just then. Throwing his pack aside, he flopped onto a snow-free stretch of grass and closed his eyes. Pavlina sat gingerly on a rock and glanced back at the narrow opening into the cave.

“What now?” Mei Ling asked softly, kneeling beside the stream and dipping her hands in the cold water.

“We have to find everyone else, and then we have to figure out somewhere to hide,” Tristan said.

“That’s not going to be easy,” Rajesh said, rubbing his eyes and yawning. “Remember how far below us that forest was? We’d have to hike half a day to get from the trees up to the cave.”

“What if we go above the cave?” Mei Ling suggested.

Rajesh’s eyes widened. “That’s brilliant.”

“Dangerous, though.” Tristan sat on another rock and eased his pack off his aching shoulders. They were safe enough for now; as long as they found somewhere to stay for the night, they would be fine. “Ilana’s going to have to come on a helicopter or something if she wants to get the globe up here.”

“She won’t be looking for us, though.” Rajesh sat up and rummaged through his pack. “I bet we could dig a hole and hide in there if anyone came near.” He held up a tan-colored tarp, close to the shade of the dry grasses all around. “We could put this over the top.”

“Good idea. It’s going to be really snowy up there, though,” Tristan said.

“Remember Greenland?” Rajesh said in amusement. “We can deal with a bit of snow.”

“Where are we going to stay tonight, then?” Tristan asked. “Maybe we should’ve brought the tents.”

Rajesh shrugged. “We could start heading toward the cave, if you want. I think that’s Mount Owen—” he pointed at a lumpy, low peak riddled with rocky bluffs “—which means the cave should be on the other side.”

“How do you know?”

“I was looking at that map I told you about. There’s only one flat valley leading up to Mt. Owen, and it’s the same one we followed from the hut to the cave. All the other sides are really steep.”

Now that Tristan thought about it, the valley did look vaguely familiar. They were on the opposite side, though, not following the same route they had originally taken to the Bulmer cave.

“Everyone agree with Rajesh?” Tristan asked.

Amber and Mei Ling nodded; Pavlina just gave him a cold stare. She obviously hadn’t forgiven him for abandoning Ori. For once, though, he wasn’t questioning his own decision—they’d had no other choice. If they had stayed behind, they would have died together. When he and Amber had agreed to Drakewell’s mad scheme, they had been forced to accept that stopping Ilana was worth sacrificing a few lives, their own included.

He wasn’t going to argue with Pavlina. She had chosen to follow him this far, and if she wanted to turn back now, that was her decision to make. He picked up his backpack again, grunting at the weight, and started across the broad valley toward the uneven face of Mount Owen. Rajesh and Amber fell into step beside him, Mei Ling just behind. When he glanced over his shoulder, he saw that Pavlina was following as well, her mouth set in a grim line.

As they picked their way around deep snowdrifts and past tussocks and oddly glossy alpine plants, Tristan marveled at the fact that, reluctant though they might have been, Rajesh, Pavlina, Mei Ling, and Ori had been brave enough to turn their backs on the only world they had truly known.

Closer to the mountain, the grass turned to bulging limestone edifices, their contours hidden beneath the snow.

“Hey—look at this!” Rajesh said, running ahead onto a plateau of stone. “We can sleep down there!”

The cans in Tristan’s pack clanked as he raced up to see what Rajesh was talking about. Peering ahead, he recognized the same plateaus riddled with deep crevasses they had passed on their way to the cave, some too narrow to fit down, others as wide as the cavern they had just left.

“That’s perfect!” Tristan said.

Breathing hard, Mei Ling caught up with them and dropped her pack. Her eyes widened as she saw the deep crevasses. Regaining her energy at once, she jumped across one of the chasms and ran lightly along a stone plateau. “This one is huge! We should spend the night here.”

The crevasse she had found was wider at the bottom than the top, with a few chunks of rock that made a stairway of sorts down the far side. Mei Ling lowered herself to the bottom of the narrow canyon and looked around. It was big enough for them to lie lengthwise, and she beckoned them to join her as she wandered around the depths of the chasm.

Lowering their packs after her, Tristan, Rajesh, and Amber joined Mei Ling in the crevasse. Aside from the melting snow, which occasionally dripped on their heads, it was a perfectly cozy little hideaway.

“You coming?” Rajesh called to Pavlina.

“Yes,” she said, stepping reluctantly over the lip of the hole.

They cooked dinner in a couple of the small camping pots Tristan had packed, and both he and Rajesh managed to burn their pasta.

“I was about to say ‘I’m glad we’re out of that miserable cave,’” Rajesh said, “but then I realized we’re still pretty much in a cave, just with a bit more light. I wish we didn’t have to hide underground all the time.”

“You have to admit this is pretty cool, though,” Tristan said.

Rajesh grinned. “True.”

They were just sitting down to eat when something caught their attention. If Tristan wasn’t mistaken, it was the thrum of a helicopter approaching their valley.

He, Rajesh, and Mei Ling raced each other to the top of the rock staircase, careful to keep their heads below the bluffs, where they watched as a helicopter soared over a ridge in a direct line toward their hideout. Something swung beneath the helicopter, chained into place—something dark and round.

It was the globe.
Ilana had returned.

Chapter 12: The Second Globe

“We’re too late,” Tristan said, stunned. “We’ll never get there in time.” The sun was already setting; even if he hadn’t been about to collapse from exhaustion, he wouldn’t be able to walk through the night here. It was too dangerous, with crevasses and half-melted snow ready to trip them up at every step.

“She won’t be able to get through the barrier yet,” Rajesh said. “They’re probably going to try blasting it apart before long, but they won’t want to destroy the marbles in the cave. That would set them back several years.”

“We have to get there by morning,” Amber said unexpectedly. “Otherwise we lose our advantage.”

Tristan groaned.

“We can sleep a few hours first,” she said. “I doubt we’re far from the cave.”

“I’ll wake the rest of you up in two hours,” Pavlina said from the bottom of the crevasse. “I don’t think I’ll be able to sleep anyway.”

“Thank you,” Tristan said. He followed Rajesh and Mei Ling back to their makeshift camp. “I’m really sorry I dragged you into this,” he told Pavlina in an undertone. “I had no idea Ori would—”

She shook her head fiercely, eyes glistening. “I’m glad. I’ve never felt so alive. Or so miserable. Before, we were just going through the motions. This is—” She trailed off, fingers digging into the limestone wall.

“How are we going to do this?” Rajesh asked from behind Tristan.

He turned. “We should do what Ori said—put all of our marbles into someone’s backpack with a fuel can, light the whole thing on fire, and drop it over the globe. If it’s conveniently sitting right in front of the cave, that is.”

“That’ll be really subtle,” Rajesh said sarcastically. “Effective, though.”

“That’s all we need. Now get some sleep. We can’t be collapsing halfway up the mountain.”

Finishing the last of his charred pasta, Tristan followed his own advice, digging in his pack for his sleeping bag. Despite his bone-deep exhaustion, sleep didn’t come easily. A steady rhythm like a ticking clock was running through his head, as though he was counting down the seconds until Ilana had destroyed the barrier. Ori wouldn’t stand a chance—Tristan tried not to think of him lying in the cave alone, only the pile of marbles and Blake’s dead body remaining for company. Each time this thought struck him, his legs itched to start running, to chase Ilana down before it was too late...

He lay restlessly and watched as the stars came out in the sliver of sky visible above their crevasse. The moon rose before long, dimming the stars and lending a silvery glow to the limestone. Every so often, a drip of water would plop onto his forehead, startling him back into alertness.

He had just drifted off into a troubled sleep when Pavlina rose and turned on her headlamp. “Time to go,” she said. Though she had spoken softly, the others sat up almost at once. They had obviously been sleeping as uneasily as Tristan. They packed in silence, shrugging on extra layers and brushing condensation from their sleeping bags.

“You’ve all got your marbles handy?” Tristan asked, reaching into his bag to ensure that his stash remained near the top.

They nodded.

“Let’s go, then.”

In a quiet group, they climbed from the crevasse and started across the limestone bluffs. The snow had hardened in the cold night, and the moonlight reflecting off the white snowdrifts shed enough light to hike by. As they wove through the bluffs and along narrow strips of grass on their way up the mountain, Tristan couldn’t stop thinking about Ori. He had justified abandoning him at the time, but now a knot of guilt had settled in his

stomach.

The higher they climbed up Mt. Owen, the rockier the slopes grew, until only the occasional patch of grass emerged from among the solid mounds of stone. Tristan felt very exposed in the moonlight, though there were more than enough crevasses to jump into if they heard a helicopter approaching—provided they didn't break an ankle in the process.

The moon had sunk close to the peak of a nearby mountain by the time they reached the cairn that marked the top of Mount Owen.

"Any idea where we're supposed to go now?" Tristan asked Rajesh, dropping his pack and sitting on a rock.

"I think we just need to head down the southern side of the mountain," Rajesh said, digging in his pack.

"We should get everything ready now," Tristan said. "Let's fill one of our backpacks with all of the marbles and the fuel canister. Then we can leave the others behind when we get close to the cave."

"Just saying we survive, how are we supposed to get out of here?" Pavlina asked, opening her backpack and pulling out several handfuls of marbles.

With a rustle of paper, Rajesh produced a crumpled map from his pack. He unfolded it, revealing a large section of mountains labeled Kahurangi National Park. Mount Owen was near the center, and Tristan recognized Granity Pass Hut to the north of the peak.

After scrutinizing the map for a moment, Rajesh said, "That's the cave there. If we drop into the valley below it, we can link up with a road and follow it back out to the closest town."

"How long do you think that's going to take?" Tristan asked skeptically.

"Several hours." Rajesh traced the route a couple times before folding the map and slipping it into his back pocket. "And even when we get to the road, we'll probably be stranded in the middle of nowhere."

"New Zealand's not *that* big of a country, is it?" Tristan said. "We can probably walk to the next town. God, I wish we knew how to fly Ilana's helicopter. That would be a lot easier than walking."

Rajesh snorted. "Yeah. Where's a good pilot when you need one?"

Tristan ended up emptying his backpack to carry the marbles, while the others shared the rest of his supplies between them. His sleeping bag was too bulky to fit, so it got abandoned on the mountaintop along with two extra pairs of socks and one of the camping pots.

Cautiously now, they began picking their way down the southern face of Mt. Owen. The rocky slope was much steeper on this side, and several times they had to backtrack to circle around vertical bluffs. Before long, Tristan thought he recognized the grassy shelf surrounded by rocks where the cave entrance lay. His suspicions were confirmed when he spotted a tent pitched on a small patch of grass between two towering boulders.

"Leave your stuff here," he said quietly. "And make sure no one sees you."

"Hopefully everyone will be looking at the cave mouth," Amber said. "We can't exactly hide up here."

"Where's the helicopter gone?" Rajesh asked.

Mei Ling pointed at a glint of silver far below. "There." She followed Pavlina's example and shoved her backpack under a rock lip, where it wouldn't be seen from overhead.

"That means it's dropped the globe somewhere," Tristan said slowly. "I...think this might actually work."

Hugging the rocks, they began creeping closer, on the lookout for anyone moving around outside.

Just as they were closing the final distance between the rocks and the top of the cave mouth, Tristan heard a voice.

"Ilana! Someone's up there!" It sounded like Stefan.

Cold with fear, Tristan dropped quickly behind the nearest rock. "Can you distract them?" he whispered urgently to Amber. This was not going well.

She nodded. "Be quick." While Tristan sheltered in the shadow of the rock, heart pounding so loud he couldn't concentrate on much else, Amber led Rajesh, Pavlina, and Mei Ling down the final grassy stretch beside the cave mouth toward the shelf.

Tristan couldn't see what was happening below, but he could hear tents being unzipped and canvas shifting. As soon as Amber and the others were out of sight, he wished he had gone in their place. Their job would be far more dangerous than his.

Shouts rose from the shelf below, and Ilana's voice cut through the clamor, saying, "You haven't fooled me,

you idiots. Besides, you're too late. No matter what you do, I have already succeeded. The spell has been set."

Suddenly the shouts grew more urgent. Tristan pressed his back sharply into the rock, willing himself to stay put. He prayed it wasn't one of his friends who was shouting. Yellow light rose from the rocky shelf—one of the tents had caught fire.

That would have been Amber's doing.

Hoping everyone's attention was fixed on the burning tent, Tristan crawled forward, unbuckling his pack as he went. He felt giddy with apprehension, his nerves on fire. He stopped just before the ledge and peeked over, lying flat on his stomach. To his intense relief, no one was looking his way.

There it was.

Just below, in a shallow indent on the grassy shelf, lay the globe. It looked a bit grimmer than before, but otherwise unchanged.

It was easily within reach. Everyone below was looking at Amber, Rajesh, Mei Ling, and Pavlina; no one kept an eye on the globe. As long as Tristan managed to set the marbles properly alight, he should have no trouble. It was still dark, so he couldn't make out faces, but he could hear Ilana and Stefan shouting at Amber.

Fumbling with one of the six marbles in his pocket, Tristan set his pack down on the ledge and concentrated on a flame. It was almost too easy—with his nerves racing, the fire sprang to his fingertips almost by accident. The backpack took a moment to catch, and when a stiff breeze raked through his hair, he held his breath, worried it would go out. The flame died for a moment, fading to a stream of smoke, and then it leapt to life again. Tristan exhaled heavily, trying not to panic.

The gas canister was buried deep within his backpack. When should he throw the pack? If he did it too soon, everyone would hear, and they would move it away from the globe at once. But if he waited too long, the whole mass would explode in his hands.

Before he could make up his mind, the decision was made for him. The flame leapt high in the air before him, nearly singeing his chin.

"What's that?" a girl's voice called from below.

Tristan swore. He had been seen.

There was no time to lose. Both arms around the pack, face averted from the flame, he took aim and hurled it at the globe.

It fell short, landing two paces before the globe.

"Get that away from here!" Ilana yelled from the opposite side of the group. Amber, Rajesh, Mei Ling, and Pavlina were forgotten as Ilana and her followers crowded around the globe to see what was happening. "No, you idiots!" Ilana shouted. "Stand back!"

As the crowd below shuffled about in confusion, some moving closer to the globe while others tried to escape the melee, Tristan saw a bright white streak disappearing below the hillside.

Amber was safe.

There was nothing more he could do. Below, the backpack was burning merrily, sending up green and purple streaks of flame. Scrambling away from the ledge, Tristan edged down the slope to the shelf below, still breathing as though he had sprinted over Mount Owen. He couldn't see any of his friends, though he kept an eye on the spot where Amber had disappeared.

As the blaze grew brighter than ever, most of the crowd backed away from the globe, sensing that something terrible was about to happen. A lone figure broke through the crowd and dashed towards the burning pack.

Stefan.

The teacher lifted the pack into his arms, yelping in pain as the fire washed over his face. Ilana came running after him, shouting, "Quick! It's going to—"

BOOM.

With a sound like a cannon, the pack exploded.

Tristan was thrown off his feet and into the rock behind him, where he lay for a long moment, dazed and off-balance. When he struggled to stand, wincing at the bruise between his shoulder blades, he saw nothing but chaos below.

At first he couldn't even recognize the grassy shelf. Was he dreaming?

Instead of an enormous globe below, there was nothing but a deep hole gouged in the rock. But as the smell of charred plastic and stove fuel rose to meet him, he realized that the entire rocky shelf had been obliterated.

Ilana's globe was gone.

Head spinning, Tristan started down the hillside once more, eyes out for Rajesh, Mei Ling, and Pavlina. He couldn't find them in the crowd.

No one noticed him. Ilana was nowhere to be seen, and students were scattering in every direction.

Hoping the others could take care of themselves, he darted in the direction that Amber had disappeared. In the darkness, no one picked him out of the crowd.

There—just over the hillside, half-hidden behind a rocky outcropping, Amber waited for him. It was a good thing she had run when she did—her silver hair stood out like a beacon in the moonlight.

"Tristan!" Amber called softly. "Where are the others?"

"You didn't see them?" He ducked behind the rock that hid her and crouched down.

Amber shook her head. "We all ran when you threw the pack. I didn't see them afterwards."

"I guess we just have to wait," Tristan said tensely. Blood was coursing through his veins; he wanted nothing more than to start running and never look back.

A few shapes came barreling down the hillside on either side of them, and Tristan quickly yanked his black wool hat over Amber's white hair. She understood at once and began stuffing the ends of her hair beneath the hat. Still no one saw them.

They still had a chance of getting away safely.

From their hiding place, Tristan carefully watched each figure that appeared on the hillside, searching for his friends. At long last, a dark-faced figure with another shape in its arms staggered down the slope.

Rajesh was carrying Mei Ling, who was barely stirring. Tristan waved him over, and Rajesh nearly collapsed when he deposited Mei Ling on the grass behind Amber.

"Where's Pavlina?" Tristan asked quickly.

"She ran the wrong way. I think she's gone after Ori."

Tristan cursed. "We don't have time for that!"

"I...don't think she'd want us to follow her," Rajesh said slowly.

Tristan groaned. He had dragged Pavlina into this mess in the first place, and he felt responsible for getting her out alive.

"I think you got Ilana and Stefan, though," Rajesh said. "That'll help things."

"There are still too many of them," Tristan said. "We're screwed."

"We have to leave now," Amber said softly. "Pavlina made her decision when she turned back."

Tristan opened his mouth to argue, but Rajesh said, "Come on. We have to get out of here." Taking a deep breath, he lifted Mei Ling once more and started down the hill, walking with the staggering gait of a drunkard.

Just as they reached the start of a steep scree slope, a voice bellowed at them from behind.

"*They're escaping!*" It was Mordechai.

Tristan went cold as he looked over his shoulder and saw Mordechai and three other burly figures starting down the hill.

"We have to hurry," Amber said quietly. "Drakewell needs to know about the spell Ilana set."

"Rajesh can't go any faster," Tristan said tensely.

"Leave us behind," Rajesh said. "They probably won't hurt us."

"Of course they will," Tristan snapped. "Don't be stupid."

Mordechai was gaining on them quickly. Rajesh was barely making progress down the scree slope, stepping carefully as the ground shifted underfoot.

"Amber. You go on ahead." Tristan stopped and gave her a flat stare. "You'll make it out alive. Go and warn Drakewell, and make sure no one follows you. I'll stay and help Rajesh."

"You'll bloody well die!" Rajesh said in alarm.

"I won't just abandon you," Tristan said. "I've already abandoned too many of my friends."

Amber froze, eyes on the approaching figures. "I can't—"

Tristan grabbed her wrist. "Go. Get out of here!"

After a long pause, she tore her gaze from Mordechai and stumbled down the slope. She made quick progress on her own, and had vanished into the beech forest at the foot of the mountain within minutes.

“You’re an idiot,” Rajesh mumbled, though he continued picking his way down the slope with the same dogged determination.

“Can I help carry her?” Tristan asked, one eye on the approaching figures. They were close enough now that he recognized Ricardo and two enormous students from the Second Division whose names he had never bothered to learn.

“I’m fine,” Rajesh grunted.

They were approaching the bottom of the scree slope—Tristan dared to hope that they might shake Mordechai off in the woods.

“Stop right there!” Mordechai shouted after them. “What’ve you done with the albino?”

“She’s gone,” Tristan yelled over his shoulder. “You’re too late!”

Something slammed him in the small of the back, knocking his feet out from under him. He landed on his tailbone, yelping in pain, and looked around wildly to see what had hit him.

Ricardo was laughing nastily. A large, flat rock lay just behind Tristan, and as he watched, Ricardo lifted another rock and sent it after Rajesh. He had to be enchanting the rocks, because no one could throw that far.

“Duck!” Tristan yelled as the second rock hurtled towards Rajesh’s head.

Rajesh dropped to his knees just in time to avoid a nasty concussion.

Struggling to regain his feet, Tristan turned to face Mordechai. It was too late to run. He, Rajesh, and Mei Ling could do nothing but give Amber a head start.

“Why did you stay behind?” Rajesh groaned, setting Mei Ling down on a grassy patch and staggering a few paces away from her.

“I couldn’t leave,” Tristan said harshly. “I just couldn’t.”

Rajesh coughed. “Well, you’re an idiot. Let’s get away from Mei Ling. I don’t want them noticing her.”

“I think we’re a bit late for that,” Tristan muttered, though he stumbled away from her stirring form.

Mordechai and his cronies were closing in.

Behind the distant horizon, the first grey light of dawn was beginning to emerge. In the pale glow, Mordechai’s face was thrown into hazy relief. His eyes were wild, his grin crazed.

“I smelled you for a traitor the first time I ever saw you,” he spat, reaching for another small boulder.

His three followers slowed as he did, their faces painted with matching expressions of bloodlust. These were the troubled students, the ones Mordechai had broken and bent to his will. If he hadn’t escaped when he did, Landen would have become one of them someday.

They were Ilana’s most devoted disciples.

“Don’t let Tristan escape,” Mordechai ordered, not bothering to keep his voice down. He stopped just a few paces above Tristan and Rajesh, caressing the boulder with his callused, tattooed hands. “Ilana should have given you to me from the start. She was too gentle with you.”

“Ilana’s dead,” Tristan shot back, hoping it was true.

“Shame,” Mordechai said softly. “Lucky she’s got me to carry on in her stead.”

He raised the boulder, and in a chilling instant Tristan realized his three followers had taken advantage of the distraction and armed themselves with rocks and knives.

Tristan went cold. Though he had meant to stand his ground, he found himself edging backwards. More than Ilana, more than any of her teachers, Mordechai terrified him.

Digging in his pocket, Tristan reached for a marble. He only had three left—the rest had blown to pieces in his backpack.

“I see that marble,” Mordechai said mockingly. “Not a very good magician, are you? Ilana told me you never mastered using your own strength for spells.”

As Tristan tried to shut down his thoughts and focus on the marble, Mordechai aimed and hurled the boulder at his face.

Tristan threw himself to the side—

—and fell right into a short hole Mordechai had gouged into the grassy shelf. His ankle gave a horrible snap,

and as he flung out a hand for balance, he dropped the marble.

Before he could straighten, a small flame sprang up in the grass and darted after him, quick as lightning.

He dodged out of the path of the flame, only to realize it was headed straight for Mei Ling.

“Leave her alone!” Rajesh bellowed, jumping over the line of fire to drag her out of the way.

Tristan groped in his pocket for another marble, trying to stamp out the approaching flame. This was something he could handle—back in Millersville, Alldusk had taught their class how to put out a fire in every way imaginable.

There it was. Clutching the marble in his numb hand, Tristan drew the power into him, eyes fixed on the fire. Then he released the magic from the marble into the air around him, summoning every drop of humidity and condensation to him until the ground beneath the fire was drenched.

As the air grew hazy with fog, the fire flickered lower and finally sizzled out.

Before he could straighten and face Mordechai once more, something slammed into his shoulder.

With a shout, Tristan whirled. Ricardo had circled around to the slope below him, and he was advancing on Tristan with a mocking grin.

“Rowan Drakewell’s best students can’t handle a few oafs throwing rocks,” Ricardo taunted. “What if we had guns?” He reached for something in his pocket. “Oh, that’s right. I forgot.” He pulled out a small revolver and twirled it in his hands. “Say goodbye to Mei Ling.”

With a wordless howl, Rajesh leapt at Ricardo.

Heart in his throat, Tristan dug for his last marble. Hazily he recalled the barrier spell he had learned the previous year, crouching in a hollow with sticks across the entrance.

The marble wasn’t in his pocket.

It must have fallen out when he tripped.

To his right, Ricardo and Rajesh were wrestling on the ground, both grunting in pain as they rolled over the sharp rocks below. With a deafening *crack*, the revolver discharged. No one screamed, so it must have misfired.

“You thought you were so clever,” Mordechai said, face lit up with a scornful smile. “You thought you could dupe us all.”

At least Mordechai didn’t have a gun. Tearing his eyes from the man’s cruel face, Tristan realized that Ricardo had knocked Rajesh temporarily unconscious. As he raised the revolver once more, Tristan’s hands grew hot with anger.

Boom! Something flashed bright white, and for a second Tristan thought Rajesh had been hit.

Then he saw that it was Ricardo, not Rajesh, who was howling and crawling backwards.

Tristan blinked in confusion. It took a moment before he recognized the power coursing beneath his skin and realized that he had inadvertently used magic—from where, he had no idea—to blow up the gun in Ricardo’s hands.

Mordechai took advantage of Tristan’s momentary distraction. As Tristan was turning back to face the teacher head-on, something struck him in the back so hard that he went sprawling.

His face smashed into a rock, and he felt something hot dribbling down his lip.

When he tried to roll over and struggle to his feet, a great pressure held him down. As he lay there, unable to move, a great volley of rocks came clattering free of the hillside and tumbled down to bury his legs. It was all he could do to bite his tongue and keep silent, blood pooling above his lip and trickling into his mouth with a bitter, rusty grit. It hurt so much he thought he would break into pieces.

From right behind him, Mordechai’s voice whispered, “She should have let me break you. Such a gem you would’ve been. But it’s too late. Ilana is gone, and you’re going to die.”

His knife was at Tristan’s neck. But instead of slitting Tristan’s throat and finishing the job, he turned the handle down and dug the point into his shoulder blade.

Tristan screamed. The pain was blinding him, sending a haze over his eyes. He prayed to lose consciousness.

Suddenly, Mordechai was thrown backwards. The great pressure on Tristan eased, and he was able to raise his head enough to see what had happened.

Amber was sprinting up the hill towards him.

Tristan could have cried in relief.

As Mordechai fumbled to stand, Amber dashed to Tristan's side and whispered, "I can't hold them off alone. Can you help? Use the forest."

He nodded, though he didn't know what he could do against four enormous magicians. He hardly knew how he would find the strength to stand.

Straightening, Amber strode forward, her hair silver in the pale light of dawn. She had lost her hat somewhere in the forest, and she stood out like a candle amidst the grey rocks.

As Tristan watched, frozen with anticipation, she summoned up a gust of wind that carried a thousand needles of ice. The wind slammed into Mordechai and his cronies, sending them all sprawling onto the rocks.

Tristan wiped his bloody nose on the back of his sleeve and scrambled to his feet. He couldn't afford to waste any more time.

Their only chance for safety lay in the trees a hundred feet below. Rajesh was already on his feet, bending over Mei Ling, who was sitting up and blinking around in confusion.

"Get to the woods," Tristan said under his breath.

Rajesh nodded without turning. Bending, he lifted Mei Ling into his arms once more and started down the hill, heavily favoring his left leg.

Though Tristan wanted nothing more than to stay and help Amber, he was virtually powerless without a marble to draw on. He started down the slope after Rajesh, watching Amber over his shoulder. As soon as the torrent of wind eased, the hillside began shifting, and a river of rocks started cascading down the slope. Mordechai and his followers scrambled to their feet, but they didn't quite make it before the rocks hit. One of the boys from the Second Division dodged to the side and managed to escape with nothing more than a rock in one leg, while the other two were dragged under, yelling and cursing.

For a moment, Tristan thought Amber had finished them off. But he should have known better.

With an explosion of shale, Mordechai tore himself free from the rockslide. Ricardo dug himself free soon after, and this time they turned on Amber without hesitation.

Rajesh and Mei Ling had nearly reached the safety of the trees.

Above, Amber took two hasty steps back, raising an arm as though summoning a new spell.

"See you later!" Tristan shouted. "I'll be telling Drakewell exactly where to find you!" He tried to imitate Mordechai's derisive tone, but he merely sounded angry.

It worked. Mordechai whirled at Tristan's voice and started downhill, quickly gaining momentum. He didn't appear to have been injured in Amber's rockslide.

Tristan cursed under his breath. Rajesh wasn't going to make it to the trees in time.

But Mordechai didn't seem to see Rajesh. He came pounding down the slope directly towards Tristan, who turned and ran for the trees as fast as he could. The deep gash in his shoulder was forgotten as adrenaline coursed through him.

Chapter 13: Out of the Woods

As he ran, Tristan stretched his mind out, feeling for the aura of the forest ahead. The moment he passed beneath the trees, he could sense the magic hanging all around him like a web. He slowed, grabbing a tree to break his reckless momentum, and turned.

Mordechai had almost reached the trees. Behind him, Amber stood alone on the slope. The other three magicians must have fallen.

Reaching out tentatively, Tristan prodded at the network of magic hovering around him. Mordechai was only a few paces behind him, so he tentatively drew a small breath of power into him and sent it towards the outermost row of beech trees. Reverting to one of the first spells Alldusk had taught them during their stay in Millersville, he drew the trees' branches together and knotted them into a dense, springy wall.

The trees moved so quickly they could have simply been swaying in the breeze, and a second later Mordechai crashed into the wall of branches. The branches held, throwing the magician backwards. Swearing, Mordechai changed course and barreled around the wall.

Tristan had already turned and started running again, and as he passed over the decaying leaves, he reached out tendrils of magic towards the ground, coaxing any stray seedlings that lay beneath to grow. He didn't stop to see whether it was working—he could hear Mordechai's heavy footsteps behind him, punctuated by labored breathing.

In a sudden burst of light, a flame sprang up before him, too close to avoid. He ran right over the fire, scorching his leg, but he didn't have time to stop and see how bad the damage was. For an instant he wondered if he had accidentally sparked a fire in his over-use of magic; then he heard Mordechai laughing, and another flame leapt to life ahead of him.

He veered to the left, but the fire spread.

Glancing wildly over his shoulder, he saw Mordechai doubled over with laughter. The fire was closing in around him.

Skidding to a stop, Tristan reached into the soil and drew on the moisture collected there. Even before he could bring a layer of condensation to the surface, the fire began petering out. The ground was already so wet that the flame hadn't stood a chance.

Not waiting for the fire to go out, Tristan leapt over the smoldering remains and kept going.

Down another short slope and around a rocky outcropping he ran, blind with fear, hoping against hope that Amber was managing to hold the others off on her own. He continued urging plants to grow everywhere he ran, not stopping or looking back. The woods had grown quiet all around him, the first rays of sunlight just touching the treetops, and he began to wonder if he had thrown off his pursuers.

Behind a large boulder, he slowed and looked behind him. He could see no sign of movement, not even a breath of wind to stir the branches. In his path he had left a trail of saplings, some of them still growing visibly, others no taller than his ankle.

Just for good measure, he turned right and cut across the hill for several hundred feet. He couldn't hear Mordechai any longer, but he couldn't shake the feeling that he was still nearby.

When he paused, he discovered that he had gone much farther downhill than he'd realized. Looking across the valley below, the opposite hill now washed in golden light, he saw that he had descended almost to the foot of Mt. Owen. If the treeline was the same on every slope, he had a long way to climb before he reached the rocky meadow once more.

He should never have abandoned Amber and Rajesh. Anything could have happened in his absence.

Worried now, he turned and reassessed the hillside, trying to remember which path he had followed. The

trail of saplings had ended before he cut to the right, so he had nothing to guide his way back.

As he began climbing, sweat trickled down his back, and he stripped down to his shirt, draping his sweatshirt and down jacket over his shoulders. He didn't want to slow, but his breath rasped in his throat and his skin was beginning to boil. If only he had a drink of water...

Eventually he could continue no longer. He stopped, gasping, and leaned against a tree to catch his breath. His legs were on fire, and sweat had soaked his shirt. The pain in his shoulder was growing more insistent than ever, a deep, gnawing bite like a toothache. He was afraid to look at the damage, afraid that the moisture that soaked his back was more blood than sweat.

He had been so stupid. He should have stayed with the others. For all he knew, Mordechai could have turned back and finished his friends off while he was busy running for his life.

And now, he didn't even recognize where he was. The trees were thicker up ahead, the slope cluttered with fallen trunks, and he couldn't see far enough past the leaves to recognize the terrain before him.

The sun was fully up now, its light stark on the trees. As Tristan started uphill once again, this time moving slowly over the mess of undergrowth and half-rotted tree trunks, the certainty that he was lost settled on him.

For the first time since they had left the cave, true fear bit at him. Before, adrenaline had spurred him to keep moving, running, pressing on. Now, he was filled with a growing panic. What if he never found the others again? If only he had another marble for an Intralocation spell.

There was nothing to do but keep moving uphill.

Almost sick with worry now, he forged on, the dull ache in his shoulder strengthening with a vengeance.

As he went, the slope grew steeper and steeper, parts of it giving way to former rockslides and sheer rock faces.

When he reached the aftermath of yet another mudslide littered with rocks and unearthed roots, the foot of the slope piled with dead trees, he turned to the right and cut across the hill, hoping he could find a stretch of forest that he recognized.

That turned out to be a worse plan than before. Soon he stumbled across a vertical stretch of hillside that he could see no way around. Cursing under his breath, he continued across the hill to the right, certain he had already passed the section of forest he had initially come through.

Suddenly, the leaves rustled above him. He froze, grasping for the magic of the forest. As usual, it eluded him.

A second later, Rajesh crashed through the trees, Mei Ling in his arms. He was pale, his face screwed up in pain, but he was still blessedly alive. Amber followed a moment later, moving silently over the dead leaves.

Tristan nearly collapsed in relief.

"How the hell did you guys find me?"

"Intralocation spell," Amber said. "You weren't that far away, though I was afraid we would never get to you. We nearly ran over a cliff!"

"Sorry," Tristan said. "I got completely lost. And I used up all of my marbles on Mordechai."

"What now?" Rajesh asked, setting Mei Ling down and shaking out his arms. "I can't keep going like this much longer."

"Let me have a turn carrying her," Tristan said. "It's going to be a long way. We have to get out of here and find the nearest airport."

"How are we going to afford plane tickets?" Amber asked. "We no longer have our passports, either."

Rajesh reached in the pockets of his enormous coat and pulled out a handful of Euros, two credit cards, and their passports. "I raided as much as I could find while we were packing. I've got Pavlina's passport, too. I hope she'll be okay without it."

"I just hope she's still alive," Tristan said darkly. "I'm sure she can figure out a new passport."

"Which way?" Rajesh asked.

"Left," Tristan said. "It's completely vertical to the right. We'll make it down to the river, and then figure out what to do from there. Does anyone have some water? I'm dying."

Rajesh tossed his water bottle over. "Careful—we're rationing. I had to dump Mei Ling's backpack near the cave."

Tristan gulped at the icy water. He could have finished off the whole bottle himself, but he forced himself to pass it back to Rajesh.

“You sure you’ll be okay with her?” Rajesh asked as Tristan lifted Mei Ling carefully into his arms.

“I’m not *that* weak,” Tristan said, though his shoulder protested sharply at the weight.

When he turned, he heard a sharp intake of breath from Amber. “What did you do to your back?”

“It’s not that bad,” Tristan insisted, though he felt a bit dizzy.

“Here, I can stop the bleeding,” Amber said. She put a hand over his shoulder blade—he flinched at her touch, though it was lighter than a dragonfly’s wing—and sent something warm spilling over his skin like sunlight. The sharp agony dulled to a persistent ache, and Tristan was able to straighten without gasping. He gave her a fleeting smile.

“You should give Mei Ling back to me,” Rajesh said with concern.

“No, I’m fine!”

After about five steps, though, he had to admit that it was much harder than it looked to negotiate the tangle of downed trees and scrubby bushes with a heavy weight in his arms. Mei Ling was stirring, her lips twitching every so often; if they were lucky, she would wake before they reached the bottom of the slope.

“What happened to the others?” Tristan asked, stopping to catch his breath. At least he was no longer feeling so lightheaded.

“Amber buried them under a rockslide,” Rajesh said. “When they tried to get up, she sent a giant root over them. They’re not getting out any time soon.”

Tristan glanced at Amber, who gave him a pointed look. He had a funny feeling that she could have killed them in the space of a heartbeat; it had been her reluctance to do any lasting damage that had delayed her.

At long last, they reached the foot of the hill, where they found a narrow stream. Though the air was icy, they found themselves stepping in the water several times to avoid steep sections of the bank. Tristan’s shoes quickly filled with water, and before long he couldn’t feel his toes.

Soon after they reached the stream, Tristan handed Mei Ling back to Rajesh, who murmured something in her ear as he lifted her into his arms. Tristan took Rajesh’s backpack, feeling so weightless he could almost fly.

It was as they neared the end of the valley that Mei Ling opened her eyes at last.

“We got away?” she asked weakly.

Rajesh stopped so abruptly Tristan nearly walked into him. They were still wading through the stream, almost knee-deep in a section of gentle rapids. “Mei! Are you okay?”

“I think so,” she said. “Where are we?”

Once he had passed the rapids, Rajesh set her gently on the bank and clambered onto a rock across from her. “We’re nearly to the road, I think. If we’re in the right valley, anyway.”

Tristan forged on ahead and climbed onto a muddy stretch of the stream’s bank, giving his icy feet a chance to thaw.

“Have you carried me this entire way?” Mei Ling asked wryly, rubbing her eyes.

“I wasn’t about to leave you behind.”

She gave Rajesh a fleeting smile. “I can walk now. I’ll be okay.”

“I’m not sure you should,” Rajesh said at once. “You’ve had a bad concussion. I think you’re supposed to lie down for the next couple days.”

“Spare me the prognosis,” Mei Ling said. “Let’s just worry about staying alive for now.”

Reaching for a tree branch, she pulled herself shakily to her feet. “I’m fine. See?” It was only after Rajesh turned away that she brought a hand to her head and prodded at what must have been a nasty bruise beneath her hair.

Tristan took the lead now, Rajesh in the rear so he could keep a careful eye on Mei Ling. Their progress was much faster now that she could walk, and before long they reached the bend in the valley. Around the base of this hill, the valley widened and their stream fed into a wide, shallow river.

It was not long after that when the trees thinned and then disappeared altogether. They had reached a stretch of dry, weedy pastureland. Tristan dropped the pack he was carrying and ran up a nearby hill, hoping against hope that he would find some sign of civilization in the distance—a town, perhaps, or even a lone settlement.

As he crested the top of the hill, he caught sight of a dilapidated barn, and beyond it, a road.

“There’s the road!” he shouted down to the others.

“Thank god,” Rajesh moaned.

As Tristan turned and picked his way back down the grassy hill, Rajesh dug in his backpack and unearthed their map.

“It’s just that way,” he told Tristan, waving the map to his right. “It’s five kilometers to a square, so...about eight kilometers to the next road. Maybe someone will be driving along that one.” He frowned. “Do you have something else to wear? Your shirt’s completely covered in blood.”

Tristan tugged off his shirt, grateful when the barely-healed wound gave only a slight twinge of protest, and pulled on his sweatshirt instead. Amber wiped a spot of blood from his chin with her thumb, and he gave her a grateful smile.

They had only been walking for what felt like another hour when the hum of an engine rose in the distance.

“Someone’s coming!” Tristan said. They all jumped off the road, Tristan holding up a thumb and the others following his lead.

Before long, the car roared around the bend—it was a truck, its bed piled with cuttings of some yellow-flowered plant. When the driver showed no signs of slowing, Rajesh jumped in front of it and waved his arms wildly.

The driver swerved to avoid him, shouting a curse out the window, but it worked—he slowed and came to a stop in the middle of the road.

“Oi! What’re you doing?”

“We need a ride back into town,” Tristan said hurriedly. “We were out backpacking, and my friend fell and got a concussion. We’re trying to get back to Nelson so we can take her to the doctor.”

The driver muttered something under his breath that sounded like, “Bloody tourists.” Raising his voice, he said, “What’ve you done with your parents?”

“We’re all eighteen,” Tristan lied. “We came out hiking on our own.”

“Well, I haven’t got room in the front,” the man said, “but you can sit in the bed. Careful, though—the gorse is sharp.”

While the others piled into the back, Tristan climbed into the front seat.

“What are you doing out here?” Tristan asked, trying to distract the driver from asking any further questions.

“It’s my job, mate.” He revved up his truck with a sputtering roar. “Department of Conservation. Just back from a gorse-clearing mission.”

“Oh.” Tristan wished one of the others had taken the front seat. “Have you—uh—always worked here?”

“Twenty years this December.”

An awkward silence fell, and after a pause the driver glanced at Tristan and said, “Not to pry, but what the hell were a bunch of kids doing out here in the goddamn middle of winter?”

“We were fine until M—until my friend fell. It’s not very snowy up on the mountain.”

The driver shook his head, though thankfully he subsided into silence after that. Every now and then he would mutter something under his breath, not looking at Tristan.

Nearly an hour passed before the bumpy road smoothed into pavement. Tristan hoped Mei Ling was doing all right; surely all this jostling couldn’t be good for her. He didn’t even want to imagine what would have happened if this truck hadn’t driven along and found them at exactly the right time.

“It’s another hour to Nelson,” the driver said as they turned onto another road, this one wider than the last. “It’s not on my way, but I can’t just leave you out here. Specially not if that girl’s got a concussion.”

“Thank you,” Tristan said quickly. “We really appreciate it.”

At long last, they came to the outskirts of Nelson. The driver pulled up outside a medical center and said, “You’ll call your parents now, right?”

“Of course,” Tristan said. “Thank you so much.”

They all climbed out of the car, Rajesh supporting Mei Ling, and the driver gave Tristan a long look before he drove away.

“He wasn’t very nice,” Tristan said.

“He gave us a ride,” Rajesh said. “He might’ve saved us. I don’t care if he was nice or not.”

“Good point.”

Since they had the money for it, and since Mei Ling was dangerously pale, they headed into the clinic and asked if someone could have a look at her.

“Have you been here before?” the receptionist asked.

“We’re just traveling through,” Tristan said. “Our parents are away for the day, and she’s fallen off her bike and gotten a concussion.”

To his relief, the receptionist didn’t ask any more questions. Mei Ling was whisked off to another room while Tristan, Amber, and Rajesh sank into plastic chairs in the waiting room.

Chapter 14: Mordechai's Revenge

An hour passed, the hands on the clock moving so slowly Tristan almost thought they had stopped. He couldn't keep from glancing at the window every few minutes, expecting Mordechai and his cronies to appear around the corner. They couldn't possibly know where Tristan had gone, yet he still couldn't shake the fear.

At long last, Mei Ling reappeared, some of her color returned to her cheeks.

"She's not disoriented," the nurse said, "but you really should let her lie down. Keep a close eye on her for the rest of the day. If she sounds the least bit confused, don't let her fall asleep. I would have kept her, but she says you have a flight to catch later today."

"Yeah," Tristan said quickly. "How do we get to the airport from here?"

The receptionist called a taxi for them, and all four of them piled into the stuffy interior. Sitting on the clean leather seats, Tristan realized for the first time how filthy they must look. He hadn't seen his reflection in months now; his face and hair were probably caked with dirt and who knew what else.

Thankfully, the taxi driver didn't say a word, and they were dropped off at the small Nelson Airport in no time.

They were in luck. Since it was winter, none of the flights were crowded, and with the credit cards and Euros Rajesh had stolen, they were able to find seats on a plane to Auckland. From there, they would board a direct flight to Vancouver.

"What happens when we get to Canada?" Rajesh asked under his breath as they waited in line to board their first plane.

"I'm planning to figure that out when we get there," Tristan said. "As long as we're far away from Ilana's followers, we'll be fine."

Rajesh nodded grimly. Tristan wondered what lies he had been fed over the years regarding Drakewell and the academy. For Rajesh and Mei Ling, defecting to Drakewell's side was just as daring as joining Ilana had been for Tristan and Amber.

Just before they reached the ramp, tickets in hand, an announcement came over the loudspeaker. "Rajesh Bhatia. Please report to the information desk immediately. Rajesh Bhatia."

Tristan went cold. "They've found us."

"Who is it?" Mei Ling whispered.

"Mordechai," Tristan said. "I'd bet my life on it. It sounds like the other three were pretty beat up when Amber left them."

"What happened?" Mei Ling asked. "I don't remember anything after the globe exploded."

When Rajesh handed over his ticket, the man at the counter said, "Did you hear the announcement, young man?"

"It's just my aunt," he said dismissively. "She wanted to make sure I didn't forget the sweater she knitted me. But I left it behind on purpose."

The man chuckled. "Poor lady. Have a good flight."

"Quick thinking," Tristan said under his breath as he hurried to join Rajesh on the tarmac.

"You've got to be a good liar if you want to keep your head around Ilana."

"Go on," Mei Ling prodded. "What happened to Ilana?"

"I think she's dead," Rajesh said slowly. "I bloody well hope she is. Stefan, too. After the globe blew up, we set off running..."

Tristan started up the stairs onto the plane, a cold wind ruffling his hair, as Rajesh filled Mei Ling in on the

whole miserable time.

“Where’s Pavlina?” she asked.

Tristan turned to her with a grimace. “She went back for Ori. I have no idea what happened to her.”

Mei Ling’s eyes widened. “Poor Pavlina!”

* * *

The first flight passed quickly, and in Auckland they stopped for an enormous meal, all four of them ravenous, before boarding the international flight. The whole time Tristan kept waiting for an announcer to call out his name, but the loudspeakers remained silent. Mordechai must have lost their trail in Nelson.

As soon as the plane took off, Tristan fell fast asleep, stretched across all three of the empty seats in his row. He didn’t wake up until many hours later, when the pilot announced that they were beginning their descent.

They made it through customs easily enough—Rajesh remarked that it was lucky they weren’t flying into the US—and found an information desk to ask for a hotel. While the others looked around one of the Canadian-themed gift shops, Tristan bought a postcard shaped like a maple leaf and scrawled,

We’ll be waiting at the Vancouver Bay Hotel. We’ve done it.

He didn’t sign the postcard, because he was worried Mordechai might intercept it, and after asking a bored-looking information desk worker to look it up, he addressed it to the Millersville post office.

On their way out of the airport, he dropped the postcard into a mailbox, praying that the Canadian post was efficient.

They caught a taxi to the Vancouver Bay Hotel, where they checked into a room on the tenth story and settled in to wait. It was dark out, but the air was warm and heavy with humidity. It took Tristan a moment to remember that it was still summer here.

“I need a shower,” Mei Ling said. “I’m filthy.”

“We all are,” Rajesh said. “I bet we reek!” He gave her a sideways look. “You don’t think you’ll pass out, do you?”

“I would have done it already if I was planning to,” she said. “I’ll be quick. Don’t worry.”

As Rajesh and Amber unpacked their backpacks, throwing all of their dirty clothes in a heap in the corner, Tristan sat by the window and flipped through a binder filled with information on Vancouver, not paying any attention to the brochures within.

“I’m sorry I didn’t kill him,” Amber said in a small voice just behind Tristan.

With a start, he turned. Rajesh had left the room, and he was alone with Amber for the first time in weeks.

“Mordechai,” she said. “I wish I had killed him.”

“I was the one running away from him, not you,” he said bitterly. “It’s my own damn fault I wasn’t quick enough.”

“I still could have done it,” Amber whispered. “But after Blake, I couldn’t—” She looked down at her hands, turning them over to examine her palms. “What am I becoming, Tristan?”

“We’ve all changed,” he said flatly. “You’re not any worse than me. I would’ve killed them all if I was strong enough.” He reached for her hand, but at that moment Rajesh returned with a pile of towels.

“I thought we’d need a few more of these,” he said, throwing them onto the bed.

Amber sat down quickly, and Tristan turned back to the binder, Mordechai’s face still haunting him.

It seemed that Mordechai had genuinely lost their trail in Nelson, though. And now that they were here, so close to the Lair and yet still hundreds of miles away, thoughts of his friends were starting to push his fear of Ilana’s magicians aside.

He wondered if things had changed in the Subroom in his and Amber’s absence these past four months, or if life had gone on as before. Had they gone home for the summer, or had Drakewell held them back so Ilana wouldn’t be able to target them?

The academy invaded his head at night—once he dreamed that he returned to school, and no one could see him; several other times he dreamed that life returned to normal, and when he woke up he was disoriented to find that he wasn’t nestled in the safe confines of the Subroom.

* * *

Four days passed. They washed every scrap of clothing they owned, wearing bathrobes as they waited for the laundry to finish, and threw out some of their fouler camping gear. They ate out for every meal until their money began to run low, and began discussing the feasibility of hitchhiking to Alberta and finding Millersville on their own. They spent their days wandering around Vancouver, exploring the waterfront and the parks. Tristan had a feeling they were all itching to get away from civilization.

Tristan wanted nothing more than to spend time with Amber, but she disappeared most mornings before he was awake, not returning until late at night. Though she was quieter than usual, he was relieved that she hadn't closed herself off like she had the year before. Whatever she had done to Ricardo and the other magicians, it hadn't messed with her mind.

Rajesh and Mei Ling wandered off together for three days in a row, and once Tristan caught them holding hands, though they both pretended nothing had happened when they returned that evening.

More often than not, Tristan was left to his own devices, exploring as much of the city as he dared without getting lost. He poked his head into museums, wandered through tree-lined parks, and sat on the pier watching little sailboats bobbing in the wake of larger ships.

One evening, he returned to the hotel before the others and did a double-take as he recognized a crowd of people waiting in the lobby.

Drakewell stood at the front, and directly behind him was Natasha. The students from the Subroom were clustered in one corner, some sitting against the wall, others gazing around the lobby as though they'd never seen a hotel before.

Tristan's heart swelled. He couldn't believe they were actually *here*, standing before him, after all this time.

It was a moment before anyone spotted him. Natasha said, "Tristan?" and suddenly everyone turned.

"Triss!" Leila cried out. She shoved Zeke out of the way and ran to Tristan, who hugged her tightly, laughing in relief. "I can't believe you're alive!"

"Me neither," he said wryly.

Leila released him, beaming, as the rest of the students from the Subroom took turns hugging him. Even Evvie gave him a brief hug, though Tristan couldn't remember what he had liked so much about her in the past.

"What the hell?" Eli said, grinning. "You shouldn't be here."

"What've you done with Amber?" Cailyn asked.

"She's fine," Tristan said, hugging Hayley and Trey in turn. "Just wandering."

Leila laughed. "No surprises there."

Even Natasha and Gracewright hugged Tristan once his friends were done, and Alldusk clapped him on the shoulder with a broad smile. Tristan avoided Alldusk's eyes, trying not to think of the terrible news he would have to pass on before long.

"Well," Drakewell said. "I assume your mission was successful?"

Tristan nodded. "We did what you asked us to. But we've got a lot to tell you. Ilana's done something terrible, and I don't know how we're going to stop it."

"Worse than building her own globe?" Drakewell asked sharply.

"I think so." Tristan glanced at the door, wishing the others were here to back him up. "She said it didn't matter what happened to the globe any longer, because she'd found a spell that would do more damage than the globe ever could."

Hayley gasped, and Eli cursed.

"You need to tell us everything," Natasha said hurriedly.

Tristan wanted Amber to be there—she knew more about Ilana's spell than anyone. "Once the others get back, I'll tell you everything."

"Others?" Natasha raised an eyebrow.

"Two of Ilana's students escaped with us. There were supposed to be four, but the other two were—lost along the way. We never would've managed without them."

“We’ll make a dinner reservation,” Gracewright said briskly, “and you can give us the whole story then.” She made for the reception and the phone waiting there.

“Wait,” Tristan said, looking around the cluster of students and teachers. “Where’s Delair?”

Drakewell’s mouth tightened. “He never made it out.”

“What d’you mean?” Tristan asked hurriedly, his excitement rapidly deflating. “What’s happened?”

“There was an earthquake,” Natasha said heavily. “We wondered if you and Amber had been involved, but—”

“No way!” Tristan said. “We haven’t been near their globe in two months!”

“That’s what I was saying,” Natasha said. “The earthquake was on July twenty-first, which you couldn’t possibly have mistaken for the tenth. We were starting to worry something had happened to you.”

“So, Delair’s—” He didn’t want to say the words.

“Most of the Lair collapsed,” Alldusk said. “We don’t know how extensive the damage was.”

Tristan winced. “But the rest of you are okay?”

“Damian’s leg was broken quite thoroughly,” Grindlethorn said from the back of the group. He was almost entirely hidden behind Ryan’s broad shoulders. “But he’ll recover.”

For the first time, Tristan noticed that Damian was leaning on a pair of crutches.

“Sorry,” Tristan said.

“Like you care,” Damian said sourly.

To his surprise, Tristan found that he did pity Damian. As obnoxious and uncaring as he could sometimes be, he was a hundred times better than Ilana and her disciples.

Just then, the automatic doors slid open to admit Rajesh and Mei Ling, both looking thoroughly ruffled from the stiff wind outside.

“Hey,” Tristan called to Rajesh. “They’re here.”

Rajesh froze just inside the doors, eyes flickering warily from Drakewell to Natasha and back. Mei Ling continued forward, wide-eyed with curiosity. “So this is your school,” she said, stopping beside Tristan.

He nodded. “Not very impressive next to Ilana’s school, is it?” He turned. “This is Mei Ling. And that’s Rajesh.”

At last Rajesh started forward hesitantly. “Sorry. I know you don’t want us here.”

“Don’t be silly,” Natasha said briskly. “We’re thrilled to have you.”

Drakewell looked as though he didn’t fully agree with her.

“We’ve got dinner reserved for seven o’clock,” Gracewright said, rejoining the group. “Am I correct to assume it’s just Amber we’re waiting on now?”

Tristan nodded.

As if on cue, Amber walked through the doors, stopping just as Rajesh had when she saw everyone from the academy.

“Amber!” Leila called out. “We’ve missed you!”

As the rest of the group started towards the doors, Amber hunched her shoulders and submitted to being hugged by Leila, Rusty, Hayley, Cailyn, and Trey. Tristan caught her eye and grinned at her disarmed expression.

“I doubt you actually missed me,” Amber told Leila under her breath as she followed Tristan into the windy night.

“No, we did,” Leila said. “It’s amazing how lonely it got with both you and Tristan away.”

When Amber glanced skeptically at Tristan, he shook his head with amusement.

Gracewright had reserved the entire back room of a Chinese restaurant not far from the hotel, and it was only after they had ordered one of nearly every dish on the menu and the waitress had disappeared that Drakewell said, “Now. We are all impatient to hear what happened to you these past four months. Is the globe destroyed? And what should we expect from our enemies in the future?”

“It’s a long story,” Tristan said. “What’s been happening on your end? We sent a ton of rain and a hailstorm on May tenth, but we haven’t done anything since then.”

“That rain flooded half of the Lair,” Grindlethorn said sourly. “Don’t you remember that hole the rogue magicians dug in the nearby cave? It still hasn’t been patched.”

Tristan grimaced. "Sorry. But what was that earthquake you were talking about? And how did you figure out where Ilana was hiding in Greenland?"

"I think we should just start from the beginning," Natasha said. "You left, and life continued as normal for a while. We couldn't be certain you were alive until the tenth of May, when a flood and a hailstorm hit while we sheltered out in the woods."

"But everyone thought we just ran away?" Tristan asked.

"Everyone but Leila. She insisted some foul play must have been involved. After five days of listening to her list off the reasons why you and Amber would not have simply abandoned us, we drew her aside and told her the truth. We didn't want the others thinking too much about your absence."

Tristan glanced at Leila, who made a face. "I knew you wouldn't just *vanish*."

"Then, of course, Leila and Rusty insisted on searching for you on the globe. Leila spent every evening in the Map Room, until we started giving her regular shifts there. After nearly two months, she came running one morning to say she'd found a cluster of too-bright auras in Greenland.

"Quinsley tipped off the British newspapers, exposing an off-grid colony up in Greenland, and a week later we sent an earthquake after you. We wanted Ilana to know, without a doubt, that we had found her. We hoped she would flee, and in the confusion you would get a chance to destroy the globe."

"It almost worked," Tristan said under his breath.

Natasha gave him a curious look but did not ask what he meant. "We called off classes that week. We decided to reveal the truth to the other students, most of whom were not surprised. Then we spent every hour supervising the Map Room, waiting for Ilana to reveal herself.

"No auras appeared for several days, and we began to wonder if Ilana had fled while we were looking the other way. Then, all at once, strings of auras began appearing in small groups and then disappearing—clearly they were boarding planes or helicopters. We couldn't believe how many there were! More than fifty, possibly even a hundred."

Tristan nodded. "And most of them are still out there," he said grimly.

Just then, five waiters appeared with their food, the aroma of rich Chinese sauces, sautéed garlic, crispy orange chicken, and spicy hot and sour soup filling the room. No one spoke as the waiters set the platters and bowls down.

Once they had left, Natasha reached for a plate and spooned a large helping of moo shu vegetables onto her plate.

Impatient for her to continue, Tristan said, "But you lost us after that, didn't you? You didn't see where we went."

"There was a ship we followed for a while," Natasha said, handing the platter on to Drakewell, who grimaced. "We could only see four auras on the ship, but they were so bright we knew they were magicians. Drakewell wanted to attack it, but none of us knew if either of you were aboard. Unfortunately, the ship disappeared into the southern hemisphere before long, and though we tried to fix the globe so we could follow them south, it was such a slow process that the ship had long since disappeared by the time we could track its course. And we can't see four stray auras on the full globe, so we had no hope of picking the ship out of the sea."

"That was our fault," Tristan said. "Ilana still didn't trust us, so we told her that the safest place to hide was somewhere in the southern hemisphere. We've been in New Zealand for the past two months."

"Oh!" Leila said. "I thought you were in Africa. That's where the ship looked like it was heading."

"They considered it," Tristan said, "but one of the teachers was a New Zealander, and he said it would be easier to go somewhere familiar."

"Well, it's a good thing you showed up before we fixed the entire globe," Quinsley said drily. "We were planning to start with Africa before moving on to South America and Australia. We probably would've fixed Antarctica before we got around to New Zealand."

Tristan laughed dully. "What happened then? What about the earthquake?"

Natasha picked up the story once more. "All this time, someone was sending drenching rain at the Lair. We knew it was Ilana, but our air magic was running so low we couldn't waste it on sending the rainclouds away."

Tristan glanced at Amber, who had ducked her head to her plate and was suddenly very interested in her

sesame chicken. She would feel guilty, of course—if she had agreed to gather more air magic for the academy, this would never have happened.

“By the time the rain had shattered our outer barrier once more, we knew Ilana had something terrible in store for us. Barely a day after the barrier came down, a catastrophic earthquake hit the valley. Most of the Lair collapsed, and those of us who were lucky enough to be near the top were able to dig our way out. As you know, we were unable to return for Delair.” Natasha took a heavy breath. “That nearby cave collapsed entirely, and several large sections of rock were dislodged from the mountains.

“Luckily our plane escaped undamaged, and we flew to Millersville to recoup. We had no supplies, and aside from an account we set up with the Millersville bank, most of our wealth is still buried in the Lair. That was ten days ago. As soon as we received your message, we gathered our possessions and left Millersville behind.”

Tristan and Amber looked at each other in disbelief. Somehow Tristan had imagined that life had continued as usual while they had been away; to think that the academy was no longer waiting for them, safe and stocked with supplies and sealed off from attack...

“Where are we going now?” he asked, pushing a clump of sautéed cabbage back and forth with his fork.

“We have no idea,” Alldusk said. “Millersville isn’t safe, because Ilana’s people know exactly where to find us. Still, we don’t want to go too far from the Lair. If someone managed to raid the tunnels, we would be destroyed.”

“But what happened to you?” Leila asked. “Your story is going to be so much more exciting than ours!”

“First, everyone needs to eat,” Natasha said sternly. “This hot and sour soup is delicious. Would you like some, Rowan?”

Drakewell took the bowl of soup with a frown, and for a few minutes everyone fell quiet as they dug into the feast. When Tristan could eat no more, he pushed his plate away and waited for someone to ask for his side of the story again. Rajesh was eating steadily, eyes fixed on his plate, while Mei Ling picked at one piece of rice at a time with her chopsticks. Both were avoiding the curious stares of the students from the academy. To his right, Amber’s eyes had glazed over. Tristan shifted ever so slightly closer to her and pressed his knee against hers; Amber turned with a start and stared at him. After a moment, her expression of alarm softened to a shy smile.

“C’mon,” Rusty said once he had polished his plate clean. “Tell us what happened!”

So Tristan began slowly, describing everything that had happened since the day he and Amber had left the Lair. He told them about being picked up almost immediately from Millersville, and about the division they had been assigned into. When he mentioned Ilana’s obsession with using internal strength to fuel spells, Drakewell asked for a demonstration.

“I’m no good at it,” Tristan said. “Rajesh, do you want to—?”

Though Rajesh made a face, he complied. With a subtle gesture, all twelve candles on the table began burning so fiercely that their wax melted into one giant turquoise puddle.

“Impressive,” Alldusk said, leaning back in his chair and folding his arms over his chest as the candles flickered out one by one.

“And does everyone at this school of yours possess the same talent?” Drakewell asked sharply.

Rajesh shook his head. “Only the kids in the top two divisions, and there weren’t many of us. I think a couple of them might be gone now. The other divisions were learning, but most of them weren’t very good at it. It takes years of strength training and concentration before you can do that.”

“We are well aware of that,” Drakewell said coldly. “Continue, Fairholm.”

Tristan shot Rajesh an apologetic look and continued. He didn’t go into detail about the punishment Ilana had put them through, and he didn’t mention Merridy, though he did explain how Amber had been locked away and forced to produce a hundred air marbles before they left the ice cave behind.

“We didn’t see Ilana for almost two months after that,” he said. “She and a couple other teachers took the globe on a ship, and she must’ve sent all of that rain and the earthquake while she was on her way to New Zealand.”

He described their time in the Bulmer cave system, and mentioned the way they’d been harvesting earth magic through the stalactites.

“Poor Osric would have been so excited to hear that,” Gracewright said sadly.

Tristan swallowed. He was just grateful that none of his friends had been trapped down in the Subroom during the earthquake.

Leila urged him to continue, so he explained their plan to trap Ilana and the globe outside while they found a way to destroy it.

“And you actually did it?” Leila asked, wide-eyed.

“Yeah. We dropped a burning backpack full of marbles and fuel canisters over the globe, and everything for thirty feet was completely obliterated. Ilana is dead, I’m almost positive, and the teacher responsible for the First Division is too.”

“How many are left?” Natasha asked.

“I don’t know,” Tristan said. “Four of them chased after us, and at least one of those four survived. There were probably twenty or thirty others left outside the cave when we escaped, but I don’t know how many were students and how many were trained magicians. There were lots of really young kids, too, and they wouldn’t know anything about magic. Ilana liked to adopt them from birth so they’d be completely brainwashed.”

Drakewell’s mouth twisted, but he said nothing.

“Now tell us about this spell of Ilana’s,” Natasha said in a low voice.

Every eye was on Tristan now. “Before we left the ice cave, Ilana told Amber that she’d found an old spell that would be more powerful than both globes combined. That’s what she needed the air magic for, and I think she must have enacted that while she was on the ship. She didn’t even care about the globe by the end.”

“She might have just been making that up to scare you,” Quinsley said.

“No.” It was the first time Amber had spoken all evening, and every head turned to her. “I can feel it. Something has taken hold up in the north. I can sense it on the wind. It grows stronger every day.”

Though it was a warm evening, Tristan shivered. This was something new, something no one understood. Ilana might have known she was going to die. This ancient piece of magic must have been her way of ensuring the rest of the world would end with her.

“Can you tell us where the magic is based?” Natasha asked.

“No,” Amber said softly. “I would have to search for it. But I think it lies almost directly to the north.”

Tristan found her hand under the table and gave it a squeeze, trying not to imagine what waited for them.

It was a quiet group that returned to the Vancouver Bay Hotel that night. As the others began making their way up to their rooms, Tristan stopped Alldusk. “Can I talk to you?”

“Of course,” Alldusk said, looking surprised.

Tristan did not want to be the one to say this, but someone had to. “Merridy was there,” he said quietly. “At Ilana’s school. They’d captured her and locked her up.”

A spark of hope lit Alldusk’s eyes, so Tristan plowed on before his professor came to the wrong conclusion.

“We talked to her. She said she’d been wrong, said she wished she’d never left the academy.”

“Where is she now?” Alldusk asked desperately. “Is she—”

Tristan shook his head. “Ilana killed her.” His voice broke. “I’m so sorry.”

Alldusk froze. His face went grey, and his hands shook slightly. But when he spoke, his voice was surprisingly steady. “Thank you for telling me. It is a small reassurance to know that she forgave us in the end.”

“I’m so sorry,” Tristan repeated uselessly.

“It’s okay,” Alldusk said, running a trembling hand through his black hair. “Get some rest. And don’t worry about me.”

Tristan hesitated before continuing down the hall. When he looked over his shoulder as he waited for the elevator, Alldusk was gone.

Rusty was waiting for him on the tenth floor. “Where’d you disappear off to?”

“I just had to talk to Alldusk,” Tristan said, shoving his hands into his pockets. “Merridy was locked up at Ilana’s school, but she’s dead now.”

Rusty rocked back on his heels. “Poor Alldusk!”

“I know.” He had looked forward to this reunion for months, but now the evening had turned bitter, tainted by death and by the thought of what might have happened to Pavlina and Ori.

When Tristan made to turn into the room he’d been sharing with Amber, Rajesh, and Mei Ling, Rusty

grabbed his arm and steered him across the hall. “Everyone’s here. They wanna spend some time with you.”

“Where are Rajesh and Mei Ling?”

Rusty glanced back at the door across the hall. “They’re probably in there.”

Tristan shook his arm free and went to fetch his new friends. “I’d be dead without them,” he told Rusty over his shoulder. “I don’t want them to regret coming with us.” He opened the door and called, “Rajesh? Mei Ling? You have to come meet the others properly.”

Mei Ling appeared at once, toothbrush in her mouth. “Okay!”

Rajesh poked his head around the corner a moment later. “Do we have to? I’m tired.”

“Oh, come on,” Tristan said. “If you’re going to stay with us, you’ll have to get to know everyone a bit better.”

Several minutes later, they joined him in the hallway, Mei Ling looking excited, Rajesh scowling.

“This is Rusty,” Tristan said, tilting his head at his friend.

Grinning, Rusty shook both of their hands. “It’s exciting, getting new kids here,” he said. “There’s only fifteen of us—well, thirteen once Tristan and Amber were gone—and it gets kinda boring after a while.”

“Only fifteen?” Rajesh said skeptically. “Ilana was so worried about your school. I don’t think she realized how small it was.”

“We also had the Lair,” Tristan said. “That’s much safer than Ilana’s ice cave. Or it was, anyway. Come on. Let’s get this over with.” He was tired himself, and already overwhelmed after seeing everyone again for the first time in months.

When Rusty led the way into the bedroom across the hall, the four of them were greeted with applause.

“Oh, calm down,” Tristan said, trying not to smile. “It hasn’t been *that* long.”

“Look what Gerry slipped us,” Leila said, holding up a bottle of champagne.

They had secured a spacious suite with a sitting area and three plush couches, and Tristan’s friends were sitting all around the room, some perched on the end of the single enormous bed, others curled up with their backs against the wall. Amber was there, to his relief, and she gave him a shy smile from her seat in the back corner.

As Tristan took a seat beside Leila on one of the couches, Rajesh and Mei Ling settling awkwardly onto the end of the bed behind him, he did a double-take. Was that *Zeke* sitting next to Trey?

“What’s up with you?” Tristan asked Zeke, though without malice.

Zeke gave him a funny smile. “Damian and Cassidy haven’t talked to me in weeks. And these morons are stupid enough to hang out with me in the meantime.”

Tristan raised his eyebrows at Leila, who punched him in the shoulder. “Oh, shut up,” she muttered.

“What else is new?” Tristan asked, taking a wine glass from Hayley. She continued around the room, passing out a mismatched collection of water glasses, mugs, and wine glasses that had clearly been scavenged from several different rooms.

“We didn’t get to go home for summer,” Rusty said. “It’s too dangerous now. But I got to visit Christa a month ago.” His tone softened. “She’s out of Juvie now, and she’s staying with a really nice foster family. Alldusk helped arrange the whole thing.”

Leila pried off the wire cage over the champagne cork, tongue between her teeth.

“What about classes?” Tristan asked. “You haven’t just been carrying on like usual, have you?”

“Like Natasha said, we stayed in normal classes for the first month or two,” Cailyn said. “After that, we started watching the Map Room with them and learning as much defensive magic as possible. We spent a lot of time up in the forest, which was nice. No one was watching us any longer, and I think Natasha knew we might be evacuating the Lair before long. We spent a week hiking through the woods with Gracewright at one point, and we learned how to forage and make shelters from everything we could find.”

When the champagne was poured, they all raised their glasses.

“To Tristan and Amber,” Leila said.

“Tristan and Amber,” repeated everyone except Tristan and Amber.

The bubbles tickled his throat as he took a sip, leaning back into the embroidered couch pillows. “Damian’s gang is going to be looking pretty sad,” he remarked, allowing the weight of fear and sorrow to retreat just for a

short while.

Eli laughed. “I don’t see them joining us, though. They’ll just be wallowing in their misery, champagne-less and lonely.”

They spent the next several hours in happy companionship, joking and catching up on all the mundane details of life the others had missed. Even Rajesh and Mei Ling joined the circle after a while, though Rajesh still looked uncomfortable.

It was well past midnight when Tristan, Amber, Rajesh, and Mei Ling returned to their room. After the clean room they had just left, the stench of camping gear and mildew was stronger than ever.

As Tristan pushed open the door, he caught sight of a postcard in the shape of a maple leaf lying on the floor. What was that doing back here?

He bent to pick it up. The spikéd handwriting was unfamiliar, but his heartbeat quickened as he read.

We’ll be waiting for you. You’re not half as clever as you think you are.

Tristan handed the postcard wordlessly to Rajesh.

“Mordechai,” Rajesh whispered.

Mei Ling’s eyes widened. “Even here?”

“It’s not over yet,” Tristan said. He locked the deadbolt and crossed to his bed, the words still seared across his eyes. *We’ll be waiting for you.* But where? Was Mordechai in Millersville, or had he broken into the Lair?

The curtains rippled in a warm breeze, and beyond them, the night was waiting.

The Final Order

The Underground Academy: Book 4

Chapter 1: Pursuit

Tristan stood as though frozen, turning the postcard from Mordechai over and over in his hands. He could not believe Ilana's most dangerous follower was *here*, somewhere in Vancouver, watching them and biding his time. He had thought it would end with Ilana's death—that the destruction of her globe would mean her followers no longer posed a threat.

Yet Ilana's final act had been to enact an enchantment she believed powerful enough to spell the end of humanity. And now Mordechai was here to remove the last threat to Ilana's enchantment: Tristan and the rest of his school.

Last night had been wonderful, seeing Leila and Rusty—his best friends at the Underground Academy—once again. After spending a joyful evening catching up with the students and professors from his school, he felt as though someone had dumped a bucket of ice water over his head.

"Can I see?" Mei Ling asked from where she was perched at the end of her bed. She and Rajesh had risked their lives to betray Ilana and help Tristan destroy her globe, and he hated knowing he had dragged them into danger once again.

Tristan walked mechanically over to Mei Ling and handed her the maple leaf-shaped postcard. He had already memorized the words scrawled on the back. *We'll be waiting for you. You're not half as clever as you think you are.*

"How is that even possible?" Mei Ling asked, her eyes wide and horrified.

Rajesh sat beside Mei Ling and stared at the writing again, as though it would reveal its secrets if he examined it carefully enough. "There isn't even a stamp. He must've delivered it in person."

"But how did he find us?" Mei Ling asked.

Rajesh shrugged. "I guess we've been here too long. He probably figured out what flight we took out of Auckland."

Tristan sat on the end of his bed and put his head in his hands. "I thought it was going to be over once we got away from Ilana. But now the Lair's gone, and we have nowhere to hide." The Lair had been the first place that had truly felt like home since his parents had split up.

Standing beside the window, Amber hugged her arms across her chest as though she was cold. "I can feel the enchantment, even now. It's almost tugging at me. It feels so wrong." She lowered her voice to a whisper. "I should have killed Mordechai when I had the chance."

Though the summer air was laden with heat, Tristan's skin crawled with goosebumps. "I wish you had, too. But it's too late." He wanted to hug her, to reassure her that they would get through this somehow, but his feet were too heavy to move.

"We need to warn your professors," Mei Ling said, dropping the postcard onto her bed at last. "We can't just sit here and wait for Mordechai to do whatever he's planning. He's completely unpredictable."

"You're right," Tristan said. "We need to get out of here."

Moving felt like the right thing to do. He began stuffing all of his belongings into the backpack he was sharing with Rajesh, amazed to find the pack was only half-full when he was finished. It was incredible that his entire life had been reduced to such a basic list of needs. Of course, anything he might have called his own had been reduced to shreds when his own pack had exploded outside the Bulmer cave system in New Zealand.

The others quickly followed suit, and in silence they made for the door. Rajesh ducked into the bathroom just before they left and grabbed all of the shampoo, conditioner, and lotion containers left behind, along with three bars of paper-wrapped soap.

"What?" he said when Mei Ling shook her head at him. "I can't stand being filthy."

Tristan remembered seeing Professor Alldusk disappearing into the room at the end of the hall, so he led the others past the room where they had sat up drinking champagne and catching up on the past four months, trying his best not to make the floor creak. He couldn't believe that just thirty minutes ago he had felt safe and happy for the first time since leaving the academy.

It was a while before Alldusk stumbled to the door in rumpled pajamas, his eyes bloodshot and swollen. He probably hadn't slept a wink, haunted by the death of the woman he had once loved.

"What's going on?" he asked, looking from Tristan to the other three. "You should be asleep! What are you doing with those backpacks? You're not running away, are you?"

"No, of course not," Tristan said quickly. "But—" He dug in the pocket of his sweatshirt and handed Alldusk

the postcard. “We found this under our door. It’s from one of Ilana’s supporters.”

Alldusk read it under his breath, his expression darkening with each word. “You think he’s here, don’t you?”

Tristan nodded solemnly. “And he’s really dangerous. I think we should leave.”

“Well, first things first. Let me get dressed—do you want to wake everyone else up?” He listed off each of the rooms they had booked. “We have to leave quietly, though. If this person is as dangerous as you think, he might be trying to draw us out.”

Tristan glanced at Rajesh in concern. That idea hadn’t occurred to him.

“Go on,” Alldusk said. “I’ll be out in a moment.”

Tristan and his friends spread out and began knocking softly on doors until most of the school had assembled in the hallway, all wearing pajamas and blinking in the light. Eli took so long to answer the door at the room he shared with Trey that Tristan wondered if the two had simply fallen asleep on couches in the suite where he’d last seen them; at last Eli pushed open the door, his badly-dyed hair plastered to his forehead as though wet, his face white.

“You okay?” Tristan asked.

Eli wiped his mouth. “Fine. What the hell are you doing waking us up so late? It’s almost two in the morning.” Then he noticed the others milling in the hallway behind Tristan and frowned. “I’m late to the party, I guess. Trey!”

Poor Amber inadvertently knocked on the door of Damian and Ryan’s room, and she narrowly dodged a pillow when the door swung open. “Get outta my room,” Damian barked.

“Shh!” Amber whispered. “Tristan will explain. This is not my fault.”

“Bastard,” Damian muttered, though at least his vehemence was directed at Tristan this time. “We haven’t slept properly in two weeks!”

“Feel free to stay,” Tristan said shortly. “And good riddance.”

The whispers went silent when Professor Drakewell appeared from his room, fully clothed and wide awake. “What is this nonsense?” the headmaster hissed. “We could be thrown out of this hotel if you don’t quiet down right this instant!”

Tristan pushed past the other students to reach Drakewell before he yelled at anyone else. “We talked to Alldusk, Professor, and he told us to wake everyone up. One of Ilana’s supporters is here.”

“Where?” Drakewell snapped, scanning the students with his unnerving hollow-eyed stare as though expecting to find a stranger in their midst.

“I don’t know, but he managed to get a postcard under our door,” Tristan said. “He’s a massive guy named Mordechai, and he’s even worse than Ilana.”

After a pregnant pause, Drakewell said, “We need to leave at once, in that case. Gather your things and return here promptly.”

Tristan and his three roommates were the only ones left behind as the other students scrambled to collect their belongings. Leila was one of the first to reappear, carrying nothing more than a day pack with a sweatshirt draped over the top. Her black hair was in a braid once more—it had taken the full two years to grow back after Zeke had cut it off.

“Is that all you managed to bring?” Tristan asked, nodding at the backpack.

“Yeah. I was down in the Subroom when the earthquake started, so I shoved a few things in here before I ran up. Most of the others didn’t even get to bring that. We bought a few more clothes in Millersville, but Drakewell didn’t want us carrying too much.”

Tristan felt another pang as he tried to reconcile his memory of the cozy, safe Subroom with the wreckage it had likely been reduced to.

“Well, at least you’re alive,” he said bracingly.

Leila leaned her head against his shoulder for a brief instant. “And at least you are too.”

Before long everyone had returned to the hallway, and Drakewell led the students down the stairs—he eschewed the elevators, afraid of what might happen if they split up—and out a back door that led to a fenced-in patio with a swimming pool. It was such an ordinary sight that it didn’t quite seem right.

Damian was lagging behind, still on crutches. His two cronies, Ryan and Cassidy, walked on either side as

though ready to catch him if he fell. Drakewell waited until he had hobbled outside before waving everyone over to the far side of the pool. With a gold fire marble from his pocket, he sliced away a chunk of the high iron fence and led the way through.

The city was surprisingly lively even this late at night—people milled through doorways where music hammered within, and lights cast a hazy glow on the streets. At first Tristan was nervous about the number of eyes following them as they made their way silently through town, but after a while he realized they would have been far more conspicuous if the city had been deserted.

“You haven’t seen this guy anywhere, have you?” Leila whispered from behind Tristan as they passed an especially raucous bar.

“No. He’s pretty easy to spot. Really strong, with tattoos all up his arms and neck. He *looks* scary, if you know what I mean.”

Leila nodded. “Kind of like the way Drakewell looks scary, right?”

Tristan laughed under his breath. “Drakewell is practically a saint compared to everyone at Ilana’s school. But most of them don’t look nasty. They seem perfectly ordinary, and then—”

“What was it *really* like?” Rusty whispered from Tristan’s other side. “How come Ilana didn’t just kill you, huh?”

Tristan glanced over his shoulder at Amber, who was trailing behind the group as though lost in thought. “I’m not sure if she believed us, but she knew Amber was valuable. I could never tell with her—she acted all friendly for a while, like she actually wanted us there, but then she was horrible to Amber when she needed air marbles.”

“Quiet back there,” Professor Grindlethorn hissed without turning.

Tristan swallowed what he had been about to say and looked ruefully at Leila. Amber was the only magician alive who knew how to harvest air magic, and she had guarded that secret so carefully she had not even let her professors at the academy know the truth.

By the time they reached the edge of the city, Tristan was sure they had shaken off Mordechai’s trail. He was falling asleep as he walked, and twice he nearly tripped as he walked off a curb without realizing it was there.

“We need to stop,” Professor Gracewright said, pointing to a lighted “Vacancy” sign. “Surely we’ve walked far enough.” Her flyaway grey hair looked odd without one of the hats she always wore—she must have left them all behind when she fled the Lair.

“I don’t think he followed us,” Tristan said.

“Good,” Drakewell said, sounding as weary as Tristan felt. “I hope this hasn’t all been for nothing.”

There were only six rooms available to fit their group of twenty-four at the rather bleak motel, but everyone was so tired they were happy to make do. Tristan curled up on one of the sleeping rolls Rajesh had brought when they fled New Zealand while Rusty sprawled on the nearby couch with his curly brown hair flopped across his eyes, and snores filled the room within minutes.

Tristan was almost asleep when he heard sirens in the distance, a muffled wail that grew gradually louder. His eyes flew open in the dark. Surely it was just some bar fight the sirens were chasing, surely it had nothing to do with them...

Chapter 2: Into the North

“Look at that! My god, that’s where we were!”
“Shh, Tristan’s still asleep.”
“How’d he know? Where d’you think he’s at now?”

Tristan rubbed his eyes blearily and sat up. He was amazed no one had stepped on him—six of his friends huddled at the end of one of the beds, watching something that had been muted on the ancient TV.

“What is it?” Tristan asked, trying to stifle a yawn.

Rusty whirled. “I told them to shut up! We didn’t want to wake you up.”

“No, I want to know what’s happened.” Sitting up, Tristan scooted his sleeping mat backwards until he was leaning against the nearest bed. “Is this about those sirens I heard last night?”

Leila raised her eyebrows at him.

“Go on, tell him what it was,” Eli said impatiently.

Leila grabbed the remote and turned up the volume. “—fatalities have now been confirmed as the result of a gas leak at the Vancouver Bay Hotel early this morning,” an announcer said, before cutting to footage of a very familiar building now ringed with police tape. “The hotel has been evacuated, and police are investigating the source of the leak.”

Tristan drew in a sharp breath. “Does it say which room the ‘gas leak’ was in?”

As though he had read Tristan’s mind, the announcer continued. “Sources confirmed early this morning that the leak began on the tenth floor, though it has also affected rooms on the eleventh floor. The hotel will undergo a health and safety inspection before any guests or staff are allowed to re-enter.”

Tristan’s chest tightened. They had to leave Vancouver, and soon. It seemed wherever he went, he left a trail of death in his wake. First Merridy, then Delair, then Ori and Pavlina, and now these innocent tourists. A part of him still clung to the possibility that Ori and Pavlina had made it out of the cave in New Zealand alive, but he knew it was a fool’s hope.

“But why did he warn us?” Rajesh asked, staring at the chaotic scene outside the hotel. “It doesn’t make sense. He could’ve killed us, but instead he let us know he was there.”

“Maybe he was just being arrogant,” Tristan said.

“Or maybe he wants to show that he doesn’t care how many people die,” Mei Ling said unexpectedly. “It seems like something he would do—threaten us with his carelessness.”

“But I thought he’d want to kill us as quickly as possible,” Rajesh said, still frowning at the screen. “Aren’t we too much of a risk to whatever Ilana had planned?”

“Unless he knows we can’t stop whatever it is she’s done,” Tristan said, hugging his knees to his chest.

“Who is this Mordechai, anyway?” Eli asked, sounding disgruntled. “I thought you guys were on his side.” He gestured dismissively at Rajesh and Mei Ling. “What makes him so awful?”

Rajesh’s face was stony. “Ilana ended up with difficult kids sometimes, and Mordechai was responsible for them. He broke them. I don’t know what he did to them, but they’ve always turned into her most loyal followers.”

“We should ask if the professors have seen this,” Leila said, turning off the TV and getting to her feet. The others scattered like rats off a carcass. “I think we need to get out of here.”

No one disagreed.

Silence filled the room in Leila’s absence, and Tristan pretended he did not see how many of his friends were giving Rajesh and Mei Ling accusatory looks, as though they had led Mordechai right to them. He knew he would have the same fears if he had been the one to stay behind, but he trusted Rajesh and Mei Ling with his life.

It was a relief when Leila returned only minutes later, Amber trailing in her wake along with Evvie and her friends.

“Gerry was just coming to find us,” Leila said. “He says we need to fly out of here as soon as we can. Before Mordechai figures out where we’ve gone.”

“It hardly seems real,” Amber said under her breath. “New Zealand seems like a completely different world from this, but somehow he’s still here...”

“At least you’ll be glad to get out of the city, right?” Tristan said bracingly.

Amber gave him a forced smile. “I still feel so guilty.”

“Don’t. It’s not your fault at all.”

“Come on, Triss!” Leila said. “We don’t have all day!”

Tristan scrambled to repack his backpack; he was the last to join Leila at the door, and he gave the room a cursory glance as he left to be sure they hadn’t left anything behind. The place was a mess, most of the blankets thrown in haphazard piles on the floor and the mirror hanging askew.

Then he was herded into a group with Damian’s gang, the professors shepherding them with matching grim expressions. Quinsley stood by the road, arm held out for a taxi, and one stopped before long.

“One professor and three students to a cab,” Natasha said brusquely, waving Damian, Ryan, and Cassidy forward to join Quinsley. “If anything happens, each of your professors has an emergency cell phone with all of our numbers saved in the contacts.”

As Tristan climbed into the second taxi, he had a flashback to the day when Merridy had collected him from the graveyard where his brother had been buried. Back then, he had the same weighty feeling of apprehension as he did now—yet again, he was leaving behind everything he knew for a future he couldn’t fathom.

But this time, he wasn’t doing it alone. Amber sat with her forehead pressed against the window, and Tristan let his knee rest ever so slightly against hers, feeling the warmth of her skin like an anchor to keep him sane. He could tell she noticed his careful touch by the way her mouth carried the barest hint of a smile.

“I wanna say I’m excited for another adventure,” Rusty said morosely, “but nothing’s been the same ever since we left the Lair.”

“I was dreaming of returning for months,” Tristan said. “I kept thinking about the Subroom, and how we used to play poker and bet with those gold coins you hated stealing.”

This made Rusty crack a grin. “I wish we’d stolen more of them now! Then they wouldn’t all be buried down there.” He sat in silence for a few minutes before leaning forward to speak to Alldusk, who was in the front seat beyond a clear plastic partition. “Where d’you think we’re going?”

“We can discuss that later,” Alldusk said tersely, obviously unwilling to talk in front of the taxi driver.

“Hmph.” Rusty folded his arms and slouched back in his seat. “I never thought I’d be homeless.”

Though Tristan did not want to say anything, it unnerved him to see Rusty’s typically unshakeable optimism gone.

They arrived at the Vancouver airport not long after that, the radio tower rising high above the terminal, and joined the rest of the school outside the departures hall.

“Where’s the plane?” Tristan asked Leila. “You’re not just allowed to land a private plane at a big international airport, are you?”

Leila shrugged. “Quinsley said it was strictly illegal, but he did it anyway. He told the airport police it was an emergency, and he spent the whole afternoon yesterday filling out paperwork.”

“You can get comfortable,” Quinsley said as they paused in a waiting area near the security line. “This might take a while.”

He disappeared for what seemed like hours while Tristan and the others sat waiting. Damian kept prodding people with his crutches, his expression even sourer than usual, while the others shifted restlessly. Tristan didn’t want to talk to anyone—it seemed too exposed here—and he kept an eye on the entryway in case Mordechai appeared.

Rusty tried briefly to engage Rajesh in conversation, but his heart didn’t seem to be in it. *At least you’re not alone*, Tristan thought. This was nothing compared to the terror he had felt when he and Amber had gone out searching for Ilana.

At last Quinsley returned, two airport security officers trailing him. After a quick head count, Natasha told everyone to hurry along, taking up the rear as though she expected someone to run off while her back was turned.

Tristan suspected the opposite—the students walked in a tight huddle, afraid of being separated. Even Damian and Zeke were uncharacteristically subdued.

It was a relief when the security officer let them out a side doorway, bypassing the security line and the metal detectors, and onto the tarmac.

“You’re in line after the Alaska Airlines plane over there,” the first security officer said, pointing at a plane that was still boarding. “If you jump the line, you’ll be fined, and your license will be revoked.”

“Understood,” Quinsley said gravely.

By the time they had all ascended the ladder and taken their seats, the Alaska Airlines plane was being towed away from the gate.

As soon as the door swung shut, everyone started talking at once.

“Do you think we’ve actually shaken him off?” Leila asked Tristan, who was sitting in a window seat for once.

“I hope so. I don’t know how he tracked us to that hotel, though. That was creepy.”

Two rows ahead of them, Eli was saying, “—don’t know how we know you’re not still working for Ilana. You could’ve tipped Mordechai off. I bet it was you.”

Across the aisle, Rajesh had turned red, whether with anger or embarrassment Tristan couldn’t tell.

“Leave him alone,” Tristan called over Amber’s head. “I would’ve died if Rajesh and Mei Ling hadn’t helped us.”

Eli whirled and made a face at Tristan. “I don’t even know who to believe any longer. One minute you and Amber were traitors who’d run off, and next thing you’re back and we’re supposed to be making friends with the enemy.”

“You never actually thought they had run away,” Trey said reasonably, not turning.

“Settle down,” Natasha called from the front of the plane. “And please don’t make me remind you to fasten your seatbelts.”

A few stray seatbelts clicked, but the babble of voices did not quiet. Drakewell was playing Quinsley’s copilot in the cockpit, and the other professors did not seem to care that their students were half-shouting. Eli began interrogating Tristan before long, and Rusty kept turning around to ask Rajesh questions.

Once their plane had taken off and the airport was hidden beneath a layer of fog, Natasha stood and said, “Amber, could you please join me up here?”

Every eye was on her as she got to her feet, glancing at Tristan as though pleading for help, and made for the front of the plane.

“I suspect you would like to know where we’re headed,” Natasha said, her voice still loud enough to carry through the plane. She pointed Amber to an empty seat beside her.

The chatter died away at once; all that remained was the low thrum of the engine.

“We need to stop whatever spell Ilana has started before it grows too dangerous. Amber is going to help us find where the magic has taken root. Once we know what we’re up against, we can decide what to do next. Now we know Ilana’s followers no longer have a globe, returning to the academy has become a good option once again. With any luck, we could be back within the next few days.”

A ragged cheer went up from the students.

“There are still over a hundred of Ilana’s magicians out there,” Rajesh said tentatively. “I don’t mean to be rude, but—how are you going to fight them off if they come after us?”

“We have other graduates working in the field,” Natasha said. “I’ve been in touch with most of them, and as soon as we can decide on a meeting place, we will be joined by at least thirty others.” She leaned around her seat to give Rajesh a calculating look. “Do you think it will be enough?”

“I think Ilana had about a hundred and fifty followers,” Mei Ling said from the window seat. “There were almost fifty of us divided into divisions, with fifteen teachers sharing us around, plus thirty or forty graduates—I don’t know if they know what’s happening yet, though—and Mordechai and his twenty kids. Oh, and there were about twenty-five or thirty little kids, but they hadn’t started learning magic yet. They were just learning to see auras.”

“So we have approximately a hundred known opponents, with several dozen others who may or may not

join them,” Natasha said grimly. “It doesn’t sound like we stand much of a chance. But we have weapons they don’t know about.”

“Like Amber,” Rusty suggested.

“And Tristan,” Zeke scoffed.

Most of the students laughed at this, while Tristan wondered what he had missed while he had been away.

“We also know for a fact that most of Ilana’s marble stash was recently destroyed,” Alldusk pointed out from the back of the plane.

“I’m not sure about that,” Tristan said. “At least half of it was still inside the cave, and it might’ve been safe there.”

“But then the barrier could still be up,” Leila said, “which means they can’t get in anyway.”

Amber said something quietly from the front of the plane; she had to repeat herself before Tristan could hear her over the hum of the engine. “I think the explosion brought the barrier down.”

Though Tristan had surmised as much, he hadn’t managed to get a good look at the cave mouth as he had sprinted after his friends. His stomach twisted at the thought of poor, injured Ori, who would have been left at the mercy of Ilana’s followers.

“Do we all have to do this?” Damian asked sourly. “Some of us didn’t sign up to risk our lives for your dumb school.”

“Unfortunately, you will be safer with us than anywhere else,” Natasha said. “If Ilana’s magicians break into the Lair at any point and take over the globe, they will be able to destroy every magical aura they find. At least this way we can protect you if something happens. Don’t worry—with any luck, we can return to the Lair very soon. As long as we reach the school before Ilana’s followers do, it will be the safest place for us.”

* * *

For two hours they flew north, over clouds and barren grasslands and mountains, Damian snoring and several others drifting off to sleep as well. Tristan kept his forehead pressed against the window, his eyes trained on the ground below, trying fruitlessly to feel whatever magic was pulling Amber onwards.

Just as Tristan suspected they were nearing the North Pole, the plane gave a jolt and began bumping around.

“Please return to your seats and fasten your seatbelts,” Quinsley said over the crackly loudspeakers, his voice playful. “We are experiencing unexpected turbulence.”

Ten minutes later, the turbulence wasn’t quite so funny. The plane was tipping and swerving so wildly that Tristan could hardly tell which way was up or down; Hayley threw up all over the aisle, and the foul smell permeated the stale air.

“Brace yourselves,” Quinsley said, all traces of humor gone from his voice. “It’s going to be a rough landing.”

Tristan gripped his armrests, feeling a bit queasy himself. The plane gave another jolt and dropped several feet; only Tristan’s seatbelt kept him from sailing into the air.

They were hurtling towards a stand of scrawny matchstick pines—at the last second, Quinsley wrenched the plane sideways so only one wing slammed into the pines. They crash-landed on a bumpy stretch of ground, and lurched to a stop with the plane listing sideways at a broken angle.

The engine juddered to a stop, and Quinsley poked his head out from the cockpit. “Everyone alive?” He scanned the seats. “We need to get out of here quick, just in case.”

They didn’t need telling twice. Tristan grabbed his backpack and hurried down the aisle after Leila, grimacing as he stepped over the splatter of vomit.

As soon as the fresh air hit him, his head cleared and his stomach settled. Hayley dropped to her knees beside one of the scrawny, misshapen pines and threw up a bit more, and Gracewright hurried over to hand her a water bottle.

Tristan followed the others away from the plane, jumping back in surprise when his foot slid off one of the grassy mounds and landed in a filthy puddle.

“Where are we?” he asked no one in particular.

“Somewhere in the Northwest Territories,” Quinsley said, stopping beside another patch of trees and pulling

on a coat. “I hope everyone has layers.”

As though in answer to his words, the wind picked up, whistling through the open hatch of the plane and rustling the sturdy little pines.

Tristan noticed Amber was standing a ways off from the group, her face to the wind. Reluctantly, Tristan dropped his backpack on the patch of dry ground Quinsley had found and waded through the squelchy marsh to Amber, trying his best to step on the grassy mounds wherever they stuck out of the muck.

“What is it?” he asked when he reached her.

Amber turned to him, her forehead creased in fear. “I think the wind is coming from Ilana’s spell. It smells like—like magic that has been burned up.”

Tristan waded closer to her, the wind grazing his cheeks raw. He wanted to take her hand, more for his own reassurance than for hers, but he didn’t dare touch her in front of everyone. “How close are we?”

She shook her head. “It feels so strong now I can’t ignore it. It’s like a buzzing in my head, something that refuses to go away no matter how much I try to drown it out.”

“What do you think it *is*?”

“Something very dangerous. Something destructive. I can feel it pulling at us.” She looked at him with fear in her eyes. “Can you feel it at all?”

“I can feel the wind,” Tristan said, concentrating in the direction Amber was facing. “But not much else.”

“Keep paying attention,” she said. “I think you will notice it before long.”

“Tristan! Amber!” All dusk called. “Grab your things. We need to find a better place to camp.”

They stood there for another long moment, Amber’s face haunted with whatever she was sensing, Tristan trying his best to detect it as well. Then they turned as one and slogged back to the patch of dry ground where the rest of their school stood.

“How does the plane look?” Gracewright was asking Quinsley in an undertone.

The pilot wiped his white hair off his forehead and shook his head. “Bad. It won’t be flying again any time soon.”

“Where was the last town we passed?”

Quinsley grimaced. “Approximately a hundred miles to the southeast. It’s a village called Fort Good Hope. I’ll need to hike down and see if there’s a mechanic at the local air strip—the engine is fine, but one of the propellers is badly cracked.”

“How long will it take?” Drakewell asked sharply. “We are hardly prepared to linger here.”

“I don’t know,” Quinsley said, his shoulders sagging. “Up to two weeks, depending on how soon I can reach the village. Where are you planning to camp?”

Gracewright handed Quinsley a radio. “We’ll let you know as soon as we decide. But we should get moving. I don’t want to linger here. Work as quickly as you can.” Her tone betrayed worry.

“Don’t wait for me,” Quinsley said, rummaging in a pack. Leila ran over and gave him a fierce hug.

“Come along,” Drakewell snapped. “No time for that now. We need to set up camp before sunset, and we cannot get separated.”

Leila put her thumbs under her backpack straps and followed the rest of the school. For having fled the Lair with no time to pack, the professors had a suspiciously substantial amount of supplies.

“We went shopping in one of the towns we refueled at on our way to Vancouver,” Leila explained, following Tristan’s look. “They got a bunch of tents and camping supplies—now that the Lair has collapsed, we’ll be camping no matter where we are.”

“Ah,” Tristan said, relieved to know they wouldn’t be surviving off wild mushrooms and snow hares just yet.

“We should find this spell of Ilana’s, so we don’t waste time,” Natasha said. “We can return to the Lair as soon as the plane is fixed. Amber?”

With a start, Amber whirled to Natasha. “Yes?” She had clearly been absorbed in the enchantment.

“Would you be so kind as to lead us?”

“Oh,” Amber said. “Yes, of course.”

As they waded past the trees and into an even deeper section of swamp, this one without helpful little mounds of grass to balance on, Tristan scanned the horizon in search of any sort of landmark to focus on. Apart from the

narrow, stubby pines, the place they had landed was entirely flat.

The sun had dropped low in the sky, though just as in Greenland, it appeared to set slower than usual, moving sideways along the horizon for a while before dropping below. If the sun was anything to go off, they were heading northwest, the wind growing stronger with every step.

“I hope the tents are strong,” Tristan muttered under his breath.

Rusty heard him from behind and said, “Remember when we first got to the academy and I thought we’d be camping? This is a bit exciting, isn’t it?” His bad mood from earlier seemed forgotten.

“What’s got you all cheery?” Leila asked grumpily, hooking her thumbs under her backpack.

“That creepy guy’s never going to find us out here,” Rusty said. “We’re in the middle of nowhere, and their globe doesn’t have auras on it.”

“Their globe is destroyed, Rusty,” Leila said, shaking her head in exasperation.

“Hah! Of course. They’re really never going to find us, then.”

Tristan wasn’t so sure, though he was relieved to see Rusty acting himself again. “I just hope we can figure out what to do about this spell. I don’t even know what it is, but Amber says it feels destructive.”

Leila shivered, and a dark shadow crossed Rusty’s face.

“Ilana seemed very confident about the whole thing,” Rajesh said from behind Tristan. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to eavesdrop.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Tristan said quickly. He felt guilty for dragging Rajesh and Mei Ling into such a mess, and hated the thought of them feeling left out.

“Do you know anything else that Amber hasn’t told us?” Leila asked, falling back to walk beside Rajesh.

“About the spell?” He frowned. “I just know Ilana wouldn’t have acted so arrogant unless she was sure she’d won. I think she knew something bad was going to happen ever since you found our school—maybe she even knew she would die. But I think she was so obsessed with her mission that she didn’t even care about herself, as long as she succeeded.”

“How much did you know about her?” Leila asked, intrigued. “Drakewell told us a bit, but not much. He hated talking about her.”

Rajesh shrugged. “Not that much. Most of what I heard was from the other kids, and I don’t know if any of it was true. She told us she had been trained by an evil group of magicians who wanted to use magic to kill off everyone they hated. She said magic had been created for a purer purpose—to keep humans from getting too powerful. It kind of made sense, but she thought everyone needed to be killed to stop the damage that they were doing.”

Rajesh cast his gaze about, his eyes lighting on Drakewell, who was at the front of the group and well out of earshot. “The other kids said she was after revenge against your headmaster. She despised him. But she was definitely a psychopath, because she didn’t seem to feel anything except hate. She was as manipulative as hell, and half the older students thought they were in love with her—half the teachers, too—but she never cared about anyone.”

“Drakewell told us she was in a coma for a long time,” Leila said, her eyes wide. “I think that can happen sometimes, when you get a really bad brain injury and you can’t process emotions properly afterwards.”

A few things were falling into place now. Though what scared Tristan more than anything was not so much Ilana’s lack of empathy but the fact that she had convinced over a hundred people that what she was doing was right.

“Well, I’m glad she’s gone, either way,” Rajesh said. “I bet a few of the teachers won’t follow Mordechai, unless he forces them to. No one’s ever liked him much.”

Their conversation was cut short when Drakewell set down his pack and declared that they would be making camp where they stood. They had left the marsh behind, and they were now spread out in a stand of scraggly trees. Though there was not much space left for the tents between trees, anything was better than the marsh. Tristan was wearing every layer he owned, but the wind had chilled him right through, especially with the cold seeping up from his half-numb, waterlogged feet. He hadn’t noticed the chill until they stopped walking—now he was shivering.

“Remember how we stayed warm in Greenland?” Rajesh said quietly. “You guys should all learn to do a bit

more internal magic, or we'll never stand a chance against Ilana's followers."

"Lucky we'll be building up our strength with all this hiking," Tristan grumbled. He tried reaching for a bit of magic to warm himself, and to his surprise, the power came readily. With a simple thought, he sent warmth radiating out from his chest through his arms and down his legs.

"Do you really all know how to use internal magic?" Leila asked. "Our professors have always said it was too dangerous."

"It is if you don't know what you're doing," Rajesh said. "But we've been training at it for years, and building up our strength too. If you start with simple exercises, it isn't too hard. I can show you later, if you want."

"Really?" Leila's eyes widened. "I'd love that."

Gracewright waved the students over, saying, "There weren't any proper backpacking tents at the general store, so we're stuck with these monstrosities." She heaved a tent bag out of her pack and threw it on the ground, where it clanked and rolled into a tree trunk. "We only have five tents, so you'll need to share."

Tristan, Leila, and Rusty claimed one of the tents immediately, and Tristan told Rajesh and Mei Ling that they should join them. Amber was off to the side, deep in conversation with Natasha, so Tristan couldn't wave her over yet, but he would have slept outside if it meant having her near.

The tents were tall, square structures, not designed for fitting in small spaces or withstanding any sort of wind. Luckily the trees grew so close together that they acted as supports for the tent walls, which were turned concave by the nearest bushy branches. Without the trees, the entire tent would have toppled several times in the process of figuring out which poles went where.

Eventually they managed to get the tent standing, and they tied the flimsy ropes to the nearby trees.

"Remind me why we didn't get proper tents?" Tristan asked Leila as he surveyed their work.

"We were supposed to go shopping after we picked you up, but Mordechai ruined that plan. It was lucky Gerry decided to grab these ones just in case."

"Do we have sleeping bags?" Rusty asked, rubbing his arms at the icy wind. He wore even fewer layers than Tristan, nothing more than a shirt and a light sweatshirt.

"Rajesh and Amber still have theirs from New Zealand," Tristan said.

"Lucky them," Rusty grumbled.

Rusty's question was answered before long—Alldusk had finished putting up his tent, and he came around with a fleece blanket for each tent. "Sorry, we don't have sleeping bags," he said. "The store only had three, and I've given them to the professors."

"Did you buy the whole store out?" Tristan asked wryly.

"Pretty much. We even got a few things I'm sure we'll never use, mostly because we all feel a bit insecure without the Lair to fall back on."

Tristan felt the same way. "How badly was it destroyed?"

Alldusk shook his head. "I have no idea. We tried going back for Delair, but the stairway below the meadow was falling in. We didn't trust it to hold while we were inside."

They got a small bonfire going after that, and Gracewright cooked several pots of lentil stew. Somehow the simple meal tasted a hundred times better than anything Tristan had eaten at Ilana's school.

"I suppose we should discuss our plans," Natasha mused as she took a seat by the fire. Though she had spoken quietly, every eye was on her. "Your headmaster and I have been deciding where we should go from here, and we think you ought to know."

"Is Mordechai coming here?" Damian asked swiftly. "Do we have any way of knowing, without the globe?"

"No," Natasha said. "We don't. I'm sure he will track us, but for now he should have no way of figuring out where we are."

"Except for the fact that we're heading straight for Ilana's spell," Zeke said. "It's only the most obvious place in the entire world for us to be."

"I know," Natasha said gently. "But we can't make any decisions until we know what we're up against. Your professors and I have decided that we need to find this spell and see what form it has taken as soon as possible, before Ilana's followers have a chance to get there. After that, Quinsley will hopefully have finished repairing the plane so we can return to the academy. We might not be able to salvage anything, but at least we'll be able to keep

Ilana's followers from raiding whatever is left over."

"And we're just going to camp this whole time?" Damian asked, stabbing his crutch at the fire with a disgruntled frown.

"Do you see anywhere else for us to go?" Natasha asked, spreading her arms to indicate the barren landscape. With her colorful blouse hidden beneath dark rain layers, she nearly vanished into the night. "Once we see what we're up against, we can hike back and camp here. At least that way we can shelter in the plane if the weather turns."

"Couldn't some of us stay here?" Zeke asked with what he clearly thought was a winning smile. "We don't *all* have to go hiking through that awful marsh, do we?"

"If Mordechai takes control of our globe, you will be safer under our protection," Drakewell said with finality. After that, no further complaints were voiced.

Most of the students retreated to their tents soon after dinner, unwilling to brave the strengthening wind. The twilight lingered, though a billowing front of clouds threatened to erase what light remained.

"You'd better join us," Tristan told Amber, grabbing her hand as she turned away from the fire. Her eyes widened, and a small smile tugged at her lips.

"In a bit," she said. "I feel as though this spell will drive me mad. The buzzing is getting worse."

"I can help distract you," Tristan said.

Even in the dark, he could tell she was blushing furiously.

Leila, Rusty, Rajesh, and Mei Ling were already in the tent when Tristan joined them, sorting through their backpacks and claiming their spots. Theirs was the luckiest tent by far, with two sleeping bags and a blanket between them.

By the time Amber joined them, curling up shyly between Tristan and the wall, the tent was feeling a bit crowded.

"There's a root digging into my back," Leila grumbled from Tristan's right, rolling over a few times and stealing the whole blanket as she tried to get comfortable.

"Hey!" Rusty said. "Give that back!"

It was a surprise when Zeke pushed back the flap of their tent, looking sheepish, and said, "Any chance I could join you?"

"Too scared to face Damian, are you?" Leila mocked.

"You could always join Drakewell," Tristan said with a grin. "I bet his tent is looking pretty lonely." He glanced at Leila. "It's your call."

A confusing array of emotions passed over Leila's face before she settled on resignation. "Fine. Whatever. But you have to lie on the root."

Zeke slunk into the tent with a confused frown and zipped the door behind him. "I'll just lie at your feet. I don't want to get in the way."

Tristan tried not to stare at him. Where was the haughty, posturing Zeke he knew?

Leila stared at him for a moment and then tossed him one of the sleeping bags. "Here. You don't want to freeze."

Tristan and Rusty looked at each other in surprise. Neither dared to say anything—this fragile truce seemed too unsteady to last, and Tristan didn't want Leila and Zeke killing each other in the middle of the night.

The last light was fading, so Tristan curled up under his scrap of blanket and tried to get comfortable on the lumpy ground. When he was sure it was dark enough, he shifted closer to Amber, who leaned into his warmth gratefully.

Chapter 3: Ilana's Enchantment

They awoke to a persistent drizzle which was made worse by the stinging breeze.

"Can't we just stay inside today?" Damian groaned from the next tent when Alldusk came around to wake them.

"We don't have any time to waste," Alldusk said tersely. "Ilana's forces could already be gathering around her spell."

"Or they could be sitting inside some fancy hotel, laughing at us," Zeke grumbled from the foot of their tent, his face hidden inside his sleeping bag.

"They weren't rich," Mei Ling said. "So if they are sitting in a hotel, it's a run-down one. Probably full of cockroaches."

Zeke gave a muffled laugh, which he quickly stifled.

"Come on, everyone. Move it!" Gracewright said. "Breakfast is ready, and you can't eat inside your tents."

Rusty, Rajesh, and Mei Ling jumped up at that, unzipping their tent and letting in a blast of cold air. Rajesh and Mei Ling both still had their raincoats from New Zealand, but Rusty wore nothing apart from his thin sweatshirt.

When Zeke pulled the sleeping bag down from his head, Leila met his eyes and quickly looked away, her expression inexplicably shy.

Tristan didn't comment, though he suspected something had gone on between the two of them while he had been away with Ilana's school. A few months ago he would have resented Zeke for this; now he was ready to give him a chance.

They ate breakfast in miserable silence, most of the students soaked through. Natasha handed around a few rain ponchos, but Cassidy and Damian snatched up half of them for their gang, and the professors took the others. Tristan was grateful he had shoved his raincoat into Rajesh's backpack before his own pack had been blown to pieces outside the Bulmer cave.

It was a very subdued group that packed up their tents and shouldered their supplies for the day's walk. Gracewright asked the students to take turns carrying the tents, which were about five times heavier than a standard backpacking tent; Rusty took their group's tent without complaint.

The fog hung so low that even the nearby trees were hard to distinguish in the gloom, and Natasha and Gracewright snapped at any student who strayed too far ahead or behind. Although Tristan's legs and boots were soaked, he still flinched with each misplaced step that landed in the icy muck lurking behind every grassy mound. Tussocks, Gracewright called the mounds. They seemed designed to break the ankles of anyone who walked on them.

Without the sun to gauge the time by, the day dragged on forever. Tristan was starving long before they stopped for lunch, and was ready to curl up in his tent and sleep not long after that. Yet they trudged on, slipping and stumbling on the wet tussocks.

At last the marsh gave way to a grassy clearing in the trees, and Gracewright declared that they would be better off setting up camp and waiting for the weather to clear. A collective groan of relief went through the group as they stopped and unbuckled their packs. This time they had enough space to comfortably set up their tents on the springy grass.

As they were setting up their tents, Tristan noticed Amber sidle over to Damian, who was sitting on a drenched log a ways off from the tents and looking thoroughly miserable.

Tristan edged closer, wondering what Amber was up to. She wouldn't have approached someone she so obviously feared without good reason.

“—is your leg holding up?” she was asking gently, taking a seat beside Damian.

He turned and glared at her. “What the hell do you think? It’s killing me. Get away from me.”

Amber glanced down at his leg, where his pants were bulky around the cast just below his knee. “I might be able to help.”

“And if it doesn’t work?” he asked sourly. “Am I going to be a goddamned cripple for the rest of my life?”

“No, I doubt that,” Amber said, though she glanced up nervously. She noticed Tristan eavesdropping, and he hurriedly turned away to fetch more stakes for the tents, missing the rest of their conversation.

As he pounded in the last two stakes with a rock, he marveled over Amber’s kindness. She would never have even considered helping one of Damian’s gang the year before; something had changed while they were living with Ilana.

Tristan’s group erected their tent in record time, desperate to escape the rain, and piled inside with all of their soaking gear. The tent itself had miraculously stayed dry, and the ground cloth kept the floor from absorbing the moisture on the grass, yet it was still freezing inside. Tristan wished the roof was a bit lower so it would better trap the heat.

“Well, at least we’ve got a lot of us to warm this place,” Rusty said, clearly thinking along the same lines as Tristan. His lips were blue, and his teeth chattering.

Tristan was shivering as well, but he felt so guilty for having a raincoat when the others did not that he tried not to show it.

“Speaking of which, where are Amber and Zeke?” Leila asked.

“I’ll see if I can find them,” Tristan said, pausing with his laces half-untied. He suspected they both felt unwelcome.

He spotted Zeke immediately, crouching by a camp stove Gracewright had set up beneath the meager shelter of a tree.

“Hey, Zeke,” Tristan said as he drew near.

“What?” Zeke snapped. “I’ll go back with Damian if I have to.”

Tristan blinked in surprise. “No, I was just going to say that you’re—uh—welcome to come join us, if you want. Warm up a bit. We could use your body heat.”

Zeke made a face and stood; Gracewright waved him away, saying, “Thanks for your help. Go and get warm.”

As Zeke walked with Tristan to the tent, he muttered, “What’s wrong with you? I thought you hated me.”

Tristan hunched his shoulders forward uncomfortably. “Leila seems to have forgiven you, so I’ll trust her judgment. Besides, you’re nowhere near as bad as Ilana’s students.”

Zeke laughed humorlessly. “Thanks.”

They parted ways at the tent flap, and Tristan stopped Natasha to ask if she had seen where Amber had gone.

A flicker of concern crossed her face. “You don’t think we’ve turned her against us, do you?”

“No, of course not,” Tristan said quickly. He knew how much she cared for everyone here, even if she had trouble demonstrating it.

Natasha nodded and said, “I think I saw her going that way.” She pointed to a gap in the trees, where the swamp began again.

Groaning, Tristan started off towards the marshy tundra, wishing they had landed somewhere a little more hospitable. Even the featureless monotony of Greenland was better than this.

At the edge of the swamp, he stopped and strained his eyes to see through the fog, reluctant to give his feet yet another dousing. His toes felt as though they were about to rot as it was. Nothing revealed itself through the fog, so he drew his hood low over his eyes and waited. He was about to give up when the grass behind him rustled and Leila joined him.

“Hey,” she said softly.

“Hey.” Tristan glanced at her, wondering what was on her mind. “What’s up with you and Zeke?” he asked wryly.

“What do you mean?” Though Leila spoke dismissively, her face turned pink.

“I saw the way you were looking at him this morning. Something’s changed.”

Leila took a step forward, her toes hanging out over the fetid water, avoiding Tristan’s curious gaze. “He

came down a few times, when I was searching for you on the globe, and I could tell he was jealous. I—I didn't send him away."

She didn't speak again for a long time, but Tristan waited.

"One night he was in a really funny mood, and he told me his dad used to hit his mom. She wouldn't pay attention to him unless he did. I think his dad beat him a few times, too."

Tristan cursed under his breath. "Poor Zeke. I never thought I'd say that."

Leila nodded. For a moment she looked as though she was about to say something, but then she simply gave him a wistful smile. "And what about you and Amber?"

Tristan flushed. "She's amazing. I don't know how I didn't see it from the start."

"Remember stupid Evvie? The only one who was good enough for you because she wasn't a criminal?"

Tristan snorted. "I'm sorry, all right? Forget that ever happened."

"Well, good for you," Leila said. "I'm going back inside before I freeze. I'll tell Zeke he's welcome whenever he wants to stay with us."

She gave him a searching look, and Tristan nodded. He had the oddest feeling she had stopped herself short of saying something else.

With more determination than before, Tristan steeled himself and waded into the swamp.

It was as though Amber had been waiting for him, because he had barely gone twenty steps when she appeared from the fog and picked her way towards him. Though her shoes were soaked from the rain, they remained clean; as usual, she had been walking above the swamp rather than stepping in the murky water.

"What have you been doing?" Tristan asked. On impulse, he reached for Amber's hand.

"I wanted to know if we were getting close to the epicenter," she said wearily. "I can hardly hear myself think with this buzzing. Can you feel it at all?"

Still clutching her hand, Tristan turned in the direction Amber had appeared from and closed his eyes, trying to pick up something besides the wind and the freezing rain.

"Try reaching for the forest's magic," Amber said. "It feels like part of that power, only corrupted."

Tristan was still unaccustomed to drawing on any magic aside from the marbles, so he didn't quite know where to start. When he had last sensed the power of the forest, it had manifested itself as an invisible net hanging in the trees, vibrating with life and tightly wound magic. He tried to block out everything else and reach for the invisible web, but his hood was muffling everything and he could focus on nothing besides the whistling wind, the cold creeping up from his submerged feet, and the steady dripping of water from his hood onto his nose.

"I can't do it, Amber," he said at last. "I'm sorry."

She reached for his hood and pulled it back, exposing his head to the persistent rain. "Try it now."

At first he was just annoyed at the way his hair almost immediately plastered itself to his face in the rain; then he had the idea of trying to warm himself with the forest, as he had done once outside the Lair. He reached out to the surrounding forest, raising his left hand as though he could sense the strands of magic, and this time a bead of warmth gathered in his hand and spread through his body. He knew at once that this had come from the forest, not from within, because he didn't feel drained as the power continued to flow.

When he released the spell at last, warmer than he had been all day, the sensation Amber had described hit him.

It wasn't quite a buzzing sound, just a persistent, niggling feeling that something was not quite right, almost like the heady sensation of walking into a room filled with too many computers.

"I can feel it," he said, dropping his hand and turning to Amber. "God, that's annoying. I bet it's a lot worse for you."

Her lips twitched. "Sorry you have to suffer too. But I am glad it's not just me."

"Now can we get out of the rain? My feet are about to turn into mush."

Amber looked down at where he stood ankle-deep in the marsh. "Sorry! I didn't think."

They walked back, hand in hand, and reached the clearing just in time for dinner. Though he tried to distract himself with happier thoughts, Tristan couldn't stop thinking of Ilana and the sheer number of followers she had gathered. Now he was reunited with his friends again, the thought of anything happening to them was unbearable.

"You're allowed to eat inside if you promise not to spill anything," Gracewright said, handing them two

bowls each. “There are quite a few bears in these parts.”

“Thanks,” Tristan said, wiping water from his forehead with the back of one hand.

When they pushed back the flap to their tent, they found Rajesh and Mei Ling giving Leila, Rusty, and Zeke lessons in drawing on their internal magic.

“Are they any good?” Tristan asked Rajesh.

“Not really,” Rajesh said drily. Leila swatted his arm.

“Well, it’s dinnertime, so you can take a break.” He handed his two bowls to Leila and Rajesh; Leila took hers without meeting his eyes. “You stay in here, Amber. I’ll get the rest.”

He ducked out of the tent again and went back to fetch the rest of their dinners, and then ate in silence while Leila and Rusty begged Rajesh and Mei Ling for more details from their life with Ilana. Even Zeke joined in with his own questions, hesitantly at first and then with more enthusiasm.

“How young were you guys learning magic?” he asked eagerly.

“She started trying to teach us when we were about ten,” Rajesh said. “But some of the younger kids have picked it up even before that. I think Helene was the youngest one who ever managed to cast a spell—she was only six the first time.”

“We’re still useless at magic,” Rusty said, hugging his knees. “Well, except Tristan and Amber.”

“Hey!” Leila said. “Watch who you’re calling useless. I wasn’t that bad at Alldusk’s spells when we were in Millersville.”

“I was better than you,” Zeke scoffed.

Leila shoved him against the doorway, making the whole tent sway. “Liar.”

Tristan finished his chili and scraped the bowl clean with unnecessary concentration. He collected the others’ finished dishes and braved the rain once more to bring them back to Alldusk, who was washing up with water from a Nalgene.

“Can I help you?” Tristan asked.

“I’d be grateful.” Alldusk handed him a soaked towel and said, “Something on your mind? You look troubled.”

Tristan hurriedly straightened his face. “No, of course not.”

They cleaned up in silence, packing everything into a waterproof bag far from the tents, and Alldusk bade Tristan goodnight with a sympathetic smile.

On his way back to his tent, the clouds darkening the sky more than ever, he raked his sopping hair over his scars, hating the way his worries were written so plainly across his face. Yet if the others had seen what he had, they would be terrified as well.

“You’re soaked,” Rusty said when Tristan rejoined them in the tent.

“Yeah,” Tristan said flatly. “It’s still raining.”

Amber gave him a sideways look. “Is everything okay? You seem very quiet. Can you feel the spell?”

“Yeah,” Tristan said darkly. He could detect Ilana’s enchantment at the corner of his mind, and he wondered if it was fueling his grim thoughts.

“You can feel Ilana’s spell too?” Mei Ling asked curiously. “What do you think it is?”

“I don’t know,” Tristan said. “It feels like when there’s a buzzing in your ears and you can’t tell if it’s real or just in your head.”

Amber nodded. “That’s exactly what it feels like.”

“We should get some sleep,” Tristan said. “Tomorrow’s going to be a long day.”

“Thanks, mom,” Zeke said.

Leila threw a sock at him.

When Tristan curled up under a piece of their fleece blanket, the others lowered their voices and began shifting around getting ready for bed. Rusty stripped down to his boxers, hanging his sopping clothes from the ceiling, and Leila borrowed a dry shirt from Mei Ling.

This time when Tristan closed his eyes and tried to fall asleep, he lay flat on his back, too aware of the others around him to reach for Amber. Soon he gave up and stared at the top of the tent, where Rusty’s clothes dripped every few moments onto the end of Leila’s sleeping bag.

Every minute that passed brought them closer to the end. He could see no possible victory—whether their demise came from Ilana’s enchantment or from Mordechai’s forces, it would still be the end. He just hoped he would die bravely.

* * *

The pattering rain died off sometime in the night, and they woke to a beam of weak sunlight. When Tristan ventured outside, he caught sight of a distant ridge still enshrouded in fog. He didn’t care if they had to climb a mountain to get to Ilana’s spell; anything was better than the monotony of the marshlands.

Once he had wrung out his socks and gotten a drink of water, he returned to the tent and woke Amber with a whisper. “The rain stopped,” he breathed, his lips touching her ear.

She stirred and blinked sleepily, her hair tangled about her face in a very endearing way. Everything was better with the sun back.

Amber joined him outside before long, yawning in the pale light of dawn. Her hair gleamed in the sun, and her eyes sparkled at the sight of the mountains.

“It’s prettier than I expected,” she said.

“Yeah,” Tristan said. “Thank god for the mountains. I was getting sick of that forest.”

She nodded emphatically. “I think we are very close now. We need to stay on guard.”

They made a slower start that morning, pausing for a hot drink before they shouldered their packs, and Tristan felt marginally better by the time they set off.

Though Amber said Ilana’s spell lay to the northwest, they cut directly west towards the mountains—no one offered a reason for it, but Tristan guessed the professors were hoping the ground might be drier once they left the flat marshlands behind.

They were in luck. Just before noon, they reached the foot of the hills, which sloped gradually up to an undulating ridge that formed a wall along the western horizon. As soon as they climbed out of the trees and onto the hillside, the ground dried up and turned from uneven tussocks to squishy moss.

“We should climb the ridge,” Gracewright said. “It will be easier walking on top.”

Zeke and a few of the others groaned at this, though anything was better than the swamp. They reached the top of the ridge no more than thirty minutes later, stripping down layers as they climbed, and Tristan had to admit it was nice standing at the top with solid, flat ground underfoot again.

“It’s there,” Amber said abruptly as soon as she reached the ridge.

Tristan followed her gaze north along the valley floor and saw a faint shimmer in the air, a mirage that had grown like a soap bubble.

The wind picked up all at once, and at the same time something rumbled in the distance. At first he thought it was thunder—then he spotted a cloud of dust rising from the foot of the ridge and realized it had been a rockslide thundering down the slope.

Natasha and Drakewell were both pointing at the spell as well, shouting something that Tristan couldn’t hear over the wind, and Amber made her way over to them while Tristan turned back to Rajesh and asked, “Can you see that?”

Rajesh squinted at the valley floor—a wide, flat depression between two ridges with a river running through the middle—and shook his head. “I can tell it’s close, but I can’t see where.”

“Be on your guard,” Natasha said, turning back to the students. “We need to get a bit closer, but not too close. The epicenter looks volatile.”

This time Amber hung back, staring apprehensively at the enchantment, while the others started along the ridge towards the strange shimmery space.

“You go on without me,” Amber said distractedly when Tristan lingered.

Reluctantly he turned and followed the rest of his school along the ridge, enjoying the sensation of walking on firm ground once more. Minutes passed before Amber moved again, and this time Tristan waited for her, pausing halfway up a small rise the others had just summited.

“The magic around here feels wrong,” Amber said when she caught up to him. “It feels dirty. I’m afraid we

might be contaminated if we get too close.”

“Should we turn back?”

She shook her head. “We need to know what this is, or we will never be able to destroy it.”

Together they turned and continued up the rise, the wind growing colder as the ground flattened out once more.

“You waited for me again,” Amber said with a sideways smile. “Just like when we first met. I’ve liked you ever since then, you know.”

Tristan reached an arm around her waist and hugged her for a moment. “It’s hard to believe those days were real, isn’t it? If Merridy had told me, when she first collected me, that I’d risk my life for this school, I wouldn’t have believed her. Everything has changed so much.”

Amber nodded her head against his shoulder, and they started walking again.

When they caught up to the rest of the school, Natasha told them they would be setting up camp on the ridge and venturing down to the epicenter from there.

It was an ordeal to get the tents up—with no trees to block the wind, Tristan’s group took several tries to get the awkward structure to hold. The tent blew over twice before they came up with the idea of having Zeke sit inside while they erected the poles before hastily tying the upper corners with spare rope so it didn’t collapse on itself. The groups were fighting for stakes by the end, as several of them had already gotten lost or broken in the previous two evenings. Tristan finally resorted to gathering an armful of heavy rocks to tie the ropes around.

After a hurried lunch, sheltering from the wind behind their swaying tent, Drakewell and Natasha organized a reconnaissance mission to the spell. Though Natasha warned them it might be unpleasant, they were driven by intense curiosity, and everyone came along except Brikkens, who insisted he should stay on guard in case anything blew away. Tristan had seen him panting from exertion earlier and suspected he liked the idea of sitting down for a while.

As they clambered down a rocky chute, the wind grew fiercer than ever. Hayley shrieked as she was thrown off balance and toppled off the rock she had been standing on, and Cailyn and Trey raced over to help her up.

In the valley far below, the wind spiraled into a miniature tornado, a howling gray funnel that suctioned water from the river and then dispersed as quickly as it had come, splattering the water onto the grass as though someone had overturned a bucket.

Tristan jumped backwards as the water fell, feeling something like a surge of pressure in his ears.

“Did you feel that?” Amber asked tensely.

Tristan nodded.

“Be careful.”

Natasha took the lead when they reached the valley floor, and Gracewright ordered everyone to stay close. Drakewell paced behind Natasha, eyes flashing. He had been very subdued since Tristan had returned; perhaps he no longer felt he deserved the role of headmaster now that he was no longer the master of the globe.

A few rocks shifted behind Tristan when he jumped off the last boulder in the chute, and he flinched, expecting another rockslide. The rocks settled, though, and he jogged safely out of their path. Amber’s face was rigid, her pupils wide; even Tristan could hear the spell down here, like the buzzing of a trapped fly.

“Not too close,” Amber said under her breath as Natasha took three cautious steps towards the epicenter. From here, Tristan could see that the grass beneath the shimmering space was beginning to go yellow at the roots—the tops still looked green, but soon the whole circle would be dead.

“We need to see if it’s expanding,” Gracewright said, sidling up beside Natasha. “We should mark it with something.”

“A rock,” Alldusk said. “I don’t trust anything else to stay in place.”

“Stay back,” Natasha snapped when Alldusk ventured within a few paces of the spell. The wind truly did seem to emanate from the epicenter—his shoulder-length black hair flew back from his face as he examined the spell.

“Who has the best throwing arm?” Alldusk asked.

“Damian’s really good,” Cassidy said, pushing Damian forward. He scowled and slouched up to stand beside Alldusk, squinting against the wind.

To Tristan's surprise, the first rock Damian lifted and hurled at the epicenter rolled to a stop exactly where the yellowed grass ended and the healthy grass began.

"What happens if you throw a rock at the spell?" Zeke mused. With a calculating look, he hefted a palm-sized rock and threw it directly at the shimmering air.

"Zeke—" Natasha scolded.

It was too late. With a bang like a gunshot, the rock exploded, gravel flying away from the spell like shrapnel. Damian howled and leapt back, and Alldusk retreated soon after.

"You goddamned idiot!" Damian shouted at Zeke.

"You're just mad you didn't think of it first," Zeke said disdainfully. "You've gotta admit, that was pretty neat."

"No, it was reckless," Natasha said, "but it does give us a bit more information to work with. Now let's get out of here."

Tristan stared at the spell for a long moment before turning to follow the rest of the school. Amber was already halfway up the hillside, evidently unable to stand the proximity of the destructive magic any longer.

Though he had climbed a ridge with a heavy backpack on just hours ago, this hill seemed ten times harder to ascend. Tristan had to stop four times to catch his breath and gulp down water, and his legs were aching by the time he was halfway up the slope. The others were faring no better; he soon overtook Eli, Evvie, and Stacy.

Rusty collapsed on a rock, his messy brown hair blowing all over his face, and gave Tristan a weak wave when he caught up.

"Is it just me, or is this hill bigger than before?" Tristan asked.

"Ugh, I need a nap," Rusty said. "Or a massage. I'm sure it wasn't this hard earlier today."

They looked at each other in surprise. "You don't think it's the spell, do you?" Tristan asked nervously.

"Forget it—I'm not going down there again," Rusty said. "That place is creeping me out."

"Agreed," Tristan said.

With a long sigh, Rusty got to his feet and started uphill again, cursing every third step.

When they reached flat ground again, it wasn't just the incline that relented; the buzzing in Tristan's ears faded a bit, and the wind seemed somehow cleaner. Looking back at the valley, Tristan grimaced. "That place is nasty."

Rusty nodded emphatically. "If I wasn't sick of climbing, I'd say we should camp at the bottom of the ridge." He paused. "Don't tell anyone I said that. I'm not walking anywhere else."

Tristan laughed. "Same."

That night they sat around the camp stove, the flame threatening to blow out in the near-constant breeze, and discussed what Ilana's spell might be.

"It appears to be some manifestation of the globe," Alldusk said, his face lined with worry. "We've already seen a tornado and a rockslide nearby, and this wind doesn't seem entirely natural."

Gracewright nodded soberly. "It almost looks as though Ilana has created an invisible globe here, one that causes disasters at random."

"Why has no one thought of it before, then?" Brikkens asked, his face blotchy from the wind.

"They have," Tristan said, remembering Ilana's words. "She didn't invent this spell. She dug it up from somewhere. But I don't think anyone has used it before."

Natasha gave him a speculative look. "There's more to it than that," she said. "I think Amber can confirm this, and possibly you as well, Tristan. The spell almost seems to be *pulling* at us, as though it wants to consume us. Did you notice how the grass nearby was turning yellow?"

Tristan and several of the others nodded.

"Okay, what can we say for certain about this spell?" Natasha asked.

"It looks shimmery," Eli said.

"And it blows things up," Zeke chimed in.

To Tristan's right, Leila shook her head to herself, smiling.

"The wind does seem unusual," Gracewright said, "though we can't confirm that it relates to the spell just yet. There could be a weather system moving through this region at the moment—none of us have had access to

a weather forecast in a few days.”

“It definitely has done something to the grass,” Alldusk said. “I couldn’t be sure where that odd shimmering ended until I noticed the circle of yellow.”

“That tornado thing was really weird,” Rusty said.

“And the rockslide,” Leila said. “But it could’ve just happened randomly.”

Tristan was trying to put what he had felt into words, but it didn’t quite make sense even in his head. “It seemed like the whole valley was contaminated or something,” he said slowly. “It didn’t feel right until we got back up to the ridge.”

Amber nodded. “It still doesn’t feel right, but—it is better. Tristan is right. The whole valley feels as though it has been corrupted.”

No one mentioned the difficulty of the climb; Tristan began to wonder if he was simply worn out from three days of hiking.

As if to emphasize their concerns, a low rumble sounded in the distance as another rockslide careened off a faraway mountainside.

Gracewright handed around camping tins of tea as they discussed Ilana’s spell; there weren’t enough to go around, so they passed the tins along after a few sips.

“We have no reason to stay here,” Drakewell said after a long silence. “We’ll stay tonight, and tomorrow Quinsley should have an estimate for when the plane will be repaired. Then we must return to the Lair and guard the Map Room.”

“Do you really think Ilana’s forces will go to the academy?” Gracewright asked. “I think they might be a bit more concerned about keeping their enchantment safe.”

“That will be easy, seeing as we can’t approach the blasted thing,” Drakewell said under his breath.

“Maybe Ilana’s followers can’t do anything to help or harm the enchantment either,” Natasha said. “We don’t know. But until we do know, a bit of caution is in order.”

“The globe is more important, though,” Alldusk said wearily. “If it has been destroyed, we will be outnumbered and overwhelmed.”

“Which is why we cannot delay,” Drakewell said. “If Ilana’s forces seize the globe before we do, we won’t stand a chance.”

Tristan shifted uncomfortably at this. He had a feeling his professors didn’t appreciate quite how badly outnumbered they were. It was one thing to say Ilana had over a hundred followers; it was another entirely to know that she had brainwashed ten-year-olds on her side who could use magic better than most of the students at the academy. If they encountered Ilana’s full forces outside the protection of the Lair, they would be slaughtered.

Late that night, when the sun had set and the stars were beginning to appear in the cloudless, windy sky, Tristan and his friends retreated into their tent.

“I’m not tired at all,” Leila said. “Are you guys?”

“No,” Tristan said. He couldn’t see anyone’s faces, but after facing Ilana’s spell and contemplating their impending demise, he felt oddly affectionate for all of them. Even Zeke wasn’t too bad.

“I can’t wait to go back,” Amber whispered. “My head feels like it might split open if I stay here too long.”

Tristan shifted closer to Amber, his leg brushing against hers, and tried to make out her eyes in the darkness.

“I still can’t believe the Lair is gone,” Rusty said sadly. “I was just getting used to living there, and now it’s all over. D’you think we’ll have to kill all of Ilana’s followers, or will they join us if we’re nice enough?”

“I want to say that’s stupid, but some of the older kids are decent,” Tristan said. “You never met Ori or Pavlina, but they were helping us back in New Zealand too. They hated Ilana all along, but they were too scared to do anything about it. One of the teachers wanted to leave, too.”

“I bet Tony ran off,” Rajesh said. Though he couldn’t see his friend, Tristan could tell he was smiling. “As soon as the barrier was down, he would’ve slipped into the cave and waited until everyone was gone.”

“Oh, I hope Pavlina and Ori are okay,” Mei Ling said.

Rajesh sighed. “Don’t get your hopes up.”

“What was that?” Zeke asked swiftly.

No one moved as they strained to hear what Zeke had picked up. Tristan sat rigid, expecting to hear the heavy rustling of a bear outside; what he heard instead set him reeling.

A faint, pitiful girl's voice was calling out over the wind, "Tristan? Amber?"

Tristan jumped to his feet and tugged open the zipper, not bothering with his shoes. "Hello?" he called out. "Who's there?"

A figure came limping across the ridge, pale hair lit by the stars, and stopped just beyond Drakewell's tent.

It was a moment before Tristan recognized her as Helene, the tiny Norwegian girl from Ilana's school.

Chapter 4: Helene

“Rajesh! Mei Ling!” Tristan called. “Come see!”

All six of his tent-mates piled out in a rush, tripping over each other to see what was happening. None of them were wearing shoes; Rusty was barefoot and shirtless, his chest covered in goosebumps.

“It’s Helene!” Mei Ling cried. She ran over to the girl and knelt down in front of her, saying, “How did you get here? Are you hurt? You must be freezing!”

Quinsley, Gracewright, Natasha, and Alldusk joined them outside, and in the light of Quinsley’s headlamp, Tristan could see poor Helene was covered in dirt from head to foot, her uniform falling to pieces. She appeared too frightened to speak. She shook her head at Mei Ling, eyes wide, shivering so hard she swayed back and forth.

“She needs a blanket,” Mei Ling said. “Could someone—”

Rajesh ducked back into their tent and tossed their fleece blanket to Mei Ling, who draped it over Helene’s shoulders.

“Let’s get you something warm to drink,” Gracewright said kindly. “Are you hurt?”

Helene bit her lip before shaking her head slowly, her tiny hands clutching the blanket tighter still.

Gracewright rummaged in a bag of supplies until she dug up one of the backpacking stoves and a small pot that she filled with water. While she made tea, Mei Ling took Helene’s hands and led her to a rock to sit on. She closed her eyes and must have sent a jolt of warmth into the girl, because Helene stopped shivering abruptly, her shoulders sagging.

“Better?” Mei Ling asked.

After a long pause, Helene nodded.

“Here,” Gracewright said at last, handing the girl a mug of steaming tea. “Careful. It’s hot.”

Helene clutched the tea with both hands, the blanket slipping from her shoulders, and stared at Quinsley. After she had taken a sip of tea, she whispered, “I’m s-so scared.”

“Oh, honey, don’t worry,” Gracewright said, kneeling beside Helene. “You’re safe now. How did you get here?”

Helene took another sip of tea, her shoulders trembling. “They sent me t-to report back on you,” she stuttered. “They t-told me to make sure you d-didn’t damage the spell. A c-couple of them are coming here, to finish the spell off. It’s n-not complete yet.” Her eyes were glistening in the beam of the flashlight; Tristan had never seen a more pitiful sight.

“And why did they send you?” Natasha asked. “Why not someone more capable?”

“B-because they need all the strength they can g-get. I’m useless. They d-don’t care if I die.” She sniffed and scrubbed at her eyes.

“We’ll keep you safe,” Gracewright said, rubbing Helene’s shoulders. “You can stay in our tent. Come inside and get warm.”

Helene nodded and followed Gracewright to one of the professors’ tents, tripping on the huge blanket and nearly falling halfway there. Gracewright grabbed her arm to steady her, and she gazed up at the professor with surprised gratitude.

“Tristan and Amber, could I speak with you?” Natasha said. “I thought we would wait until morning, but since we’re up...”

Tristan stood up straight, trying to figure out if he had done anything wrong.

“Rajesh and Mei Ling, I think you should come with me too,” Natasha said, quieter this time. “And Rowan, if you don’t mind.”

Looking at each other in surprise, Tristan and his friends followed Natasha and Drakewell away from the tents and down a short rise, well out of earshot of the others.

“You two are probably the best ones to ask,” Natasha said with no preamble, looking at Rajesh and Mei Ling. “What do you know about this girl? Tell me everything. We have to decide if she can be trusted.”

“Didn’t you see her?” Mei Ling asked in surprise. “She looked awful! Maybe she still supports Ilana, but she’s obviously been abandoned. I don’t think it will take much to convince her that we’re the right ones to trust.”

“That was the other thing I wanted to know,” Drakewell said, his voice icy. “How can we be so sure you two are not planning to betray us? I am not entirely convinced that you weren’t involved in giving away our whereabouts to that magician in Vancouver.”

“I am,” Tristan said firmly. “You didn’t see what it was like with Ilana. Everyone was too scared to say a word against her, but my friends risked their lives to help us. I’m pretty sure one of them died doing it.” His voice broke. “If you’d seen Ori, you wouldn’t say they were lying.”

“Then we will give Helene the benefit of the doubt,” Natasha said gently, with a warning look at Drakewell. “She’s still a child—too young to do any real damage.”

“If the spell is not complete, then it may become stronger still,” Drakewell said slowly. “We need to interrogate Helene, find out what this means. And in the meantime, we need to guard the spell. If only a few of Ilana’s followers are on their way, we can easily finish them off and keep the enchantment safe.”

“Let me do the interrogating,” Natasha said, glancing over her shoulder at the tent Helene had disappeared into. “If only a few of Ilana’s magicians have come this way, the others are probably descending on the Lair as we speak.”

Tristan shivered as he imagined returning to find an ambush waiting for them.

“They must have guessed we’d head straight to the Lair, rather than wasting time with the enchantment,” Natasha said.

“That may have been the better course,” Drakewell said grimly. “Keep your eyes open, all of you. Lingering here hardly feels safe, but if the spell will be strengthened—”

“We’ll set a guard,” Natasha said. “And we will do our best to prepare.” She looked at Rajesh and Mei Ling. “If you two can teach the rest of our students to use their own magic without hurting themselves, we’d be very grateful.”

“Of course,” Mei Ling said. “I’d love to help.”

* * *

Tristan woke the next morning to find the rest of his tent empty. He felt disoriented and drowsy, as though he had slept half the day. As he pulled on his damp socks and zipped his raincoat over his sweatshirt, a headache began building at his temples.

Clouds had obscured the sun, so Tristan wasn’t sure how late it was, and the wind outside was as fierce as ever.

“Morning, sleepyhead,” Leila said when she saw him.

Tristan groaned and rubbed his eyes, which were sandy with sleep. “Did I miss anything?”

“Just an absolutely delicious breakfast of oatmeal and brown sugar,” she said sarcastically. “Natasha says we’re staying here until Gerry repairs the plane, not heading back down to the marsh. Apparently the professors believe Helene.”

“Well, I guess we’re camping in the middle of nowhere either way,” Tristan grumbled.

“True. And your friends are going to teach us how to use our own magic now. I’m excited!”

“Good,” Tristan said moodily, thinking back to the times he had passed out after drawing on too much of his own strength. He felt weary and almost sick, not at all up to the task of tapping into his reserves. “How much longer do you think we’ll be stuck here?”

Leila shrugged. “As long as it takes for Gerry to find a mechanic. Hopefully Mordechai shows up before then. It sounds like most of his followers are heading to the Lair, so only a couple of them are coming here. They probably think we’ve gone back to the Lair.”

“We should’ve,” Tristan said, struggling to his feet and pulling on all of his layers. “We’re useless out here, without the globe.”

“You didn’t see how bad the earthquake was,” Leila said grimly. “I’m not sure we’d be able to get to the globe even if we did go back.”

With an ominous feeling, Tristan followed her out onto the ridge. Everything about this felt wrong—staying close to the enchantment, waiting for Ilana’s forces to descend on them, and leaving the academy undefended...but there was hardly anything they could do about it, at least until Quinsley had repaired their plane. He felt like a sitting target, and that dread added to the sick feeling in the pit of his stomach.

All of the students aside from Damian’s gang had gathered on a stretch of mossy grass beside the tents for Rajesh and Mei Ling’s lesson. Rajesh was shifting side to side uncomfortably, his hands in his pockets, while Mei Ling was smiling at everyone who joined them. When Rajesh saw Tristan making his way towards the mossy circle, he seemed to relax slightly.

“Everyone can sit down, if they would like,” Mei Ling said. “It’s easier to concentrate that way.”

As Tristan took a seat, Alldusk wandered over to join them as well. Tristan remembered that Drakewell had suppressed all study of internal magic since he had become headmaster, afraid of what their students would do if they became too powerful. Alldusk was the only remaining professor who had been young enough to study under Drakewell.

“It’s kind of like meditation, and kind of like what it feels like when you first start learning to see auras,” Mei Ling continued. “We always start off with heat, because you can immediately tell you’re channeling too much power if you get too hot. You can close your eyes if you want, or keep them open, but focus on a small flame. When you’re better at this, you don’t want to think about fire, because you might set something on fire. But for now you need something powerful.”

Tristan closed his eyes and tried halfheartedly to imagine a flame. He didn’t expect it to be too hard, because he had already succeeded at this particular spell a couple times.

For some reason, he couldn’t reach his power. He squeezed his eyes tighter still, but he felt nothing. It was this cold he had, or whatever it was, he thought unhappily. Of course he was having trouble.

He opened his eyes to see if anyone else was struggling, and had to stifle a laugh at Rusty’s expression. Amber’s eyes were open as well; she did not appear to be trying at all.

“Are you having a hard time?” Tristan whispered.

“I don’t know,” she said softly. “I can’t tell my own power apart from everything around me unless the rest of it is suddenly cut off.”

“I feel sick. This isn’t working at all.”

Leila opened her eyes to glare at Tristan. “*Some* of us actually want to learn something,” she hissed.

Tristan snapped his mouth shut and closed his eyes again.

They sat in silence for at least fifteen minutes, the wind howling around them, the tent-ropes slapping against the tents. Though Tristan strained to concentrate and pull even the smallest drop of power from himself, he felt nothing at all. It was humiliating, as if he had returned to his high school chemistry classes, where he had never grasped even the simplest organic chemistry principles. He had gone through all of the motions, getting everything consistently wrong and falling farther and farther behind on his homework.

“What was that?” Eli said sharply.

Tristan’s eyes flew open.

“I think it worked. What the hell?”

Rajesh touched the back of Eli’s hand and said, “It feels like you have a fever. Nice job!”

Eli’s eyebrows raised so far they disappeared beneath his hair. “That can’t be right. I’m crap at this!”

“I guess it’s time for Tristan to hand over his crown,” Zeke taunted.

Ordinarily Tristan wouldn’t have cared what Zeke said, but with his power so frustratingly out of reach and Leila’s words still fresh in his head, he found his face going hot with anger. “No one thinks you’re funny, Zeke,” he said sourly. “And I never pretended to be that good in the first place.”

“Yeah, maybe the professors were wrong about you,” Damian said. “You’re useless.”

“Tristan used magic from the forest in New Zealand when we were fighting off Mordechai,” Amber said

unexpectedly. “That is much harder than using your own power. None of Ilana’s students could do that.”

Tristan avoided the other students’ curious gazes, half-grateful and half-embarrassed.

“Wow, we’re really impressed now,” Damian snapped. “No one cares what you think, Amber.”

“I do,” Leila said loudly, surprising Tristan. “Why don’t you go join Ilana, if you’re determined to hate everyone?”

“He’s just scared,” Zeke said scornfully.

Leila’s eyes widened.

This was new—Zeke taking Leila’s side against Damian.

“Stop this, please,” Natasha said loudly. Tristan whirled—he hadn’t noticed her and Drakewell approach while his eyes had been shut. “We need unity if we plan to defeat Ilana’s followers. If we start fighting amongst ourselves, we’re practically begging Mordechai to kill us.”

“We’re dead anyway,” Cassidy said. “Maybe we should join her before she gets us.”

“If you make one move against us, you will wish you had never been born,” Drakewell snapped. “Anyone who threatens us will be treated as dispensable.”

Tristan expected Natasha to argue this, but for once she was silent.

“I think your lessons are over for the day,” she said at last. “Students, you are free to amuse yourselves however you like. Rowan, Brinley, we need to discuss strategy.”

As the students dispersed, some exploring the ridge they were camped on, others conspicuously spying on the professors, Tristan sat on the springy ground and leaned against a rock, staring at Ilana’s spell with an unfocused gaze. He really did feel sick now—his head ached as though it was about to split in half, and he felt so drained that he wanted to sleep for a week.

The grass in the valley below was already yellower than the day before. The rot that started in the roots had overtaken the full leaves, and Ilana’s spell now sat atop a clearly defined circle of decay.

“I wonder if the spell has expanded,” Amber’s voice said mournfully from behind Tristan.

He turned slowly so as not to set his head pounding. “Are you feeling sick?”

She bit her lip, dropping to her knees beside him. “Not sick, no, but drained. I can hardly draw on any power right now. I think the spell has sucked this land dry.”

“Then it’s a terrible place to face Ilana’s magicians,” Tristan said, massaging his temples. “You’re our only hope, and if you can’t use your powers properly, they’ll destroy us.”

“I think we should leave,” she said softly. “I think we need to return to the plane and leave Ilana’s spell alone. I doubt her magicians can do anything to help it without the globe.”

“But what about Helene? She seems to think they haven’t even finished the enchantment yet.” Tristan glanced over his shoulder and spotted the tiny girl sitting outside the professors’ tent, a blanket draped over her thin shoulders and a mug of something steaming in her hands.

“She might be wrong,” Amber said. “How much does Mordechai know about that enchantment, anyway? He wasn’t on the ship with Ilana.”

“I’ll talk to Alldusk,” Tristan said. “You’re right—it doesn’t feel right to stay here. It’s almost like the spell is sucking out our power.”

Amber nodded fervently.

* * *

It wasn’t until late that afternoon that Tristan got a chance to speak with Alldusk. Several of the professors had gone down to the valley to monitor the enchantment, Helene trailing along behind them, and they took ages to make the slog back up to camp.

“It’s spreading,” Gracewright said grimly as she rejoined the rest of the school. “The dead circle has grown by approximately six inches. If it starts expanding much faster, it could get completely out of control.”

The wind had strengthened as well, the gusts almost sharp enough to knock Tristan off his feet, and Rusty had to run halfway down the ridge chasing his wool hat when it blew away from him.

Alldusk was making for his tent, head bowed and hair blowing all over his face, when Tristan intercepted

him.

“Tristan?” Alldusk said when he noticed him at last. “Is something on your mind?” He gathered his blowing hair in one hand and held it back from his face.

“I know what Helene said, but it doesn’t seem right to stay here,” Tristan said. “Wouldn’t it be better if we went back to the plane? At least that way we’ll be able to use our magic if someone attacks us.”

“I know it isn’t fun,” Alldusk said. “But if Ilana’s followers are as powerful as they sound, it might be best for us to face them here, where they’ll be weakened as well. Besides, if Helene is telling the truth, we’ll outnumber them by a considerable margin. If we hide out by the plane and they really do come and strengthen this enchantment, we would be letting them win.”

Tristan hunched his shoulders forward in embarrassment. He didn’t want Alldusk to think he was scared. “It just seems wrong. Amber can hardly use magic here, and I can’t do it at all. What if the spell damages us permanently?”

“I hope not,” Alldusk said, his face betraying a flicker of worry. “It’s good that you’re on guard. To be completely honest, I don’t feel comfortable staying here myself, but we have to support Drakewell and stick together. We’re setting a watch through the night, and we will keep a close eye on Helene. Either way, there’s nothing we can really do until the plane is repaired.”

“Right,” Tristan said. He turned away, head pounding. That had been a complete waste of time.

* * *

The week dragged on forever. Helene slowly began joining the students for meals and lessons with Rajesh and Mei Ling, and at Leila’s insistence, she finally explained Ilana’s enchantment in more detail.

“It just soaks in everything around it right now,” Helene said in her quiet yet authoritative way. “Once Mordechai adds the direct channel, it’ll be able to reach out and target any powerful magic sources nearby. It’s going to grow twice as fast as before.” Her eyes were wide, whether from fear or fascination Tristan could not tell.

“Does that mean Mordechai’s coming up here?” Rajesh asked swiftly. “Or is he back at the Lair?”

Helene shook her head. “He didn’t trust anyone else with this job. He’ll be leading the group north.”

“You were in that group, weren’t you?” Mei Ling asked. “How many of them were there? And who was it?”

Helene frowned. “There were seven of us, so six now I’ve left. I know Amelia and Ricardo were with him, but the other students I didn’t know.”

“So apart from him and Amelia, it’s just students?” Rajesh asked suspiciously. “That doesn’t sound right.”

Helene shrugged, her eyes downcast. “Mordechai thought you would all be heading back to the Lair. And besides, he thinks the students at the academy are useless. Sorry.” She glanced at Tristan and Amber, who shared a wry look. “But he thinks you’ll be powerless without the globe behind you.”

Little though he wished to admit it, Tristan knew she was right.

Gracewright appeared just then and invited Helene to join her, throwing a warning look over her shoulder as she walked away. Mei Ling rolled her eyes and leaned close to Tristan to whisper, “I still don’t trust Helene.”

Tristan shook his head. “I don’t know what to think.”

While the students remained on the ridge and tried to learn internal magic as best they could, Gracewright and Natasha hiked down several days in a row to monitor the enchantment. They confirmed it was spreading quicker with each day, while underneath the grass grew steadily browner. That much was visible even from the top of the ridge.

Tristan still felt sick and miserable, and he was amazed no one else caught whatever he had. Amber tried healing him with no success, so he spent half of his days sleeping. Helene recovered under the care of Gracewright, who seemed determined to spoil the poor, bewildered girl.

On their fourth day on the ridge, Quinsley radioed Drakewell to say he had found a mechanic and should have the plane repaired within the week. Tristan and most of the other students heard the radio crackling and eavesdropped from behind the professors’ tent, so they heard the whole conversation.

“You could probably hike down to the plane,” Quinsley’s voice rasped. “It won’t be long now.”

“We have had an unexpected change of plans,” Drakewell said. “One of Ilana’s students appeared and told us Mordechai is on his way right now to strengthen the enchantment.”

“How bad is it?” Quinsley asked.

“Worse than we expected,” Drakewell said darkly. “If Mordechai truly can make it more powerful, we would be obliterated. We need to stop him.”

“So you’re staying there?” Quinsley’s voice, broken-up though it was, sounded worried. “What do you want me to do?”

“Repair the plane as quickly as you can. We cannot afford to leave the enchantment unguarded until we return to the Lair. The girl says Ilana’s main force is heading to the Lair right now, but it should take them at least another week to get there if they are on foot.”

“Do you want to send some of the students down to wait with me?” Quinsley asked.

“No, it would be too dangerous for us to split up. If Mordechai ambushed you, the only option would be to abandon the plane, and then we would be right back where we started. But keep watch and—”

The wind picked up all at once, drowning out the rest of their conversation.

Not wanting to get caught, Tristan backed away from the professors’ tent, tripping over Damian’s crutch on the way.

“Sorry!” he whispered.

Damian gave him a blank stare.

As the rest of the students followed Tristan away from the tent, a low murmur rose among them. No one wanted to stay at the enchantment any longer than necessary, and with no sign of Ilana’s followers, Helene’s warning was beginning to seem more and more like a ruse.

“I’d rather be helping Gerry fix that plane than sitting around here,” Leila grumbled. “We’re just getting weaker the longer we stay here.”

“Maybe that’s Helene’s plan,” Zeke said sourly. “Maybe we’re sitting here wasting time for nothing.”

Drakewell appeared behind them suddenly—he must have known they had been eavesdropping—and said, “We will only wait until the end of this week. After that, we abandon the enchantment and rejoin Gerard.”

Tristan was not alone in sighing in relief at this. On top of everything else, their food was running very low—Gracewright and Alldusk had hiked back to the plane to retrieve the last of their supplies, and they were beginning to supplement their meals with wild mushrooms and berries and even a few rabbits that Rajesh and Mei Ling taught the other students how to catch with magic.

“I wish I could’ve seen your school,” Rajesh said unexpectedly.

“I wish we could go back,” Tristan said. “But it won’t ever be the same. No matter what was happening up above, it was always safe down there, and now it’s all caved in.”

Rajesh grimaced. “Nowhere is really safe now, with this enchantment here, is it?”

Tristan shook his head.

After a brief respite, the wind began to pick up that afternoon. Tristan and his friends retreated into their tent for an early night after several cups went flying, and despite the babble of voices around him, Tristan fell asleep before it was even dark.

The wind picked up further during the night, rousing Tristan from a deep sleep, and a hammering rain began as well, almost loud enough to drown out the howling gusts.

All at once, something rose above the din.

Someone was shouting.

Chapter 5: The Final Order

“What’s that?” Leila said sharply, sitting up.

Tristan pushed off the blankets, crawled over to the door, and unzipped the tent a crack. The rain immediately drenched his face, the raindrops slamming into him like pebbles. “I can’t see anything!”

Everyone in his tent was awake now, fumbling around in the darkness and grabbing clothes.

“What’s happening?” he yelled into the darkness.

“There’s a light off in the distance,” Natasha shouted back. “It’s moving towards us. Someone is out there.”

Tristan cursed under his breath. Pulling his head back into the tent, he wiped his sodden hair out of his face. “Where’s my raincoat?”

Leila thrust it into his hands. “What’s wrong?”

“Someone’s out there. I think Mordechai’s arrived.”

The tent erupted into chaos at his words. His friends flung off the blanket and struggled out of their sleeping bags, reaching for clothes in the dark and snapping at each other as they collided with one another.

Tristan struggled into his coat and zipped it up to his chin, wishing he had waterproof pants to go along with it. He pulled on his boots without tying them and crawled out into the rainstorm, bracing himself for the gale.

As soon as he stood, he was nearly thrown off his feet by a fierce gust of wind. He couldn’t see anything, not even the professors’ tent, so he followed their shouts blindly.

At last his hands collided with the canvas of their rainfly. “Can I borrow a headlamp?” he shouted over the wind.

“Tristan! Are the others coming out too?” Alldusk yelled.

“I think so!”

“Well, we’re not going to risk any lights right now,” Alldusk said. “Can you see that?”

The sky must have been lightening somewhat, because he could make out Alldusk’s arm when he pointed down the ridge to the marsh. After a moment, Tristan picked out a distant beam of light, wavering in the heavy downpour.

“And it’s definitely coming closer?”

“Yes,” Alldusk said. “Natasha’s been on watch, and she says it’s moved at least half a mile closer in the ten minutes she’s kept an eye on it. It’s close to dawn, so we should be able to see who’s coming before they reach us. We need to pack up our tents and hide so we’re not ambushed.”

Indistinct shapes were emerging from Tristan’s tent now, and more professors were joining Alldusk, bundled so heavily in layers that Tristan couldn’t tell them apart in the darkness.

“Someone stay in the tent,” Tristan told his friends, stumbling back towards his own tent. “We don’t want it to blow away.”

“Just don’t suffocate me!” Rusty’s voice came from inside.

Clumsily, colliding with one another in their panic and blindness, Tristan’s friends took down their tent and deconstructed the metal poles. Rusty crawled out once the tent was lying in a heap on the ground, still staked in place, the fabric flapping like a trapped bird in the wind.

While three of his friends—Tristan couldn’t make out their faces in the darkness—folded away the tent, Tristan stuffing away their blankets and sleeping bags, trying his hardest to keep them from getting soaked yet knowing he had failed.

“Make sure you have food, too,” Natasha said, coming up behind Tristan and dropping a sack beside his knee.

Tristan looked at her in surprise. She was almost acting as though Tristan would be leaving.

In the mayhem, Tristan did not notice the sky growing lighter. Only when he zipped Rajesh's overstuffed backpack full and straightened did he realize he could finally make out his friends' faces.

He crossed to the edge of the ridge to see if he could make out their attackers—and his insides went cold.

Over fifty dark shapes were moving up the hill, heads bent against the wind, their light extinguished.

Helene had lied.

A strange pressure seemed to have settled over Tristan's ears, muffling everything around him, and his chest constricted.

"Tristan," Drakewell said in a low voice.

Tristan jumped.

"Come here, please."

Tristan obeyed mechanically, only realizing belatedly how unusual it was for Drakewell to say "please." While the rest of the students were hurrying around and packing the last of their supplies, Tristan followed Drakewell away from the mayhem and towards a tight cluster of professors.

Though the dark shapes were approaching rapidly up the hill, Drakewell spoke with an almost detached calm. "You must return to the Lair," he said. "From here on, Tristan, you are in charge."

"Why not Amber?" Tristan said at once, looking over his shoulder to where her silvery hair danced around their camp like starlight. "Everyone knows she's much better at magic than me."

"It does not only take magic to lead," Drakewell said heavily. "It takes a willingness to do what is required, however distasteful, however frightening. And I trust you wholly in this. I was not the most skilled magician in my year—that honor goes to Natasha—but I was willing to do my part unflinchingly."

Tristan felt a dash of cold that had nothing to do with the chill evening breeze or the knowledge that Mordechai's forces were fast approaching. "Why can't one of you come with us?"

"Because I'm worried that Mordechai would follow you if he saw a professor accompanying you," Natasha said. "We can't give them any reason to care about a group of what they see as useless students fleeing the scene of battle." Her voice grew gentle. "Ilana's followers must be destroyed at all costs. I think you know what this means, Tristan. You must lead your classmates back to the Lair, take control of the globe once more, and destroy every magician's aura on the map."

Tristan's stomach lurched, as though he had missed a step. "We won't be able to tell which ones are you guys."

Natasha, Drakewell, and Alldusk all shook their heads.

"You see why we could trust no one else to take on this burden," Drakewell said. "And now, we must hurry. Take your head start and don't waste it."

Gracewright pulled a radio from her coat pocket and pressed a button so a crackling buzz drowned out the fearful silence. "Gerard?"

Quinsley's voice replied almost at once. "Abilene? What's happening? It's the middle of the night!"

"We're under attack," Gracewright said grimly. "The students are fleeing south along the valley west of the enchantment. Bring our reinforcements north, and then find them there. Leave the rest of us."

"What are you—"

Gracewright pressed another button that silenced the radio, her eyes glistening in the moonlight.

Tristan couldn't breathe. "What if we can't?" he whispered. "What if we just—can't do it?"

"I have faith in you," Natasha said softly.

Tristan's cheek itched, and when he rubbed at it, he realized he was crying.

"You're so brave," Natasha said, drawing Tristan into an embrace.

"Y-you all agree with this?" Tristan stammered, wiping furiously at his eyes. His cheeks were already soaked from the rain.

"Of course," Drakewell snapped. "Our job has never been easy."

Alldusk embraced him next. "I never understood you, but you were always my favorite student," he said quietly. "I think you reminded me a bit of myself."

Tristan was crying harder than ever when Alldusk released him, though the darkness concealed his tears.

“Are you ready?” Gracewright asked softly. “We need to leave now. We’ll say our goodbyes to the rest of the school, though of course they can’t know what will happen.”

Tristan swallowed, his breath coming short, and forced his shoulders to straighten. “I’m ready.” He had to be. The magicians were nearly upon them.

Natasha raised her voice and called out, “Is everyone packed?”

A few indistinct replies returned to her over the howling rain, and gradually the students began making their way over to the professors. Helene was nowhere to be seen. Tristan backed away, pretending he had been packing with the others all along, and shouldered the backpack he shared with Rajesh.

“What’re we doing?” Zeke asked, his long hair plastered to his face. “They’ll just follow us if we run away.”

“We believe that Mordechai does not consider our students a threat,” Drakewell said harshly. “You will escape, and we will deal with these brutes before we rejoin you. Make for the next valley past the enchantment. And try not to attract attention.”

“But there are too many of them!” Cailyn protested. “You’ll be killed!”

“We have reinforcements on their way as well, remember,” Natasha said. “Thirty of our graduates should be joining us as soon as Quinsley can retrieve them.”

Tristan took a deep, shuddering breath. He wasn’t sure if that was true or if Natasha was just saying it to reassure them, but he clung to the hope and let it strengthen him.

“Remember our lessons on hypothermia,” Gracewright said. “Any of you who can use internal magic to warm yourselves, make sure you do it before it’s too late. And help each other out if you can. Once you reach the next valley over, stop to make camp and warm up. Give the dry sleeping bags to whoever is coldest, and don’t be afraid to share body heat.”

“This is goodbye, then,” Natasha said. Cailyn and Hayley ran up to hug Natasha and Gracewright, and Tristan ducked his head to avoid meeting any of their eyes, afraid he would start crying again. He could feel Alldusk’s gaze on him, and he knew that it was Alldusk he would worry about the most. Not least because he was afraid Alldusk would be reckless with his life now that Merridy was gone.

“Now go!” Natasha shouted.

Bowing their heads into the rain, they turned and started running down the ridge, cutting south at an angle to avoid the enchantment.

The moss spat out great bursts of water whenever Tristan stepped on it, and he was already soaked through, his raincoat plastered uselessly to his skin. The backpack jolted against his back as he ran, and twice he slipped on the moss and fell backwards. He shivered violently as he forged on, his legs growing weaker with each pounding step, and he could hardly feel his feet. Some were slipping and falling with every third step, while others clung to one another, shaking visibly from the cold.

As they finally skidded to the foot of the hill, Tristan looked back up to see the professors, but they were hidden over the crest of the ridge. He sent up a desperate prayer that they would hold their own against the magicians, and then he started running once again.

Ahead, Damian had stopped running and stood doubled over with his hands on his knees until Tristan caught up with him.

“How the hell are we going to get over that ridge?” he spat.

For the first time, Tristan realized Damian had abandoned his crutches back on the ridge. Amber must have helped heal him after all. “Won’t we just walk up—” Tristan broke off as he realized the ridge was dominated by a spine of jagged rocks. There was no way to pass over them, short of rock climbing, and in the hazy rain he could make out no better route.

“We’ll head south until we find somewhere better to cross over,” he said, raking his dripping hair off his forehead. In a flash of surprise, he realized he had not thought about his scars in weeks. Out here, something as trivial as that no longer mattered.

Damian nodded and started moving again, his limp now pronounced as he walked.

“Hey, guys!” Tristan shouted. Most of the others slowed and turned back to look at him. “Let’s walk for a bit. Rest our legs. We need to head south.” He hurried away from Damian, lest he think Tristan had made the order out of sympathy, and caught up with Leila and Rajesh. “Is everyone okay? Anyone getting too cold?”

Heads were shaken all around, and Tristan felt a brief flash of anger. The teachers were sacrificing themselves to give their students a chance, and now they were too proud to admit they needed help.

“Come on,” he snapped. “If anyone gets hypothermia, we won’t make it over that ridge in time.”

“I’m freezing,” Eli said sharply, “but what are you planning to do about it?”

Wordlessly, Rajesh took Eli’s hands. Eli was pale, almost as white as Amber, and his teeth were visibly chattering.

At Rajesh’s touch, color flooded back into his cheeks and he gave a shudder. Rajesh released his hands and said, “Better?”

Eli nodded. “Thanks.”

“Anyone else?” Tristan asked. He was worried about Rusty, who was only wearing his thin sweatshirt.

After a long pause, Rusty and Cailyn both admitted they were freezing. Amber and Mei Ling gave small bursts of warmth to each of them, and they started off again, walking at a brisk pace through the half-flooded valley.

“We need to cross the river before it gets too high,” Tristan said, almost to himself. They had already been walking south for thirty minutes.

Rusty had overheard him, and yelled, “Guys! River-crossing time!”

The rest of the students stopped, groaning, and waited in a cluster beside the river bank. The water was already chalky and opaque from the rain, so Tristan had no idea how deep it was. He looked over his shoulder as he waited for Damian and Cassidy to catch up, and in the distance he thought he saw a flicker that could have been a flame up on the ridge.

Though the sun had fully risen by now, the clouds were so thick and low that it still felt like night. The river was a pale gray streak against the dark rocks lining the banks, and while it was not turbulent, it did appear to be moving swiftly.

“Arms around each other’s waists,” Hayley said. “That’s how Gracewright always told us to cross.”

With some confusion, they managed to link up, Zeke somehow ending up at the front of the chain. Tristan was sandwiched between Amber and Rajesh, and he was more than a little grateful for their body warmth.

Shuffling awkwardly sideways, Zeke approached the water, the rest of the chain slowly moving along behind. Zeke gave a yelp as he put his foot into the icy current, and Tristan shuddered in anticipation.

Five more steps down, and his foot splashed into the shallows of the river, which was thankfully lined with small stones that were easy to find traction atop. By the time the end of the line had reached the bank, Zeke was more than halfway across.

“It’s moving really fast,” Zeke called out, voice wavering with uncertainty. “I’m not so sure—”

He took one more step, and with a high-pitched “Whoops!” his feet were swept out from under him. Leila, her arm still around Zeke’s waist, cried out and almost released her hold on Rusty.

“Don’t break the chain!” Tristan yelled. “Keep moving! We need to get him out of the deep water.”

Leila held tight and kept moving as Zeke thrashed around in the water, his head submerged. Tristan didn’t want to think about what would happen if Leila lost her footing as well.

Two more steps forward, Zeke managed to regain his purchase on the ground, rising from the water like a drowned man. His face was drained of all color, and he leaned heavily into Leila as he stumbled the final distance to the far shore.

The rest of the students followed cautiously. Towering Ryan, who brought up the rear, was sturdy enough that he plowed through the deepest section of the river without incident.

At last they all made it to shore, where they stamped their soaking feet to warm up and collapsed against one another.

“Is everyone warm enough?” Amber asked hesitantly. Her clothes were steaming, as though they hung over an open flame. “I can help Zeke, but the enchantment is too powerful here for me to give warmth to everyone.”

“We’re all freezing,” Tristan said, blowing on his hands to warm them. He couldn’t feel his nose or his ears either. “But we’ll just have to keep going. Once we start climbing, it might be easier.”

Amber sent a shock of warmth through Zeke, who fell to his knees in surprise and started coughing weakly.

“Keep an eye on him,” Tristan told Leila. “He looks like he’s in danger of hypothermia.”

“We all are,” she said grimly. “But I will.”

“I think I saw a way over the ridge,” Cailyn said. “It wasn’t easy. I can’t see it now, but before we crossed the river—”

“Show us the way,” Tristan said. “Unless anyone has a better idea?”

A few of his friends shook their heads, all as white-faced as he was. The rain had tapered off to a persistent drizzle, which was a small blessing, though they couldn’t possibly get any wetter than they already were.

Behind them, the clouds were sinking lower than before, so Tristan could barely make out a confusion of movement on top of the ridge they had come from. He thought of Alldusk, weary of life yet still so kind; and of Natasha, who had given their work purpose with her passionate arguments; and Gracewright, who was tougher than any of them despite her grandmotherly appearance. He hoped they were okay. Still alive.

Swallowing past the lump in his throat, he turned and started after the rest of the students, head bowed in sadness. He wasn’t sure if he could do what the professors had asked of him. It was all too much.

Soon they reached the foot of the pass Cailyn had seen. From here, it looked like a small notch in the rocky spine of the ridge, towering so high above them that the scale was hard to fathom.

Rusty dug in his bag and produced a bag of trail mix, which he portioned out in tiny handfuls until it was gone.

“Everyone okay?” Tristan asked dully. He was so far from okay that he could hardly feel at all, though at least his body was still functioning properly. Somewhere along the way, they had passed far enough away from the enchantment that he could reach for his internal power once again, and he had been half-consciously warming himself ever since.

“I wish we could go back for the professors,” Hayley said in a very small voice. “It seems wrong to abandon them.”

“I wish we could too,” Tristan said, shoving his hands deep into his pockets. “But we have to follow Drakewell’s orders.”

Leila met his eyes just then, and he wondered if she had guessed how little hope the professors had reserved for themselves.

They started up the ridge with the rain still spitting on them. At first the slope seemed forgiving, yet that soon changed. The incline steepened almost imperceptibly, until Tristan paused to look back and regretted it immediately. They had already climbed to a dizzying height; if they fell, it would be a long way down with nothing to break the fall.

Moss and tundra still carpeted the hillside, improbable though it was, and Tristan dug his fingers into the soft earth to steady himself.

“We’re nearly there,” Cailyn called from up ahead. She seemed to have taken it upon herself to find a way through since she had seen the pass in the first place. When Tristan tilted his head back to see where she was, dizziness hit him, so he hurriedly returned his eyes to the grass. From his quick glance, it seemed she was nearly to the rocky slot, her small figure dwarfed by the two peaks towering on either side.

“I—think we’ll be able to get through,” Cailyn said, pausing as she craned her neck to survey the notch. “Did anyone bring rope?”

“Gracewright gave me some,” Trey called up, and Eli paused to let him pass.

Tristan was still far below Cailyn and her friends, so he began climbing more determinedly than before, afraid of being left behind. As he approached the slot, the mossy rocks became less sturdy under his hands, and a few of them came away from the hillside when he tried to dig his fingers into the grass.

At last he reached the end of the grass, where the slope gave way to what appeared to be a narrow, near-vertical staircase walled in by two towering rocks.

“Who’s going first?” Tristan asked nervously, settling onto one hip. Now that he was more firmly anchored in place, he was able to look around without fearing for his life, though he still had to swallow back panic every time he looked back the way he had come. “Someone with a good head for heights—I don’t want anyone falling. I can do it if no one else—”

“I’ll do it,” Leila said unexpectedly.

Tristan’s heart leapt into his throat. “Are you sure? Because we could still turn back.”

“Yes. Don’t worry about me.” She glanced at Tristan and then at Zeke, whose face was stark white. “Besides,

we've made it this far. We might not have time to try again."

That was exactly what Tristan had been afraid of. But he had to trust Leila.

Trey handed Leila his backpack, with the rope coiled inside; she slipped it on and cinched it tight. Inching forward until she was perched directly below the rocky staircase, she stood and began climbing. She placed each foot with care, wedging her fingers into the cracks in the rock; Tristan kept waiting for her to slip, but she seemed almost unafraid.

Amber had crawled up beside him, and when she took his hand, he gripped hers so tightly he might have crushed it, not daring to blink for fear Leila would fall. To his left, Zeke's face was stark with fear, and he clenched the mossy rocks he was leaning against so fiercely that the tendons bulged in the back of his hands.

Leila paused for a long time near the top, probing the rock for a handhold. Only a foot of rock remained above her, unless there was something beyond that they couldn't see, and it seemed that the last stretch had defeated her.

Then she locked her fingers into a crevice and dug her toe into an almost nonexistent foothold. Tristan held his breath as she straightened her leg, straining and stretching out her arm.

At last she managed to reach the top of the rock. Tristan took a trembling breath of relief as she pulled herself over the ledge and disappeared over the other side.

Several long minutes passed, no one speaking or taking their eyes from the top of the rock staircase.

Finally, Leila's head reappeared over the slot, and a coil of rope tumbled down below her. She was smiling.

"I made it through! The other side is really gentle."

Tristan let his shoulders sag and loosened his grip on Amber's hand. "Sorry about that."

She gave him a wry smile.

"Are you sure that rope is safe?" Damian asked nervously. His overbearing manner was gone, and he looked surprisingly vulnerable.

Leila tugged on it. "Why don't you give it a try?"

Damian looked as though he might be sick as he crawled up to the foot of the rock staircase and took hold of the rope. Tristan was just relieved to see that he would not be the only one close to turning back in fear.

Once Damian had tied the rope around his waist, he grabbed the rocks and rose cautiously to his feet, leaning so far forward he looked as though he was trying to kiss the jumbled staircase. Far above, Leila had ducked out of sight again; a moment later the rope tightened around Damian's waist and he began climbing.

As much as Tristan despised Damian, it was painful watching him climb. He fumbled several times and nearly fell. Eventually Tristan turned and scanned the far ridge for Ilana's followers to distract himself from the way his stomach was twisting in knots. He could not make out anything except occasional flickers of movement.

"You scared?" Zeke asked Tristan, his tone mocking.

"You wish. I bet you're going to fall."

"No, I'm good at everything, remember?"

Tristan rolled his eyes, wishing it wasn't true. "You weren't so cocky when Leila was climbing."

Zeke gave him a shove that sent Tristan's stomach swooping into his throat. He threw his shoulder against the hillside to anchor himself in place as the rocks beneath him slipped a half-inch downhill.

When Tristan looked up, Damian had disappeared over the top of the staircase, and a moment later the rope came tumbling down again.

"Who's next?" Tristan asked. "Eli, you're closest."

Though Eli groaned and made a face at the chute, he climbed much faster than Damian, almost running near the end. He flopped over the top and immediately dropped out of sight before popping up again to give everyone below the thumbs-up.

They continued taking turns, some of the students struggling, others climbing without difficulty. Zeke hurried up fearlessly, while Rusty moved with deliberation, taking a long time to place each hand and foot. In between climbers, they sent up the backpacks at the end of the rope; Tristan felt a bit less off-balance as soon as the weight was lifted away, though he still didn't want to contemplate what would happen if he slipped.

Tristan was the last one to climb. He did not feel at all confident, though he reminded himself this could be no worse than rappelling into the black abyss back in the cave in New Zealand. He looked back one last time,

trying desperately to make out the shapes of his professors and their attackers; for a split second, he thought he saw three figures running down the far ridge towards them, but a tongue of fog rolled across the hillside and obscured his view.

Tristan grabbed the end of the rope and tied it carefully around his waist, cinching the knot as tight as he could without. Then, as the unseen students on the other side of the slot reeled in the slack, he forced himself to stand and grab the rocks.

The moment he took his hands and knees off the grassy slope, he reeled. A mere gust of wind could have knocked him off his feet. There was hardly anything to grab onto in the chute; he scabbled at a few cracks in the rock but found nothing large enough to hold onto.

With one hand he reached up for one of the flat, step-like shelves. This one offered no better handhold, though at least he could latch his fingers over the tattered edge, the rocks slicked with rain.

His legs shaking, he stepped onto the lowest shelf and boosted himself up. As soon as his hand drew level with his face, his grip on the dripping shelf slipped.

He panicked as his leg threatened to buckle beneath him, and he grabbed wildly for another handhold.

Just in time, the rope tightened around his ribs. Gulping for air, Tristan searched for another handhold and started up once again.

After a couple more steps, he forgot the endless drop beneath him. If the slot had risen from flat ground, he reminded himself, he could have raced up the rocks without a rope.

Near the top, he struggled to find a final handhold, just as Leila had done. Then he found a small notch large enough for his toe, and with that he boosted himself up enough to grab the top of the staircase.

Heaving himself up the final rise, he crawled over the rock ledge and found himself in a narrow channel littered with boulders.

“Good job,” Leila said, giving him a brief hug as he untied the rope from his waist. “I can’t believe we actually made it through that.”

Once the rope was untied, Tristan stood and gazed back down the way he had come. The fog was thickening, and he could not make out anything past the base of the slot—for all he knew, the professors could all be dead and Ilana’s followers close on their tail.

With a grimace, Tristan turned away and stumbled through the boulder-lined notch to the back of the canyon.

On the other side, a wide, gentle slope stretched to the base of another valley, this one rocky at the base and bisected by another river. From what he could see through the mist, the far side of this canyon rose in a near-vertical wall from the valley floor.

Now that he was no longer stiff with fear, Tristan realized he had grown so cold waiting for his turn to climb that his legs were hardly functioning properly. Rusty and Cailyn broke into a run on the descent, while Tristan hugged his chest and walked carefully, his feet catching on every small stone and tuft of grass he crossed over. Twice he fell, soaking his already-drenched clothes anew, and by the foot of the hill he was shaking from cold. He tried using his own power to warm himself, but he was so drained he couldn’t tap into it.

The rain picked up again as they neared the foot of the slope.

“We need to put up our tents!” Tristan yelled.

As the others murmured their agreement, he realized most of them looked just as cold as he felt. Rusty’s lips had gone blue, and Eli was leaning heavily against Trey as he stumbled along.

“There’s a grassy spot over there,” Cailyn shouted, the growing wind scattering her voice.

“It’s not too close to the river, is it?” Tristan asked, squinting as he tried to make out whatever she was pointing to. “I don’t want to drown.”

“No, it’s fine!”

They followed Cailyn around the shoulder of the hill, finally reaching a section of grassy hillside that was more or less flat.

Tristan dropped his backpack on the ground and immediately regretted it as water began soaking through the back of his raincoat. He pulled the tent out and stepped on it so it wouldn’t blow away while the others dug for the stakes and poles.

Racing over to join Tristan, Rusty tripped and fell with a shout of surprise. Tristan took two steps back to

help him, but the tent flapped and threatened to blow away almost immediately.

“Are you okay?” he called.

“Yeah.” Rusty staggered to his feet and shook his bare hands as though to warm them.

As soon as Leila, Rusty, and Rajesh reached Tristan’s side, they struggled to put the tent up. Rusty held the fabric in place while Leila fitted poles and Tristan and Rajesh jammed in stakes.

“Well, I needed a shower anyway,” Rusty said, looking shaken.

“Oh, shut up,” Leila groaned.

By the time they had erected the tent, fastened the unmatched assortment of ropes to the corners, and staked everything firmly into the soggy ground, Eli’s group and Damian’s group were halfway through setting up their own tents, working in silence.

Tristan waited until all of his friends were inside the tent before he joined them. A layer of water had seeped through the bottom of the tent, which was planted on top of a particularly squishy patch of moss, and the walls were dripping lightly.

Seconds later, someone was rapping on their tent flap.

“What’s up?” Tristan asked.

“Our tent’s got a hole in it,” Eli’s voice said dully. “I think we tore it when we were climbing over the pass. It was tied outside my backpack.”

Tristan cursed under his breath. “There’s already…” he counted quickly “…seven of us in here. I don’t think we can fit all of you.”

After a moment, in which Tristan’s friends tried to squeeze themselves closer to the walls to free up space, Damian’s sullen voice rose over the wind. “A couple of you can join us. We won’t bite.”

Tristan was so surprised he didn’t know what to say.

“We’ve got space for two or three more people,” Leila said. “Possibly.”

The voices outside dropped out of hearing range, but after a moment their tent door unzipped and Eli, Trey, and Cailyn ducked in.

“You sent Evvie and Hayley to the wolves all alone?” Zeke asked, shaking his head in amusement.

“Damian’s been awful to me, ever since he found out that I’m—” Eli flushed and stopped short. “But you’re no better,” he told Zeke.

“Aww, come on,” Zeke teased. “I’m much handsomer than Damian.”

Eli snorted.

“I think the rainfly is still working,” Leila said, inspecting the layer through one of the mesh windows. “So it might dry out eventually. Maybe.”

Trey had crouched in a corner of the tent, pale and shivering, and Eli said gruffly, “I think you need one of the sleeping bags. Are any of them dry?”

Trey threw a grateful look Eli’s way. They only had four backpacks between the ten of them, along with a series of thoroughly soaked supplies that were now littering the tent floor; Cailyn and Eli dug frantically through the bags and finally unearthed a dry sleeping bag that someone had had enough foresight to pack away in the scramble to pull apart the tents that morning.

Trey stripped to his underwear and crawled into the sleeping bag, and Cailyn and Eli each put an arm around him and huddled close to warm him.

All at once, the sound of the rain changed to a harsher percussion.

Someone outside screamed, and Leila said quietly, “I think it’s hailing.”

“You can come into our tent, if you need to,” Rusty shouted.

“Ours is up now,” Cassidy shouted back. “But—thanks.”

Zeke cursed. “Why the hell did we come here?”

The hail continued for a long time. At first Tristan was terrified that Ilana’s magicians had somehow dug out the globe and sent another ice storm after them, but eventually the storm subsided without damaging the tents.

They were safe.

It was not until the hail began to taper off that Tristan realized how cold he was. His whole body was stiff, and he could barely maneuver enough to peel off his sodden raincoat. It seemed that the waterproofing had

worked after all, because there were still a few dry patches on his sweatshirt, mostly near his waist where they didn't do any good.

"I'm f-f-freezing," Leila admitted after a while.

"Me too," Tristan and Zeke said at the same time. It was growing darker outside, whether from the clouds or from the approaching night he could not tell, and his stomach ached from hunger.

"Does someone else need the sleeping bag?" Trey asked. "I'm feeling a bit better."

"No, you keep it," Eli said quickly.

"Well, you can always strip down and cuddle up with me," Zeke told Leila slyly.

"Oh, shut up."

"I can give warmth to a few of you," Rajesh said. "But I don't think I can help everyone. I've used up most of my strength already."

He took Leila's hands and gave her a bit of warmth before doing the same with Eli, who was shivering as hard as Trey had been when they first sheltered in the tent.

"Sorry," he said after he released Eli's grip. "That's all I can do."

Eventually they decided they all should strip down to their underwear and huddle together to share warmth—Trey donated his sleeping bag for another layer over the top of their miserable huddle, and with plenty of elbowing and cursing, they all ended up in a pile with their arms and legs tangled up together. Tristan ended up sandwiched between Leila and Amber, and as he slid an arm around Amber's waist, he tried not to think about how few clothes she was wearing.

Guilt hit him as he thought of the professors, still out in the rain, fighting for their lives against Mordechai's forces. They didn't deserve to hide away in safety while their professors were in such grave danger. He clung tighter to Amber, and she slipped her hand into his, her skin surprisingly warm. His hand came to rest on her bare stomach, just below her bra, and his face grew hot as she shifted beneath his touch.

He had never been this close to anyone in his life—skin against skin, completely vulnerable. His father had never been one for affection, and when his mother had left, he and Marcus had lost the habit of hugging, of being kissed goodnight, of showing any vulnerability.

Now he was sandwiched together with the closest friends he'd ever known, and the girl he loved was in his arms.

And soon everyone would hate him. Once he took over the globe and carried out Drakewell's orders, he would never be able to look his friends in the eye again. Even Amber might turn against him.

If he could just preserve this moment, this memory, for the rest of his days, it would have to sustain him.

How ironic that his happiest moment came as most of them were freezing half to death, on the run from the magicians who would surely kill them sooner or later, while their professors fought unaided. He didn't know whether to laugh or cry.

* * *

The next morning dawned bright and freezing. Tristan was one of the first to wake, and he gently extricated himself from the pile of sleeping bodies, smiling wryly at the sight of Zeke's arm around Leila's waist.

His clothes had frozen solid, though the body heat he retained from sleep was enough to thaw them slightly. Wincing as he jammed his feet into stiff, icy shoes, he crept out of the tent.

To his amazement, the landscape all around was blanketed in white.

The hail had turned to snow sometime in the night.

Despite the cold, he was struck by the beauty of it all. Zipping up his coat and pulling on his damp hat, Tristan trudged through the pristine snow until he reached the banks of the river. The wind had actually subsided for once, and the valley floor was draped in white. Looming high above, the ragged peaks of the two ridges looked stark and majestic beneath the snow.

Footsteps crunched behind him, and Tristan turned to see Amber coming down the hill, her cheeks pink and her eyes sparkling. She was always radiant in the snow, and when she reached Tristan's side he pulled her into his arms and kissed her shyly.

“You were walking *in* the snow, not *on* it,” he said as he released her.

Amber laughed. “I didn’t want to startle you!” As she studied Tristan, her face fell. “You look sad. What are you thinking about?”

Tristan shook his head. “I’m not supposed to tell anyone. I don’t want you to hate me yet.”

Amber took his hand and buried it in her coat pocket, which was damp but warm. “I could never hate you. Is it something the professors told you while we were packing up?”

She was too perceptive.

“Of course. Did you see how many of Ilana’s followers were ambushing us?”

“No, I—” Amber stopped. “I just assumed it was a small group, like the professors said. How many were there?”

“At least fifty,” Tristan said grimly. “They’ve got reinforcements coming, but I don’t know how long the professors could hold that many off.”

Amber’s eyes widened. “They will never make it out alive.”

“That’s not the worst of it,” Tristan said softly. “Drakewell ordered me to lead all of you back to the Lair and dig out the globe. Then he said I needed to kill off every magic aura I could find on the map. Every single one. So even if they survive now...”

Amber rested her head on his shoulder. “I see why you kept this quiet,” she whispered. “But I will stand with you. You know I will. Through anything that comes our way.”

“Thank you.” Tristan wiped his nose, which was running from the cold. “I don’t even know if I can do it.”

“I’m not the only one who will support you,” Amber said. “I promise you that.”

The sound of someone unzipping a tent rang out through the icy stillness, and Tristan and Amber stepped apart with a grim smile. Rusty emerged and crunched his way through the snow to join them, his breath steaming up the air before his face.

“Wow,” he said. “It’s really pretty, isn’t it?”

“It is,” Amber said sadly.

* * *

The snow melted by late morning, and everyone draped their clothes and blankets over the tents to dry in the sun. A new set of clouds was rolling in from the west, and the wind was picking up. Tristan quickly grew impatient as they lingered at their campsite.

They shared two cans of beans for breakfast, heated over their camp stove, and afterwards realized they were down to just oats and a jar of peanut butter for rations.

“What good will it even do walking south?” Leila asked. “I’m assuming Quinsley is coming for us eventually, so shouldn’t we just find somewhere he’ll be able to land?”

“If something happens, I don’t want to starve,” Tristan said grimly. “At least if we walk south, we’ll be more likely to run into someone eventually. Besides, I don’t think the plane can land on all these rocks anyway.”

After a moment, Leila nodded. Tristan had the uncomfortable feeling that she simply wished to stay as close to the professors as possible, in case something happened.

“And—and we need to get back to the Lair. That’s what Drakewell told me before we left. We’ll never stop Mordechai without the globe.”

Hayley’s eyes widened. “What about the rest of the professors? Are we just abandoning them here while we return to the Lair alone?”

“There isn’t much else we can do, is there?” Tristan said. “Quinsley can’t fly anywhere near the enchantment, and the professors can’t get away from it without Ilana’s magicians following them. At least if we have the globe, maybe we can stop the enchantment before it gets any worse.”

“They’re going to die,” Eli said baldly. “And we’re just going to let it happen.”

“They have reinforcements coming, remember?” Tristan said. “Maybe they’re already there. But you know how important the globe is.”

Though a number of sullen looks were exchanged, no one else argued.

Almost overnight, the tundra had deepened to a brilliant red, and the blueberries that had survived the snow were bursting with sweetness. Despite the grim mood, Rusty went around stripping the bushes of their berries and eating so many his lips turned purple; as Tristan's stomach gave another hollow rumble, he decided it wasn't such a bad idea after all.

They packed up shortly before noon and shouldered their packs—Rajesh was carrying their shared pack this time—before starting off in a morose procession south. Every now and then Tristan caught one of the students saying they wished they hadn't abandoned the professors, and his stomach twisted with guilt each time.

Evvie and Hayley had survived the night with Damian's gang unscathed, which was further testament to the grim mood that had fallen over them—even the bullies were too worried to cause trouble.

They walked along the rocky valley floor all afternoon, the clouds building to the north, and only stopped when the rocks gave way to a grassy riverbank wide enough to allow Quinsley's plane to land.

It was already growing dark as they set up camp, not speaking much. Tristan wondered if they were worrying about the professors as much as he was.

Leila cooked up a pot of porridge, leaving just a small portion of dried oats in the bag—divided between the seventeen of them, it came to less than a half-cup each. Tristan ate slowly, not enjoying the texture of the bland, rubbery oats, his stomach growling even more than before at the inadequate dinner. He groaned at the thought that it was the largest meal they had left.

"Next time you see an animal, you should catch it for us," Tristan grumbled to Amber under his breath.

"I have been looking," she said. "But I haven't seen a single animal since we reached this valley."

Tristan hunched his shoulders forward as he used a finger to lick out the last scrapings of oats. Ilana had starved him and Amber, true, but that had been different—as frightened as they had been, they had known Ilana was nearby, ready to feed them if they grew too weak. Now they were completely on their own, unless Quinsley managed to arrive soon.

An intake of breath from behind him made him whirl.

"Look!" Cailyn breathed.

Before them, between jagged ridge and the layer of encroaching clouds, a green finger of light blossomed in the starry sky.

"It's the aurora," Mei Ling said reverently.

The green band of light grew, writhing and flickering in the sky like an eel. Tristan grabbed Amber's hand as he sat back on his heels to watch, and Leila reached for Zeke's. She looked as though she had considered reaching for Tristan as well before thinking better of it.

All at once, the light flared into a towering wall of green that lit up the entire eastern sky.

Then, as quick as it had appeared, it winked out.

The clouds continued their stately march across the sky, narrowing the band of stars as they strove for the horizon.

"That was incredible," Cailyn whispered.

"Did you see the aurora in Greenland?" Tristan asked Rajesh.

"Yeah, all winter," he said. "No one would've admitted it, but I think a few of the older kids prayed to it. We had nothing else to believe in."

It started raining again soon after that, so they escaped into the two remaining tents, rescuing anything that still hung outside. Everything had dried out during the day, so the tent was much cozier than before.

"Oh, that's wonderful," Eli said, wrapping the blanket around his shoulders and drawing his knees up to his chest. "I never thought I'd be warm again."

"Hey, you can't have the whole blanket to yourself," Leila protested.

"Says who?"

"Me." Zeke tossed a filthy sock at Eli's head; he barely managed to dodge in time.

"That's just nasty," Eli said, yanking his own sock off and hurling it at Zeke.

Zeke wasn't so lucky, and the sock hit him in the forehead. "Yuck! Your feet stink!"

"Not as much as yours do," Eli said.

"Oh, shut up," Cailyn said, tugging the blanket off Eli's shoulders and draping it across the middle of the

tent.

Chapter 6: Escape

Tristan had hardly fallen asleep when he woke with a start. At first he didn't know what had roused him—then the ground gave a jolt beneath him.

The ground began shaking, jerking back and forth as though he was on a trampoline someone was bouncing on.

His first instinct was to run outside, though he soon remembered there was no danger if their tent collapsed.

He found his headlamp at last, but there was no point in turning it on now. Reaching out, he grabbed the first arm he found—Amber's—and clung to it. His eyes stung as that fateful night returned to him with horrible clarity. He was back in his father's house, smoke stinging his nose, and the whole building was rattling. As he blinked, he almost thought he could see flames out of the corner of his eye.

"Are you okay?" Amber whispered.

Tristan blinked and released his death grip on Amber's arm. Wiping his eyes, he said, "Do you think that was the enchantment?"

"Definitely," Rajesh said, rustling around as he sat up.

"I think it's getting worse," Leila said hollowly. "We might not be able to outrun it."

"You can't feel it, can you?" Tristan asked in surprise.

Leila was silent for a while. "I couldn't feel it before, the way you could, but just then—it was almost like a *smell*. That earthquake smelled wrong. I don't know how to describe it."

"You really need to practice using magic without marbles," Rajesh said. "All of you. It sounds like we're going to have to fight our way into your school, and right now we wouldn't be able to do it."

"Believe me, we want to learn," Zeke said, uncharacteristically serious. "Do you think it's going to be easier now we're farther from the enchantment?"

"I hope so," Rajesh said. "It doesn't help that we're starving, though."

A loud rumble echoed from outside, and the earth gave another shake, this one more violent than before. The rumble grew louder and louder, until Tristan thought the whole valley might be cracking into pieces.

"Let's get outside," he said, lunging for the tent door. He didn't stop to put on his shoes.

Most of the students from the other tent were already standing on the grass, which was slicked with rain.

"Up there," Hayley said, pointing to the ridge south of their camp.

It took a moment before Tristan spotted it in the dark. Then he realized the entire rock slope was sagging, a great cloud of dust rising above the rockslide.

"It has to be the enchantment," Leila said grimly. "It looks like it's growing stronger."

"This is how it works, then," Tristan said. "It just sends disasters out, and keeps getting more and more powerful until the whole world is affected."

Leila shuddered. "I don't like it."

The rest of Tristan's friends had emerged by then, and they stood in a huddle, staring up at the rockslide in the misting rain. As the rocks began to settle, the thunderous roar diminished until only a few rocks could be heard clattering to rest.

"Is anyone hurt?" Tristan asked.

"No," Rajesh said, echoed by several of Tristan's friends.

"Well, I guess we should go back to bed, then."

As the others retreated once more, Tristan stood staring at the rockslide, Marcus's face fresh in his mind. Eventually he shook his head to clear it and crawled back into the tent.

He had barely drifted back to sleep again when another shock rippled through the ground; from the restless

movement, he could tell the others had woken as well, though no one spoke.

Tremors continued to hit the valley all night, some so gentle they hardly rustled the tent, others nearly as violent as the first. He was relieved when morning came, and with it the excuse to abandon sleep.

The air had grown icy overnight; as he pulled on all of his layers with numb fingers, he could see his breath misting in the air.

When he stepped out of the tent, he discovered that another layer of snow had fallen overnight, thicker than the last. The icy drifts had blanketed their tents and the ground in several inches of white. The air was colder than it had been the day before; Tristan's fingers were already half-numb, and his nose ached from the cold.

Leila and Rajesh joined him before long, faces red from the cold.

"You should try using your own magic to stay warm," Rajesh said. He was the only one of the three who was not shivering. "I bet you'll be able to."

"Yeah, right," Leila said, though she closed her eyes and frowned in concentration.

Tristan closed his eyes as well, relieved to find that he could not discern any trace of Ilana's spell. This time when he reached for his own power, it surged to him so quickly he staggered backwards in shock. Heat went coursing through him, enough that he wanted to strip off his clothes and roll around in the snow.

"Did it work?" Rajesh was grinning.

"Just a little," Tristan said, fanning his face with one hand.

"Shut up!" Leila snapped. "I'm trying to concentrate."

She stood motionless for nearly ten minutes, her lips growing bluer and her cheeks redder in the icy wind.

At long last, she drew in a surprised breath. Her eyes flew open, color returning to her face.

"I did it! I actually did it!"

"Nice," Tristan said, clapping her on the shoulder.

Rajesh smiled. "I knew you guys couldn't be that bad. That epicenter was just messing with all of us."

"Don't say that too soon," Leila said drily. "We haven't let the others try yet."

As the rest of the students began to emerge from their tents, most looking just as cold as Tristan had felt when he first woke, the wind picked up and began whisking the powdery snow off the ground. New flakes began to fall, and before long the wind had turned into a gale. He could no longer see any of the mountains beyond their valley—it was as though the whole world had been smothered.

"Ugh, this sucks." Eli stomped on the ground, rubbing his hands up and down his arms to warm them. "What next?"

"We haven't had a volcano yet," Zeke pointed out. "Or a flood."

"Don't say that," Cailyn snapped. "You're only tempting fate."

"Do you guys want to try warming yourselves?" Rajesh asked.

"No!" Eli snapped. "I already know it's not going to work. Let's get moving before we all freeze to death."

"I'd like to try," Trey said, throwing a disapproving frown at Eli. "You can go pack up the tent if you're so eager to get out of here."

Eli's eyebrows flew up—he was clearly not accustomed to being told off by quiet, unassuming Trey.

As Eli stalked over to the tent, Trey, Cailyn, Rusty, and Zeke closed their eyes and tried to concentrate on the spell.

Tristan waded through the snow, squinting against the stinging wind, to see if he could scrounge up anything to eat; when he looked back, he laughed to see Eli standing on the opposite side of the tent with his eyes shut in deep concentration.

When he reached the tent, he caught Amber watching him, and she blushed as his eyes met hers. He grinned and dropped his gaze, thinking of the smooth feeling of her bare skin against his chest as they had shared warmth in the tent.

"We're down to the last of the rations," Leila said from behind him, and Tristan jumped. "Do you think we should eat them now or save them for tonight?"

Tristan's stomach gave an answering growl. "Eat them now. If we collapse somewhere out there..."

They sheltered inside to eat the last dregs of the oatmeal sprinkled with their remaining few handfuls of trail mix, passing around the pot and sharing a spoon, and afterwards they worked together to fold up the tent and

pack away their gear. It transpired that Trey, Cailyn, and Zeke had managed to draw on their internal magic, while Eli and Rusty had failed.

As they set off once again, the blizzard grew fiercer still, until Tristan could hardly make out Leila at the front of the group. The wind howling off the cliffs almost sounded like a great beast moaning in the distance, and each swirling eddy of snow seemed to hold a shape. Once Tristan thought he saw Natasha coming towards him, her head bowed against the wind, her skin dark against the snow and her eyes bright; when he raised a hand to shield his face from the wind, the illusion dispersed.

He hoped their professors were safe. His worry for them had dulled to an unrelenting ache—whether they were alive or dead, his task would not change. And he would likely never see them again either way.

* * *

All day they forged on through the blizzard; each time they waded through the ice-cold river, Tristan would send another burst of warmth to his feet to thaw them, until he was beginning to feel lightheaded and near collapse.

The blizzard continued for two more days, the snow growing deeper with each passing hour, until they could barely wade through the drifts.

After one day without food, the hollow ache of hunger became as ever-present as the cold. Almost no one spoke in the evenings, except to complain bitterly, and Eli was convinced they would die soon.

“How are we supposed to do magic if we don’t have anything to eat? It’s hopeless. I should’ve just thrown myself into Ilana’s spell and finished it then.”

“I bet Ilana’s followers would do it for you, if you asked politely,” Zeke said. “Why don’t you head back that way and see if you can find them?”

Eli punched Zeke so hard that he stumbled and fell backwards in the snow.

“You deserved that,” Leila said, kicking a clump of snow at Zeke while he lay inert.

He sputtered and struggled to his feet again, snow caking the back of his coat. “It’s really reassuring having you on my side,” he said sarcastically.

“Good.” Leila turned and marched away from him. “I’m glad you feel that way.”

On the third morning, Tristan woke to find the sun streaming into their tent. The space inside was warmer than it had been in days, and outside the wind had finally let up. He pulled Amber close and kissed the back of her neck before slipping out of the blankets.

As Tristan ventured outside, squinting in the blinding reflection of sun on snow, he heard the whine of an engine far in the distance.

Leila was already up, melting snow in a pot. “We’re down to our last two tea bags, so—what’s that?”

Tristan forged through the snow to Leila’s side, where they scanned the southern sky for a plane or helicopter.

“There,” Tristan said, spotting something that glinted in the sunlight. “It’s a plane.”

“You don’t think that’s Mordechai, do you?” Leila jumped to her feet, abandoning the stove.

“I can’t tell.”

“We need to get out of here.”

Tristan didn’t need telling twice. He ran clumsily through the snow and pounded on the tent flap, yelling, “Get up! There’s a plane!”

Rusty unzipped the tent flap a second later and jumped out, staring around wildly until he spotted the white shape in the distance. “Is it *them*?”

“I can’t tell yet. Get away from the tents. We need to hide!”

Rusty and Zeke were the first to sprint up the snowy hillside, followed by the rest of their friends, who left the tent flap dangling open. Tristan took up the rear, still trying to get a better look at the plane.

As soon as he found a rock, he started digging out a hollow beside it, hands going numb almost immediately in the snow. Then he knelt in the depression and mounded snow over his back and shoulders, leaving his head uncovered so he could see what was happening.

The others were doing the same, aside from Eli, who was still running up the hillside.

“Eli!” Tristan yelled. “Get down!”

He threw himself into a snowdrift and burrowed in like a rabbit.

The plane was growing closer now, and it was definitely dropping in elevation. Tristan squinted to make out the details.

It dropped closer, angling as though it meant to land in the snow.

Moments before it touched down, Tristan caught sight of the body of the plane—it was entirely white, with no company logo on the side.

“That’s not Mordechai,” Tristan said. “That’s Quinsley!”

Chapter 7: The Trap

Leila was the first to abandon her shelter as the plane touched down.

“Wait!” Zeke called. “What if Tristan’s wrong?”

It was too late—Leila was already running down the hill, leaving long tracks through the snow as she skidded down the incline.

About five hundred feet north of the tents, the plane’s propellers whirred into silence and the ladder descended. The unmistakable form of Quinsley stepped out from the hatch, bundled in layers and waving to them.

Leila didn’t stop running until she reached the pilot; she threw herself into his arms and nearly knocked him off his feet.

Tristan stood weakly, brushing snow off his sleeves, and started down the slope. The others followed his lead, grinning with relief.

“You’re all here!” Quinsley said. “How have you been?”

“Starving,” Eli said. “We ran out of food a week ago!”

“That’s a bit of an exaggeration,” Leila said, though she was grinning.

Tristan was desperate to ask how the professors were doing, but he didn’t want the others to realize how bad things were. So he ground his teeth and tried to smile along with the rest of them.

“What have you been up to?” Leila asked.

“Load up the plane,” Quinsley said. “I’ll tell you on the way back. I don’t trust this weather to hold out much longer.”

They packed up the tents in record time, and Leila dumped out her pot of simmering water, leaving a swath of melted snow where it fell. Then Tristan followed Leila, Rusty, and Zeke to the plane; looking behind him, the only trace of their campsite was a mess of trampled snow and two large flattened squares where the tents had sat.

The inside of the plane exuded warm air, and Tristan let his shoulders sag as his hands began thawing for the first time in days.

“Do you want to join me at the cockpit?” Quinsley asked in an undertone.

Tristan looked around, trying to figure out who Quinsley was talking to. “Me? You want me to join you?”

He nodded grimly. “I think you deserve to know the truth.”

Tristan’s insides went cold at that, and he had to grip the back of the nearest seat to keep from swaying. “Oh.”

Pausing, he searched for Amber’s eyes. She was the only one who did not look jubilant—immediately he felt guilty for sharing his burden with her.

Tearing his eyes from hers, he ducked into the cockpit and strapped himself into the copilot’s seat. He clamped the pair of bulky headphones over his ears and closed his eyes, imagining he was sinking underwater, the rest of the world dissolving into flickers of light overhead.

As they took off, the plane bumping wildly along the snowy valley floor, Tristan sank back in his seat and watched the landscape drift by in a daze of fear. It was not until they had risen above the ridges and leveled out, a vast range of mountains stretching off to the right, that Quinsley spoke.

“I spoke to your professors yesterday,” Quinsley said through his microphone.

Tristan held his breath, the headphones heavy over his ears.

“I managed to collect our former students, and they’ve gone to help. There were twenty-seven of them, so the odds are a bit better now.”

Tristan gave a tight little nod. Quinsley was obviously stalling.

“Abilene, Drakewell, Grindlethorn, and Natasha are still okay.” He sighed, his breath rasping into the microphone.

“And Alldusk?” Tristan asked in a strangled voice.

Quinsley shook his head. “It sounds as though he took out several of Ilana’s best fighters. He was reckless, and he wasn’t strong enough to hold them off forever.”

Tristan turned away quickly and looked out the window, tears burning his eyes. *You remind me of myself*, Alldusk had said. Had he meant something more than that? Did he hate himself the way Tristan still did sometimes, every time he caught a glimpse of his scars in the mirror? Tristan had known so little about Alldusk—what crime had he been sentenced for? And who was he before the Underground Academy shaped him?

And now he was gone. Just like that. Tristan had to bite his knuckles to keep from trembling. Quinsley did not speak, for which he was grateful.

“And—the Lair?” Tristan said hoarsely after a long silence. “Have you been back?”

Quinsley shook his head. “I made a detour over the valley on my way to collect our former students, but I didn’t see anything. No fires, no tents, no people. They might not be there yet. It takes a week to hike there from the nearest town, after all.”

Tristan’s stomach clenched. At first, miserable as he was, he did not recognize it for what it was—hope. They still had a chance.

“And you kids are all okay?” Quinsley asked. “Sorry, I shouldn’t call you that. You’re almost eighteen now, aren’t you.”

“We’re fine,” Tristan said. “No one’s hurt. Amber, Rajesh, and Mei Ling kept us all from dying of hypothermia, and no one’s come after us.”

Quinsley shook his head again. “Remember that survival test, when none of you lasted even a day out alone? I’m very impressed.”

“We were also using magic a lot,” Tristan pointed out. “Half of us would be dead if we hadn’t been able to warm ourselves.”

“Oh, I just remembered!” Quinsley said. “I’ve got sandwiches for everyone. Do you want to hand them out?” He looked sideways at Tristan and must have noticed something in his expression, because he said, “You’re welcome to rejoin me afterwards.”

“Thanks,” Tristan mumbled. He was dreading the moment when the others learned the truth. It was not just Alldusk who had died, by the sounds of it—Brikkens was also gone. Numb and aching inside, he grabbed the bag of sandwiches and stumbled to his feet, unlatching the cockpit door with one shaking hand. The others were talking and laughing among themselves—the sight hit him like a fist. What right did they have to carry on as though nothing had happened when Alldusk was dead?

“Here,” Tristan said, thrusting a sandwich into Damian’s hands. He hurried down the aisle, only pausing when Amber gave him a look of alarm.

“Is it bad?” she whispered as he handed her a plastic-wrapped sandwich.

His trembling hands brushed against hers, but he quickly drew back. “Yes.”

When he reached Leila, she opened her mouth as though to say something, but he turned abruptly away and hurried back to the cockpit. Mutters followed him, none of them distinct enough to pick out the words.

Slumping back into his seat beside Quinsley, Tristan ate his turkey and cheese sandwich in four bites, his stomach a bit queasy after going so long without food. Then he slouched back in the chair, not bothering with the headphones, and stared listlessly at the clouds scudding by.

* * *

He woke with a jolt, confused by the green light that had flooded the cockpit. Sitting up and massaging the crick in his neck, he realized they had landed amidst a familiar pine forest. They were back.

The snow had not yet reached this far south, but the air was still crisp as they filed out of the plane onto the runway. Amber reached for Tristan’s hand as soon as he joined the rest of the school; he laced his fingers through hers and clung to her gratefully. She alone understood why he was suffering.

“Are you coming back with us?” Leila asked when Quinsley paused at the top of the ladder.

“Ilana’s followers aren’t here yet,” Quinsley said, climbing slowly down to join them. “I saw campfire smoke as I was passing over the woods between here and Millersville, and I’d bet you anything it was Mordechai. He should be at least four days away. Your professors need me more than you do. If you think you’ll be okay—”

“We’ll be fine,” Tristan said quickly. If it was up to him, he too would be heading straight back to help his professors. “Don’t worry about us. Bring them back as soon as you can.”

“I will,” Quinsley said. He lowered his voice. “Drakewell chose well, you know.”

Tristan smiled hollowly.

Quinsley hugged Leila, Rusty, Cailyn, and Hayley before he turned and retreated into his plane.

As the engine roared back to life, Damian and Cassidy retreated into the forest, treading the familiar path back towards the Lair. Most of the others followed, but Tristan lingered at the edge of the air strip, his toes barely touching the tarmac. He couldn’t shake the thought that this could be the last time he saw Quinsley.

He took a few steps back as Quinsley turned the plane, the wings brushing against the nearby pine boughs, and accelerated once again. Moments later, the plane was ascending, Tristan’s ears ringing in its wake.

Slowly he turned, still numb from sadness.

Amber, Leila, and Rusty stood in the trees behind him, watching him with concern.

“What the hell are you doing here?” he snapped at Leila and Rusty.

“What’s wrong, Triss?” Leila asked, her voice so gentle it made Tristan’s eyes sting. “Do you think Gerry is in danger?”

“Yes, he is, damn it. Are you happy?” he spat.

“What was Quinsley telling you about?” Rusty asked, shuffling his feet impatiently. “Are you gonna tell us?”

“No,” Tristan snapped. “I can’t.”

Amber took his arm and guided him onto the familiar path. He was grateful for the pressure of her hand—he had almost forgotten what he was meant to be doing. A part of him had been seriously considering running for it, tearing through the woods until he was so wracked with exhaustion that he forgot what it was to care for anyone.

But he could not afford to be weak. He had a job to do, and if he failed, Alldusk would have died for nothing.

“You can trust us, Triss,” Leila said. “I know something is wrong—maybe we can help.”

“No, you can’t,” Tristan said coldly, not turning to look at Leila and Rusty. He had never been a very good liar; he had to get himself under control. To pretend everything was still fine when the world he had come to love was crumbling beneath him. “Drop it, will you?”

“You know we would support you no matter what, right?”

But she had not been at Ilana’s school with him. She had not attacked the Lair because Drakewell had ordered it. Only Amber could understand how much it hurt to betray his friends because it was necessary. To turn against his own side for the hope that eventually it would be enough.

“Of course,” he said through gritted teeth. He tried to lock his pain at Alldusk’s death away with the memories of his brother. He needed to remain strong. Drakewell was counting on him to see this through.

They broke through the trees to the lakeshore just then, the water a vivid turquoise against the dark forest, and the clatter of stones underfoot cut off any attempts at conversation.

Amber was still walking beside him, her arm linked with his, and he gave her hand a brief squeeze, hoping to show her without words how much her support meant.

She managed to smile at him, though her eyes were shadowed.

“Who was it?” she whispered, when Leila and Rusty had fallen behind a few paces.

“Alldusk.” Tristan’s voice broke, and this time he couldn’t stop the tears that sprang to his eyes. “Brikkens, too.”

Amber put her arm around his waist and held him close as his shoulders shook. He didn’t reach up to wipe away his tears—he didn’t want Leila to know how broken he was. Her sympathy would be too much to bear.

By the time they had reached the far end of the lake, Tristan’s tears had dried on his cheeks. The others were waiting at the foot of the hill; Tristan hurriedly released Amber and straightened his spine when he saw them. He didn’t want to let on that anything was wrong.

“What is it?” he asked, his voice coming out horribly flat.

“I don’t think we should march right up there,” Rajesh said. “What if we’re walking into an ambush?”

“Quinsley said he didn’t see any sign of Ilana’s followers,” Tristan said.

Rajesh frowned. “What if they’re waiting inside your school? It can’t have been completely destroyed if you guys managed to make it out somehow.”

“Ugh, I hope not,” Cailyn said.

“We should be careful,” Tristan said slowly. “What do you suggest, Rajesh?”

“Well, if they are hiding in your school, they probably won’t be able to see us without giving themselves away.” Rajesh glanced up the hill as though he expected to see someone waiting for them at the top. “We should set up camp and do everything as usual, and then when they’d expect us to go to bed, we should hide in the woods and see what happens.”

“And then we can run into the Lair while they’re all outside!” Rusty said triumphantly.

“That’s brilliant,” Leila told Rajesh with surprise. “Let’s do it.”

Several of the others looked to Tristan for confirmation, and he nodded sharply. “Pretend we don’t suspect anything. If they’re going to attack us, they’ll wait until we’re asleep.”

Despite what Tristan had said, it was a subdued group that started up the hill. They walked in a tight cluster, no one speaking, until Tristan snapped that they needed to stop acting so nervous.

When they came in sight of the arch marking the entrance to their familiar meadow, the breeze carried a whiff of ash to meet them. Gracewright’s wooden nursery had been reduced to dust, while the entrance to the Lair was charred almost as badly as it had been when Tristan burned it in his first year. He winced—both had been his fault. No wonder some of the students still didn’t trust him.

“We’ll see what the Lair looks like tomorrow,” Leila said, her voice loud in the silence. “For now we should just set up camp.”

Tristan caught on immediately—she was saying this in case Ilana’s followers were waiting for them. “We’re lucky we made it back before anyone else did. I don’t know what we’d do if Mordechai was here.”

“We still don’t have any food, do we?” Rusty asked sadly.

Leila shook her head. “Unless someone saved a sandwich from earlier?”

Zeke laughed. “No way.”

They set up their two tents just inside the forest, and Tristan took comfort in the protection the trees offered after two long weeks with no shelter.

“Now what?” Eli asked, leaning against a fallen log and closing his eyes. “I’d kill for a bonfire right about now, but you’ll probably say that’s too reckless.”

“Yes,” Leila said. “We would.”

“Game of cards, then?”

“You don’t even have a deck of cards,” Trey said.

Eli sighed. “This is stupid. I’d rather just go into the Lair and kill anyone who gets in our way.”

Mei Ling rolled her eyes. “You realize there could be fifty or sixty of them waiting for us?”

“I doubt it. We haven’t seen any sign of them. Quinsley was probably right.”

“Stop it,” Cailyn said. “You’re just being annoying now.”

The afternoon dragged on for what felt like eternity. Without any dinner to look forward to, most of the students were restless and irritable. Hayley and Cailyn ventured into the meadow to examine the greenhouse, which was mostly intact aside from a few shattered panes, while Zeke threw pinecones at Leila until she grabbed a rock and chased him into the forest with it, threatening to smash his skull in.

It took every ounce of Tristan’s resolve not to jump to his feet and go running through the trees to escape it all. Alldusk’s words kept coming back to him—the way he had tried so hard to understand Tristan and had trusted him when none of the other professors had. He wanted to claw the memories out of his head, to run until he collapsed and couldn’t think about anything except the physical exhaustion.

But the others were counting on him. They had no idea anything was wrong, and he had to keep up that illusion as long as possible. Otherwise he would never be able to see this through.

Darkness fell at last. The gibbous moon rose shortly after sunset, illuminating the forest floor enough that

they did not need flashlights.

“Now,” Tristan whispered. He zipped his tent open, rustled the side a few times as though people were climbing in, and then zipped it closed. As Damian did the same thing to his gang’s tent, Tristan led the way deeper into the forest. When the clearing had almost vanished among the trees, he began skirting around the meadow, moving slowly so his feet hardly made a sound on the damp, rotting layer of pine needles. He didn’t stop until he was behind the Lair’s entrance, about twenty feet from the edge of the clearing.

“Are we actually going to try and get into the Lair?” Leila breathed in his ear.

“I don’t know. Let’s wait and see what happens.”

Some knelt on the ground, while Tristan and the rest remained standing, moving behind the dense pine boughs for extra protection.

At first Tristan’s nerves were taut and he hardly dared shift on his feet for fear of alerting someone to his presence. But as the hours dragged by and the moon ground higher into the sky, he grew less cautious. Eventually he took a seat as well, yawning every few minutes as he struggled to keep his eyes open. Amber was prowling the woods somewhere; he only caught a glimpse of her every few minutes, her hair and face glowing like a shaft of moonlight between the trees.

More than one student fell into a doze, propped into an uncomfortable-looking position on the ground—Eli only started awake when Trey nudged him with a toe. “This is stupid,” Eli grumbled, running a hand through his unevenly dyed hair.

“We sh—should’ve brought our sleeping bags and stuff,” Rusty said with a yawn.

“I’d rather just go back to the tents, if no one is going to attack us,” Zeke said. “It might not be snowy, but it’s still pretty damn cold.”

“We can cuddle, if that would help,” Eli said snidely.

Zeke snorted.

“Shh,” Tristan said in irritation.

“Anyone know what time it is?” Rajesh asked quietly.

Finley pulled up his sleeve and squinted at his watch. “One twenty-three a.m.”

“I doubt they’re coming,” Leila said, sitting up and hugging her knees. “Gerry was probably right. They’re out in the woods somewhere between Millersville and here.”

“Should we head into the Lair, then?” Cailyn asked.

“I don’t want to risk it,” Tristan said. “You guys made it sound as if the whole place might collapse at any moment. We’ll stay outside for tonight and check it out in the morning.”

Slowly, groaning and rubbing tender muscles, they stood and collected their belongings. Then they started towards the entrance to the Lair, aiming to cut straight across the meadow. They still moved quietly, whether from habit or lingering fear Tristan couldn’t say, and he didn’t notice Amber had rejoined them until she appeared by his side.

Leila and Zeke were in the lead as they reached the entrance to the Lair and began skirting past the charred wooden longhouse. Soon they were passing the damaged boards, through which they could see into the longhouse.

Leila stopped dead in her tracks and grabbed Zeke’s wrist.

Slowly she turned, her eyes wide in the moonlight. “Get back!” she mouthed, shoving Tristan’s shoulder.

Colliding into one another and tripping over the grass in haste, they retreated silently into the forest once more.

“What’s going on?” Damian hissed as soon as they were under the cover of the pines.

Leila put a finger to her lips. “They’re *here*. Waiting for us.”

Though Tristan had already guessed that was the reason behind their abrupt retreat, his stomach flip-flopped as a heady dose of adrenaline and fear hit him.

This was it. They had no chance to sneak into the Lair and fortify their position—they had to face Ilana’s magicians.

“How many did you see?” he asked Leila in a whisper. “Just one, or—”

“I couldn’t make them out very well, but definitely more than one. At least five or ten.”

Zeke cursed under his breath.

“We just need to wait, then,” Tristan said, nerves racing. “Hopefully they don’t stay there all night.”

“Did you see a big, ugly guy?” Rajesh whispered.

“It was very dark,” Leila said. “I just saw a bunch of heads.”

Rajesh nodded grimly. Tristan understood his apprehension—if Mordechai was here, the odds would be severely stacked against them.

“And the Prasadimum barrier on the stairs must be gone,” Leila said. “So we won’t have any protection once we’re inside.”

“We could run for the Subroom and start putting up barriers through the rest of the halls, until we have the whole place,” Tristan said.

“Or we could put up a barrier as soon as we get in,” Leila said. “I don’t know if the stairs to the meadow are intact, so maybe we’ll put the barrier outside the ballroom doors.”

Tristan saw a streak of bright white hair and realized Amber was already moving through the trees and collecting sticks for the frame of their barrier. “That sounds good,” he whispered. “But how are we going to distract them long enough to get the barrier up?”

“We need to try and get in without anyone seeing us,” Leila said grimly. “If that’s even possible.”

They subsided into silence, no one moving aside from Amber, and watched the moonlit clearing with a restless fear so taut it was almost palpable.

Ages passed, at least thirty minutes by Tristan’s reckoning; Ryan and Stacy sat with their backs against half-rotted logs as they waited, and Damian gave Ryan a sharp kick when he started snoring.

Finally, a flicker of movement came from the clearing.

Tristan’s nerves began racing, and he crept forward to the very edge of the trees to get a good vantage point. The moon was dropping swiftly towards the peaks, so they would lose their light if Ilana’s magicians waited much longer.

As the figure moved forward onto the grass, Tristan felt a shiver of apprehension as he recognized the stocky frame and huge arms.

Mordechai was here.

Six more followed him in a tight-knit cluster, whether students or teachers Tristan could not tell—they all looked frail and small next to Mordechai’s towering build.

Catching Leila shifting on her heels out of the corner of his eye, Tristan held up a hand to forestall her. There were still fifty others waiting underground, if Quinsley’s reports had been correct, and they would lose their advantage if they moved in now.

At first he was afraid Mordechai would stop at seven, leaving the rest of his minions belowground to guard the Lair. But soon enough, more dark shapes began emerging from the longhouse, feet not making a sound as they ghosted across the clearing. Tristan tried to count them, but they kept crossing paths and confusing things in the dim moonlight, so he gave up and estimated that around thirty had appeared.

He kept his hand raised. The magicians needed to be concentrating on something before he risked venturing into the clearing.

Soon all thirty of the magicians were clustered around the two tents with many of their belongings still inside. The students hadn’t dared bring anything with them into the trees, for fear they would give themselves away. But it meant that if they failed to take the Lair, they would be left without supplies or shelter.

Then a light appeared. At first Tristan thought it was a flashlight, but when it began flickering, he realized it was a flame.

Mordechai had set the corner of their tent on fire.

Holding his breath, Tristan crept forward and beckoned the others to follow.

Across the clearing, the rasp of steel and a few clicks from pistols being readied rose from the crowd. Apparently Mordechai did not plan to trust magic alone to finish them off.

They reached the crumbling front of the longhouse without being seen, and Tristan darted into the shadow of the building. As soon as the others had joined him, he took off running down the stairs.

Halfway down, he barreled headlong into Amelia, the teacher who had hiked up to the cave in New Zealand

along with Tony's group. She started to scream, but her voice was cut short as the rest of Tristan's friends pounded down the stairs behind him and threw her out of their way.

Tristan flinched as he nearly stepped on her again at the foot of the stairs. The usual chandeliers were unlit, so the only light came from a few glowing lanterns in the ballroom.

"Mordechai!" bellowed a man half-obsured in shadow. Tristan didn't recognize him.

Others emerged from the hallway and the kitchen at his shout, at least ten or twelve of them, but Tristan didn't have time to contemplate his imminent doom. His feet were already carrying him across the ballroom towards the hallway.

At first they had the advantage of surprise, and none of Mordechai's forces were able to react in time. But as Tristan drew near the hallway, they began regrouping and forming a line in front of the grand doors to the ballroom. The man who had shouted drew a pistol, and several others closed their eyes as though summoning spells.

Tristan couldn't help but notice most of the people facing him were older students or teachers—most of the younger ones must have gone up to the meadow.

Mordechai had set a trap as much as Tristan had.

Tristan slowed and came to a halt before the line of magicians. The others clustered around him—at least they had the advantage of numbers this time.

"Can you do one of those big fireballs again?" Eli muttered from Tristan's right.

"I don't know," Tristan said, nerves racing. He reached for his internal power and gave a start as it bit at him like an electric shock.

"We're right here," Mei Ling whispered. Tristan glanced over and saw her and Rajesh facing the magicians with matching looks of hatred in their eyes.

For a long moment, no one moved.

The broad-shouldered man who had shouted raised his pistol and aimed it straight between Tristan's eyes. "You're the one responsible for this, aren't you?" he sneered. "I'll put an end—"

He gasped and dropped the pistol, hands flying to his throat. As his face started turning purple, he dropped to his knees.

Without looking, Tristan knew it was Amber's doing.

Eli lunged for the pistol, and four magicians fired spells at him.

One was a flame that caught in his shirt and began burning his chest. Another left a gash in his leg that began oozing blood onto the colored marble floor.

Tristan couldn't tell what the other spells had done, but Eli collapsed onto the floor, unconscious, as the fire continued to smolder in his shirt.

Trey dashed forward and slapped at his back until the flame had gone out, but when the towering magician reached for his gun again and pointed it at Trey, he scrambled backwards.

Blood pounded in Tristan's ears. If they harmed Eli—

Closing his eyes, he reached for as much power as he could grasp. It felt like a current running through him, just waiting to be called on, almost bubbling up through his skin in response to his fear and anger.

Spells flew around him, and shouts echoed in the ballroom, but none of them touched Tristan. He suspected Amber was protecting him, and silently thanked her.

He squeezed his eyes tighter still and tried to recall the ferocity of the fireball he had summoned in the Map Room all those years ago.

With a roar, a burst of flames exploded in the air before him.

Tristan felt the heat and heard the crackling before he saw it.

His eyes flew open, and he staggered back as the flames careened towards the magicians. Two of them didn't manage to scramble out of the way fast enough, and their coats burst into flames. One of them was wearing a down jacket that disintegrated almost at once.

But he didn't have time to savor his victory. Another magician had thrown Hayley and Damian off their feet with a spell, and as their friends ran over to help, three more magicians escaped the path of the fireball and dragged Eli away from the rest of the group.

“Eli!” Cailyn shouted, clearly torn between helping Hayley—whose hand she was grasping in an attempt to pull her to her feet—and Eli, who remained unconscious.

“Leave him,” Tristan snapped. An opening was forming between the magicians, who had dived out of the way to avoid the fireball. The flames had died down to a smoldering heap about the size of a campfire, but still no one dared go near.

“Now,” Tristan said under his breath. Rajesh and Amber, fighting on either side of him, heard and passed along the word.

There were only eight magicians now, facing sixteen students, and several of them were distracted with Eli.

As one of them aimed a spell at Leila, Tristan bellowed, “Now!”

In a disheveled mob, they sprinted forward through the gap in the magicians and past the ballroom doors. Cassidy barely managed to drag Damian to his feet in time.

A spell hit Leila just as she was running through, and she sprawled face first onto the marble with a surprised shriek.

Tristan grabbed one of her hands, Zeke taking the other, and they hauled Leila along the smooth marble floor until she was clear of the doors.

Rajesh and Cailyn heaved the doors shut and leaned all their weight against them.

“Get the barrier ready,” Tristan told Amber hurriedly. “We’ll hold the door as long as we can. Tell us when you’re ready to activate it.”

She nodded and darted to the middle of the hallway, past the side corridor that led to the kitchens.

Leila was recovering, and she struggled to her feet a moment later, one hand on Zeke’s shoulder for support.

“We need food,” she said, rubbing at a red mark on her forehead where she had struck the marble.

“It’s too dangerous!” Tristan said.

“It’s more dangerous to get ourselves trapped down here without any food. I’d rather die out there than starve.”

“I’ll help,” Cailyn said. Hayley and Trey quickly added their support.

It was only after they had disappeared around the corner, following the darkened side passage, that Tristan realized they were probably trying to see if they could save Eli. He bit back a curse at their stupidity.

The rest of them leaned all of their weight against the great doors. Amber slid a stick between the two handles, but it seemed a pitiful measure against what was waiting for them on the other side.

The whole door shook as the magicians outside threw something at it—whether a solid battering ram or a blast of magic, Tristan couldn’t tell. His teeth rattled as the jolt juddered through his spine and nearly sent him toppling forward.

In front of them, Amber was working frantically. She had already started putting together the framework for the barrier, using a few of their tent ties to fasten the sticks in place, and she knelt in the hallway as she finished her work. If not for the way her fingers trembled and her teeth made an indent in her lower lip, Tristan would almost have guessed she was unafraid.

An armful of sticks was propped in the hallway behind her, ready for more barriers farther down the hallway, and the whole place was lit with the soft glow of the orbs on the walls. A little over half of them were still producing light.

At last, Amber straightened. “It’s ready.”

“Damn it, Leila, hurry up,” Tristan muttered under his breath.

“I can go after her,” Zeke suggested.

“No!” Tristan snapped. “If all four of them have been captured, that makes five hostages. If we’re ever going to get them out again, we need everyone working together.”

Another thud rattled the door, this one weaker than the first.

Tristan was moments away from running after Leila himself, disregarding his own orders, when slapping footsteps echoed down the corridor.

“Get ready,” he said softly, summoning up another burst of power.

Then Leila, Cailyn, Hayley, and Trey hurtled around the corner, their arms full of food.

“The barrier is ready,” Tristan said. “Get over here.”

Abandoning the door, they all raced behind Amber, who held the stick frame aloft. With so many of them crammed together in the corridor, it took a few moments to figure out how to link hands in one large circle.

"They've gone up for reinforcements," Cailyn said softly as they fumbled around. "Only three of them were still in the ballroom. Eli's vanished."

Another thud rattled the door, and the stick between the handles gave an ominous creak.

Evvie made a sound that was halfway between a whimper and a groan. "We're going to die, aren't we?"

Tristan gave Amber's hand a sharp squeeze, resisting the urge to kick Evvie. "You ready?"

Amber nodded. "Send me your power. Quickly."

A few more whispers passed through the group, but as the noise on the other side of the doors crescendoed, eyes flew shut around the circle. Fear had drawn Tristan's power to the surface of his skin, so he had to hold back this time from blasting Amber with more than she would be able to safely channel. For the first time, he left the marble in his pocket as he sent a hot stream of magic through his palm to Amber.

As he felt Amber's skin heating up, Tristan's eyes flickered open. It was as though he had opened a channel through his veins—even as he watched the door with growing unease, power continued to flow from the others on his left straight through to Amber, almost of its own volition.

Amber's lips were moving rapidly, her eyes squeezed shut as if she fought just as hard as Tristan had to resist letting her attention slide.

The magicians on the other side had grown silent—he took this as a bad sign. It could only mean that reinforcements had shown up.

"Get back," Amber whispered.

It took a moment for the words to reach Tristan's brain. Then he shouted, "Move back! Out of the way!"

The students broke ranks and scattered, tripping over one another and spilling their supplies across the marble floor as they hurried away from Amber.

Despite the chaos, the final *boom* of the marble doors rose heavy through the hall.

The doors crashed open.

Backing up, Tristan fell over something—*someone*, rather, as whoever it was shouted in surprise—and at first couldn't see what had happened.

Someone else screamed, and a searing light filled the hallway.

Tristan blinked away black spots as Amber scrambled backwards. She must have been thrown off her feet as well.

The doorway was filled with magicians. Mordechai was at their lead, a cold, triumphant smile twisting his mouth. The curly-haired teacher, Amelia, stood at his right, and a row of teachers Tristan half-recognized were flanking the two of them.

"Well, isn't this an exciting turn of events," Mordechai sneered. "Every single one of Drakewell's precious students has decided to trap themselves in a collapsing cave. And you only have two exits to choose from."

Tristan scrambled backwards as Mordechai's eyes alit on him. "Can they see us?" he asked Amber under his breath.

"They shouldn't be able to," she said, twisting her hands together. "But I did that too quickly. It might have gone all wrong."

A weak groan rose from behind her, and Tristan spun to see Rajesh curled around his knees, blood soaking through his fingers.

Amber gasped. "Did I hurt you?"

"Don't worry about it," Rajesh said through clenched teeth. "I'm fine."

Amber buried her face in her hands. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. You should never have trusted me."

Tristan shook his head furiously. "Don't beat yourself up. You couldn't have helped it."

"Prasidimums can only be destroyed with dynamite or similar explosives," Mordechai said from the other side of the barrier. He stepped up and put a hand out, fingers probing in midair until they collided with the invisible wall. "I'm assuming this sloppy barrier is a bit weaker, but don't worry. I've come prepared."

"Shit," Zeke said. "They're going to blow us up."

"Can you walk, Rajesh?" Tristan asked. "We need to get the hell out of here."

Mei Ling tried pulling Rajesh to his feet, but he was unable to support his own weight, so Tristan took the other side.

“We need to set up another barrier,” Amber said, her face completely blank. “But it needs to be somewhere they don’t expect. They can destroy our barriers much faster than we can build them.”

“They’ll have to leave once they start the dynamite, won’t they?” Damian said gruffly. “We can go stamp it out before they get back.”

“Good thinking,” Tristan said in surprise. “That should buy us a bit of time.”

“Until they start sacrificing the youngest kids,” Mei Ling said.

Tristan stared at her in horror. “You don’t think they actually would, do you?”

Mei Ling shook her head and readjusted Rajesh’s arm around her neck. “Ilana was insane, but she was more rational than Mordechai. I have no idea what he’ll do.” Her eyes flickered to Rajesh’s face, which was rapidly draining of color. “You okay? We need to move.”

He grunted and took a shaky step forward with his blood-soaked leg. Tristan could feel him trembling, though he made no sound.

“I’ll stay back here,” Damian said. “Cassidy, are you going to join me?”

“Oh, great!” Cassidy said shrilly. Her usually beautiful red hair was matted and dirty, her eyes wild. “You’ve lost your mind too!”

“You sure about this?” Tristan asked Damian in confusion.

“Yeah.” Damian didn’t meet Tristan’s eyes. “Just come back and get me before you put the next barrier up, ’kay?”

“Of course.” Tristan paused and looked around past Rajesh’s arm. “And—thanks.”

Cassidy ended up staying behind with Damian, though she was pacing the width of the hallway and muttering to herself when Tristan and the rest of the students lost sight of them around the corner.

“Eli won’t be able to get back in,” Cailyn said fretfully as they started down the stairs, Rajesh flinching with each step.

“I’m sorry,” Tristan said. “I don’t know what else we can do.”

Cailyn shook her head. “I know. But I can’t believe he’s—”

They lapsed into silence as they continued down the hallway. Rubble was strewn through the hallways, but as of yet the earthquake damage did not seem too extensive. It was only as they reached the level with the bunkroom and the tunnel to the Subroom that Leila asked, “Where are we planning to hide out?”

Tristan would have loved nothing more than to return to the Subroom, but none of Zeke’s gang would be able to enter, and nor would Rajesh and Mei Ling. “We need to go to Delair’s mine. I don’t know how else to get to the Map Room.”

“Let’s put another barrier here, then, so we can still get back to the Subroom,” Leila said.

Tristan was in wholehearted agreement. “Do you have enough sticks, Amber?”

“I think so. We can take apart a few chairs if we need them for the last barrier.”

“Can we take Rajesh down to the mine tunnel now?” Mei Ling asked. “I don’t want to move him more than we need to.”

“Sure,” Tristan said. “Could someone follow us with a few blankets for him to lie on?”

As Tristan and Mei Ling continued across the hallway and down the final flight of stairs to Delair’s mine tunnel, Rusty and Leila took off running towards the bunkroom. Behind them, Amber knelt and began fastening together the remaining sticks into a second barrier, tying off the ends with a ball of twine that must have come from Quinsley’s backpacking supplies.

“You don’t think Damian is planning to betray us, do you?” Mei Ling asked under her breath once the rest of the students were out of sight behind them.

“I doubt it,” Tristan said. “I have no idea why he’s being helpful all of a sudden, but he knows Mordechai is a thousand times worse than Drakewell. I’m sure he wouldn’t join them or anything.” He was partly trying to persuade himself of the same, because he had no idea what Damian had planned.

Just as they rounded the corner and started down the passageway towards Delair’s classroom and mine tunnel, Rajesh slumped forward and went limp.

“Rajesh!” Mei Ling cried. “Wake up!”

“He’s probably losing too much blood,” Tristan said through gritted teeth. Ori’s face flashed before him, pale yet determined as he insisted they leave him behind. He refused to let Rajesh go the same way.

“Are we close?”

“It’s just up there,” Tristan said, pointing with his chin at the darkened hole in the left side of the corridor. “Can you help lift him?”

Mei Ling already looked as though she was getting crushed beneath Rajesh’s weight, but she straightened and heaved Rajesh’s arm more securely around her neck. Tristan reached down and lifted Rajesh’s legs, and together they staggered down the hallway.

At last they reached the entrance to the mine shaft, and Tristan released Rajesh’s legs with a groan. Only then did he realize the mine was almost entirely blocked. About ten feet past the entrance, a sloping wall of rocks filled the passage.

“That’s where the Map Room is,” Tristan said, waving at the rocks. He cursed and kicked a rock at the rubble.

Footsteps sounded behind them, and Tristan turned to see Leila and Rusty dashing down the hallway with armfuls of quilts and blankets from the bunkroom.

“Thanks,” Tristan said grimly. “Look at this. We’re never going to make it through this goddamned tunnel.”

Leila skidded to a halt in front of the mine. “Oh.”

Rusty seemed not to notice the caved-in tunnel. He dropped his pile of blankets to the ground and began draping them over the floor in the tunnel until the entire thing looked like a big bed. Carefully, Tristan and Mei Ling lowered Rajesh onto the blankets. She immediately put her head to his chest to listen for a heartbeat.

“He’s alive. But can we get Amber here now?”

“We need to get the barrier up first,” Tristan said, hating himself as he said it. “It’s our only chance.”

“I’m staying down here, then,” Mei Ling said, her eyes clouding with mistrust. “Please don’t take too long.”

“I’ll try.”

Tristan got to his feet, noticing absently that a few streaks of his friend’s blood had dried on his own jeans. Leila and Rusty followed him without speaking. They probably hated him as much as he hated himself.

Up in the next corridor, Amber hardly appeared to have made any progress.

“How much longer is that going to take?” Tristan asked. The words came out harsh and angry.

“I don’t know. I am working as fast as I can.” Amber glanced at Tristan and blanched at whatever she saw in his face.

“I’m going to check on Damian and Cassidy,” he said. He wouldn’t tell her about Rajesh—that shouldn’t be her burden to bear.

He heard muttering behind him as he turned and stalked up the hallway, and he felt a surge of vicious pleasure. Let them mutter. They had no idea what the professors had ordered him to do. Neglecting Rajesh for a short while would seem like a kindness in the face of what was still to come.

The echoing sound of Damian and Cassidy arguing rose long before they came into sight—Tristan kicked a rock as he came around the corner, so he wouldn’t be accused of sneaking up on them, and both fell silent at once. Damian’s angry face was set, while Cassidy looked as though she still had a lot on her mind to tell him.

“Why are you helping us?” Tristan asked baldly.

“I’m as likely to die if they get in here as you are,” Damian said, gesturing behind him. For the first time, Tristan noticed that two of Mordechai’s cronies—one older student Tristan didn’t recognize and one younger—were standing outside the barrier with their arms folded. “I’ve played around with dynamite before. I’m not worried.”

“Have they tried anything yet?”

From behind his back, Damian produced a stick of dynamite with the fuse burned almost to the base.

“He’s insane,” Cassidy said again, kicking at a piece of cracked marble in the wall until it began to shake free.

“You don’t have to stay here,” Tristan said. “I’m sure someone else would be willing to keep watch.”

Cassidy snorted. “Unlikely. Leave us alone, Tristan. You’re not the new headmaster yet.”

“Fine.” Tristan turned to leave, though he was unwilling to return to the others yet. Before long, none of them would remain his friends. He would be like Drakewell, tied to a place he despised and abandoned by

everyone he had once cared for.

Behind him, Damian and Cassidy remained silent until he had passed out of earshot.

On the second floor down, he paused outside Alldusk's classroom. He felt lightheaded as the loss of his professor hit him once again at the familiar sight.

Tristan pushed back the door and slipped inside. A large chunk of the ceiling had fallen away and smashed the brazier where they used to burn things to collect auras—the room was a mess. Half-toppled shelves had divested their contents onto the floor, and the desks were littered with broken glass and splintered wood. Bending down, Tristan picked up one of the jars that had survived the earthquake and turned it over in his hands, rubbing rock dust from the glass.

Then he threw it with all his strength at the floor. It shattered, the pieces skidding under the work benches.

He didn't feel any better.

Kicking rocks and fragments of glass away from the wall near the door, he sank to the floor and rested his head on his knees. He wanted to cry, to yell his frustration into the echoing chamber, but the tears wouldn't come. He had been given responsibility for the students, so everything that happened now was his to answer for. Weakness was a luxury no longer afforded to him.

He had been sitting there so long his legs had grown cramped and numb when a shout rang down the hallway.
“*Tristan!*”

Chapter 8: Dynamite

Tristan jumped to his feet and kicked open the door, trying to figure out which direction the voice had come from.

“TRISTAN! Get up here now!”

It was Damian. Tristan turned left and sprinted up the stairs to the first barrier, half-expecting the whole corridor to explode at any moment.

The scene he came upon was much less dramatic than he had expected. Damian and Cassidy stood facing the barrier, legs tensed as though they were about to break into a run, while on the other side a young girl stood with her hands behind her back.

“What is it?” Tristan panted, throwing a hand against the wall to stop his momentum.

Cassidy jumped. “That girl is holding a stick of dynamite,” she said urgently once she had recovered.

Tristan blinked at the innocent-looking girl in disbelief. Mei Ling had been correct, then. The poor thing couldn’t be older than seven, and he doubted she was aware of what she had been put up to.

“Have you tried wrestling it away from her?”

Damian scowled. “What if she’s like that freaky blond girl and she curses us?”

Tristan doubted that was the case, but he didn’t have time to argue. Pushing Damian aside, he lunged through the barrier at the girl.

She cried out when he appeared as if from thin air, stumbling backwards a few steps until she fell.

“I think you need to give that to me,” Tristan said, holding out his hand for the lit fuse he could smell if not see.

She shook her head fiercely and scooted back another pace.

Tristan dropped to his knees and grabbed her shoulder. She screamed, but he did not release his grip. There, cradled in her hands, lay the stick of dynamite, the flame dangerously close to singeing her wrist. He snatched it out of her hand and stomped on the fuse until it stopped smoldering.

Running footsteps sounded around the corner—Tristan grabbed the dynamite and stumbled backwards just as a man charged into the hallway. He was holding a pistol aimed straight at Tristan.

Tristan threw himself through the barrier, which from this side hid Damian and Cassidy from view but was otherwise invisible, just as the teacher pulled the trigger.

The shot rang out through the hallway.

Tristan had fallen to his knees; looking up, he saw that Damian and Cassidy had dropped to the ground as well.

The bullet ricocheted off the marble wall and clattered to the floor behind Tristan.

He felt as though he had been punched in the stomach. The barrier didn’t protect against bullets.

“Drakewell’s office,” he managed. “Get out of here!”

His nerves vibrating, he pulled himself to his feet and ran into the office, Damian and Cassidy only seconds behind him. Together, they stuck their heads out the door and watched as the magician dragged the little girl away by one arm.

Tristan let out a ragged breath and sagged against the wall. “They must be short on bullets,” he said weakly. “They don’t have a plane, so they had to hike everything in.”

As they waited in silence, Tristan’s heart thudding painfully against his ribs, they glanced around Drakewell’s office at the ruin the earthquake had left behind. Though he had always wanted to know what secrets his headmaster hid within his private lair, Tristan could not summon up any emotion other than fear for what would come.

One bookshelf had fallen sideways and divested its contents onto the floor, and a sea of papers had slid off Drakewell's desk to coat the marble tiles.

"Maybe he left something for us," Cassidy said tonelessly, her face ragged with worry. "An idea of how to fix this effing mess, or something."

Tristan waded through the sea of papers and books to Drakewell's desk, where he sat in the headmaster's tall chair. A chill of premonition went through him as he began digging through Drakewell's desk drawers, all of which had fallen open in the earthquake. "What's happening out there?" Tristan asked, not looking up.

"The guy with the gun is still standing there," Damian said. "No dynamite or little girl."

Tristan sifted aimlessly through a few of the drawers, not entirely sure what he was looking for, and was surprised to find a bible. When he let it fall open on the desk, a crumpled photo fell out. It looked as though it had been wadded up and then smoothed out again.

After a moment, Tristan recognized the auburn hair and sharp features. Ilana had been even prettier as a young woman, eyes bright and cheeks flushed with happiness.

Feeling suddenly guilty for violating Drakewell's privacy, Tristan replaced the bible and eased the drawer closed. He no longer wanted to see what other secrets his headmaster had hidden.

Now Tristan could easily understand how much anger and self-hatred Drakewell's job entailed. He was already on his way to becoming as bitter as his headmaster. When this whole disaster was over, Drakewell—or Drakewell's ghost, if he did not live to return—would likely be Tristan's only ally.

Tristan stood abruptly.

"Didn't find anything?" Damian asked.

"No. I'm going to see how the others are getting along. Stay in here if you can."

Damian and Cassidy nodded. As Tristan picked his way among the papers, Cassidy reached impulsively for Damian's hand.

The magician with the gun had disappeared around the corner, and Tristan paused a long time behind the barrier, wondering what was in store for them next. Just as he was about to turn, the girl he had wrestled the dynamite from appeared around the corner. Only this time, her face was streaked with blood and mottled with darkening bruises.

Tristan felt sick. Was Mordechai trying to cloud Tristan's judgment with pity?

Wrenching his eyes from the pitiful sight of the girl, he started down the hall to rejoin the rest of the students. He hoped Amber was nearly done with the barrier—every minute that slipped away took Rajesh farther from an easy recovery.

When he came down the last flight of stairs to the hallway where he had left the others, he stopped short. The barrier lay half-completed on the marble floor, and no one was in the hallway.

His anger mounting, Tristan turned on his heel. Had they disregarded his orders and flocked down to see Rajesh?

A moment later, he heard voices echoing out of Alldusk's classroom behind him. Taking the stairs two at a time, he dashed into the ruined chamber.

"What's going on?" he snapped. "Why aren't you working on the barrier?"

Amber whirled, her face going white. "We need marbles. We already cast a barrier without them, and I am afraid we will overextend ourselves if we draw on our own power again."

Tristan felt immediately guilty. Now that he looked at her properly, he realized there were dark circles under her eyes and her hands were shaking slightly where she held a broken glass jar. None of them had slept all night.

"Right," he said stupidly. He didn't want to apologize in front of the entire school; he had to appear strong and confident. "Any luck, then?"

"We found a few," Leila said, giving Tristan an accusatory look. "Maybe five or six."

"Here's another two," Rusty said.

"I'm sure that will be enough," Tristan said. "They have guns upstairs, so I'm not sure how much longer we'll be able to hold the top barrier."

"Tristan is right," Amber said, not meeting his eyes. "We have enough marbles. We can set up the barrier now."

“Is it done?” he asked in surprise.

“I’ve done the best I can.”

Tristan hesitated—Amber was still avoiding his gaze, and that more than anything made him feel like a tyrant. But they had no time to waste. “I’ll get the others,” he said at last.

He found Damian and Cassidy in Drakewell’s office, exactly where he had left them. Tristan still wasn’t sure if sound carried through the barriers, so he beckoned them with a hand. They seemed to catch his meaning, because they tiptoed down the hallway and did not speak until they had rounded the corner.

“Those bastards are sick,” Damian hissed as soon as the barrier was out of sight behind them. “D’you know what they did to that girl?”

Tristan shook his head.

“They tried to bait us—they lit another stick of dynamite, but this time someone was waiting behind the doors. As soon as we tried to grab it off her, they showed up and tried to shoot us. But they missed and hit the girl. We ran back to Drakewell’s office, and she started crying, and the bastards *yelled* at her for messing up!”

Tristan felt sick. “I wish we could take care of her. But we can’t get her through the damn barrier.”

Only as they rejoined the rest of the students did Tristan realize how odd it was for him to be speaking with Damian on such friendly terms. He would have considered it a victory if not for the way his former friends were looking at him with suspicion and dislike.

They fell easily into the now-familiar routine of activating the barrier. Tristan stood between Amber and Leila, only this time Amber did not look at him, and she held his hand lightly, as though eager to shake it off. His disgust with himself was only mitigated by worry—even as he tried to reach within for his reserves of power, he was listening tensely for the sound of gunshots or explosions that were sure to come.

Tristan had not given himself a marble to draw from, because he had assumed the power would come easily, but he found himself struggling to sense it at all. His thoughts were too scattered.

It was a moment before he realized Leila was trying to send a bead of power his way. Flinching, he tightened his grip and allowed the power to flow through him, using the sensation to dig deep and grasp his own power at last.

This barrier was much slower to enact than the previous one, or maybe Amber was just paranoid after what had happened to Rajesh. It seemed to take a couple tries before the barrier stabilized and finally faded into transparency.

Amber gave a sigh as she released Tristan’s hand. “It’s done.”

“Amber, I—” He stopped his apology short. Rajesh was more important. “Do you have enough power left to help Rajesh? He’s passed out, and I think he’s losing too much blood.”

Amber blanched. “Where?”

“Down in Delair’s mine. I’m sure—”

He didn’t get a chance to finish what he was going to say, because Amber had already taken off running down the stairs.

“We need to keep an eye on the top barrier,” Tristan said when the rest of the students looked liable to follow Amber. “We’ll stay in Drakewell’s office as much as we can—the magicians have guns. But I don’t think they’re foolish enough to wait in the hallway when the dynamite is about to go off.”

Tristan took first watch himself; though he was weary, his mind was so tightly wound that he was miles from sleep. “I’ll come get the next watch in a couple hours.”

“Can I go with you?” Rusty asked.

“You need backup,” Leila pointed out. Alone among the students, Rusty and Leila did not seem to resent him. But it was only a matter of time.

“Fine. But if you fall asleep, you’re gone.”

They retraced the familiar route back to the barrier without speaking. The rest of the students headed the opposite direction, their voices bouncing off the walls until they faded to ringing silence.

“What’d you go and yell at Amber for?” Rusty said without preamble when they stopped in Drakewell’s office.

Tristan walked around Drakewell’s desk and dragged the headmaster’s chair into the doorway as an excuse

not to look at Rusty. “Do you really want to know?”

“Yeah.” Rusty was uncharacteristically serious as he drew a splintered wooden chair beside Tristan. In a flash, Tristan remembered when Drakewell had called him to his office in his first year, when he suspected Tristan of sabotaging the school, and Tristan had sat trembling in that very chair. How the tables had turned.

“Rajesh might be dying right now,” Tristan spat, putting his head in his hands. “I told Mei Ling we had to put the damn barrier up before Amber saved him. Now Mei Ling thinks I’m heartless, and it’s only a matter of time before the rest of you guys hate me too, because Drakewell’s asked me to do something so awful—” He stopped himself short, breathing hard. He should not have told Rusty any of that.

“I won’t hate you,” Rusty said simply. “Promise.” After a moment, he added, “But you’ve gotta apologize to Amber. She’ll understand.”

“Right.” Tristan rubbed at his temples, trying to banish the headache that was threatening.

Rusty leaned against the wall, studying the barrier through Drakewell’s office doorway with a look of deep concentration. Eventually he turned to Tristan, frowning, and asked, “How do we know when two hours’ve gone by?”

* * *

When their watch was up, Tristan was reluctant to go downstairs, fearing he would find Rajesh dead and the rest of the students ready to mutiny.

Rusty seemed to sense Tristan’s apprehension, because he said nothing about Rajesh or about the other students.

As they reached the foot of the last flight of stairs, Tristan caught sight of a soft glow emanating from the mine tunnel. The rest of the hallway was dark—someone must have gathered up the orbs from the wall and relocated them.

All fourteen of the students were crammed into the small cleared space at the end of the mine tunnel. It was a moment before Tristan spotted Rajesh, lying at the far end beside the sloping wall of rocks that had blocked the tunnel. He knew at once that his friend was okay—rather than tending to him, Amber sat near the entrance to the tunnel, piecing together another barrier out of the splintered fragments of a wooden chair.

“How is Rajesh?” Tristan asked in a low voice.

Amber glanced up very briefly, caught Tristan’s intense gaze, and hurriedly dropped her eyes back to her work. “The injury was not too serious. He was bleeding a lot, and he’s still unconscious, but I hope he will be fine now.”

“Amber?”

This time she met his eyes for a longer moment.

Tristan sighed and changed what he had been about to say. “Thank you.”

They fell into a routine after that, watching the barrier in sets of two while the rest of the students dug through the mountain of rocks in Delair’s mine.

Tristan kept looking for a chance to catch Amber alone so he could apologize properly, but she was forever digging or stabilizing the ceiling while the others worked around her. Though she volunteered several times to stand watch at the first barrier, Tristan would not allow it—she was far too valuable. And so Tristan was left alone with his self-loathing. After a couple days, he began to think this was for the best. Amber would hate him after he carried out Drakewell’s orders in any case; what was the point in making amends now? He would only be delaying his suffering.

After Tristan and the rest of the students had taken twenty-three sticks of dynamite off Mordechai’s followers, the attempts stopped altogether.

“They must be running low on dynamite,” Zeke said on their fifth day after retreating underground. “They haven’t tried anything in three days now.”

“I hope that means they’re running low on bullets, too,” Leila said grimly.

Tristan said nothing. He was afraid the unexpected silence from Mordechai meant he was scheming to find another way through the barriers.

Dynamite or no, Tristan did not trust the magicians to stay away, so they continued putting up barriers as they worked. One went above All dusk’s classroom, directly below Drakewell’s office, so any students on guard would have an easy escape if the first barrier came down. Another closed off the entrance to Delair’s mine.

Despite the success of the barriers, each day that passed increased Tristan’s sense of impending doom. They seemed to be making no progress in their digging—every time they dropped a handful of debris into the hallway outside the mine, a new pile of rubble would slide into place.

Rajesh had been carefully relocated into Delair’s classroom, where he remained unconscious. With Rajesh injured and Eli still missing—Tristan was already beginning to fear he was dead—the rest of the students were very subdued. He knew they blamed him for everything that had gone wrong, and he had nothing to say in his own defense.

Leila was in charge of pulling together meals each night from the meager supplies they had scrounged, but even those were getting low. Their days underground were numbered; whether their end would be a result of Mordechai’s magicians, a cave-in, or starvation was anyone’s guess.

On their fifth day underground, Tristan was trying hard to stay awake as he kept watch alongside Trey, who had withdrawn into himself after Eli’s disappearance. He jolted upright in Drakewell’s chair to the slapping sound of running footsteps.

Leila came sprinting around the corner, her cheeks flushed and her hair in disarray. “Rajesh is awake! He’s alive!”

Tristan jumped to his feet. “How is he?”

Leila stopped beside the office door, leaning against the entryway and breathing hard. “He’s fine. He’s completely fine.”

Tristan rubbed at his eyes, which were prickling from exhaustion. “Thank god. Now if we could just get Eli back —”

Trey made a small sound of assent.

“If you want me to take over your watch, you can go see Rajesh,” Leila said gently. “I know he probably wants to talk to you.”

“Thank you.” Tristan gave her a lopsided smile. How was it that Leila could overlook everything terrible he had done when Amber couldn’t?

Just as he was turning to go, however, two enormous magicians strode into the hallway. One was the tall black professor Tristan had first seen at Ilana’s school seminar, and the other was a brute of a man built along the same lines as Mordechai.

“He must be a graduate,” Tristan muttered under his breath, nodding at the second man. “I’ve never seen him before.”

“Great,” Leila said, her voice a bit higher than usual. “Just wonderful. What are they planning now?”

The two men swaggered closer to the barrier, leering at the unseen students on the other side. The tall professor pulled out a gun and fired three shots down the hallway, which ricocheted off the wall near Brikkens’ classroom.

“Surely they’re not planning to sacrifice themselves,” Tristan said slowly, sticking his head cautiously into the hallway once the way was clear again.

“We can’t attack them,” Trey said. “If they’re trained magicians, they could kill us.”

“If they don’t strangle us first,” Leila said.

The two men stopped within three feet of the barrier, the tall professor still holding his gun out, and Tristan realized the other man had one hand behind his back.

The men exchanged a quiet word, and in a movement so fast it caught Tristan completely off guard, the professor turned and sprinted back the way he had come.

“Shit. *Run!*” Tristan bolted out of the office and took off running down the hallway. Leila and Trey took a moment to catch on, but Tristan didn’t stop and wait—adrenaline was pumping through him and propelling him forward.

Tristan was just rounding the corner, the other two closing in behind, when it happened.

The hallway exploded behind them. The *boom* was so loud echoing off the walls that it seemed to compress

Tristan's ears.

Then a roiling cloud of flames engulfed the corridor. Leila screamed, Tristan yelled, and they all jumped down the staircase to the bottom just as a thousand shattered pieces of marble flew like shrapnel over the top of the stairs.

The air itself seemed to be boiling. Trey had jumped farthest, and he had fallen to his knees—Tristan and Leila grabbed him by the arms and dragged him bodily to his feet, and they started running, the flames still roasting the air all around them.

When they passed through the next barrier, the acrid smell of burning flesh and rotten bananas faded slightly.

"I'll wait here," Tristan gasped, though his legs wanted to propel him forward another ten miles to escape the explosion.

"No, it's not safe," Leila snapped. Grabbing Tristan's wrist, she dragged him behind as she started off running again, down the next flight of stairs and through the third barrier.

They ran into a throng of students at the end of the lowest corridor.

"What the hell was that?" Zeke asked, eyes wild. He seemed to relax somewhat when he spotted Leila.

"The first barrier is gone," Tristan said heavily.

"They just blew the whole corridor up!" Leila slowed and crossed her arms, tucking her trembling hands beneath her elbows. "This really intimidating magician held the dynamite behind his back, and we didn't realize he was planning to kill himself until it was too late."

"Shit," Cailyn said. "I can't believe you guys are alive. Well, that's one barrier down."

Just then, Tristan noticed Rajesh hovering behind the group, his face paler than usual but very much alive.

"Rajesh!" Tristan threaded his way through the cluster of students to give his friend a hug. "Are you okay?" He was still shaking a bit himself, and he gripped Rajesh for a moment longer than he would have ordinarily, taking comfort in his solid presence.

"I'm alive. Amber's amazing."

Amber looked up and met Tristan's eyes with an odd defiance.

"What now?" Zeke asked. "Are we just going to let them blow up the whole damn school?"

"I have to watch over the barrier," Amber said. "I might be able to overpower whoever it is next time."

"I'll go with you," Tristan said at once.

"Great," Leila said sarcastically. "Our two most useful people are going straight to the front line."

Tristan sighed. "If we can't keep the barriers up, we might as well give up now. We'll never dig through to the Map Room with fifty magicians trying to kill us."

Leila rolled her eyes but didn't argue any further.

"Let's go." Tristan turned and started up the stairs again, Amber following. "The rest of you, get back to work."

Tristan and Amber had hardly reached the top of the stairs when a second thunderous BOOM echoed through the halls.

Tristan grabbed Amber and jumped down the full flight of stairs in one clumsy leap, dragging her along with him. He fell badly on his shoulder, and Amber gave a cry of what could have been surprise or pain as she crashed to the ground beside him.

They were not a moment too early.

A second later, flames roiled through the air overhead, along with a greasy cloud of smoke that stained the white marble walls before receding.

"You okay?" Tristan asked Amber when the heat and echoes began to fade.

She nodded and sat up warily. "That would be two barriers down."

They got slowly to their feet. When Tristan looked back, he saw Leila, Rusty, Zeke, and Rajesh watching from the bottom of the final flight of stairs. Tristan gave them a nod and waved them away. They had to reach the Map Room, and soon.

Tristan didn't even know who had killed themselves this time. Was it the tall black professor, or someone else he had never met before, one of Mordechai's special cases?

"We only have two barriers left," Amber said softly as they reached the final barrier, just above the bunkroom

corridor. "All of our work was for nothing."

"They paid for it, though," Tristan said. "How many more do you think Mordechai is willing to sacrifice?"

She shook her head.

No one was in sight, so Tristan leaned back against the wall and folded his arms. Some leader he was proving to be. They could be mere hours from getting themselves killed, Eli was still missing, and he had alienated most of the other students. At least now he had the chance to make one thing right.

"Amber?" Tristan said hesitantly. "If we're about to die, I don't want it to end this way. Not talking to you, I mean. I didn't mean to snap at you. I'm really sorry. It's just that I told Mei Ling we had to put the barrier up before you helped Rajesh, and she was so angry that I hardly recognized myself. It's Drakewell's orders and the way I keep messing everything up and—"

Amber grabbed his hands. "You're not! I thought you were angry at me for hurting Rajesh!" Tears glistened in her eyes. "I was so ashamed."

Tristan rocked back in surprise. "No, of course not! You saved all of us. It was no one's fault—it just happened."

When Amber hung her head, Tristan pulled her into his arms and clung to her. This was the way it should be. If they were to die, at least they would die together.

"I'm scared," Amber said, her voice muffled against Tristan's shoulder. "Everyone expects me to be able to save them, but I can hardly use magic underground."

"You don't need to do anything except help us disable Ilana's enchantment. If we ever reach the Map Room, that is."

"You probably think I can stop the next magician who comes to blow up the next barrier. But I don't know if I can."

"What about Blake? You were underground when you killed him."

Amber winced and drew away from Tristan. He realized his mistake a second too late—she hated being reminded of the deaths she had caused. "We were close to the entrance of the cave. I could not have done that in the passage below." Her voice was wooden.

"What if you had a few marbles?"

Amber shook her head. "You're better with them than I am." She reached into a pocket and, to Tristan's utter surprise, drew out a handful of green marbles. "Mei Ling and I have been gathering rock magic while we dig." She pressed the marbles into Tristan's hand and, when he tried to push them away, closed his fingers around them.

"The only thing I'm good at is fire!" Tristan protested. "And that isn't very useful when we're trying to stop the place from blowing up."

This drew a small smile from Amber. "Just plan what you want to do ahead of time. I'm sure you will be fine."

"I really just want to throw a rock at Mordechai's head," Tristan said.

Amber bit her lip, as though suppressing a giggle. "Just don't get shot by whoever is waiting at the back."

"I could burn *him* up, at least."

"Sounds like a plan."

They sank down against the wall after that and sat waiting for the next wave of magicians to arrive. Tristan reached for Amber's hand and played with her soft, delicate fingers, wanting nothing more than to kiss her and hold her for as many hours as they had left.

Not a word had come from their professors since Quinsley had abandoned them; for all they knew, every single one of them could already be dead. Their time was slipping away.

"It's a lost cause, you know," Amber said eventually. "We have been digging for days, and we have hardly made any progress. The tunnel could be buried all the way to the Map Room."

"I know," Tristan said grimly. "There's just too many of them. When they run out of dynamite, they'll send someone over to the nearest town to get more, and even if we build twenty barriers while they're away, they can keep sacrificing themselves until they make it through."

"I doubt it will come to that," Amber muttered. "I think tonight might be the end."

Tristan gripped her hand fiercely. “We tried. We did everything we could. But I still feel like I’ve failed the professors. They trusted me.”

“For good reason.” Amber leaned her head on Tristan’s shoulder. “You got us this far.”

Tristan opened his mouth to argue and then stopped short. If they were doomed either way, he would rather not spend his final moments dwelling on all the hundred ways he had failed.

But no one materialized. They must have waited at the foot of the stairs for several hours, because Tristan snapped out of a doze at the sound of approaching footsteps. His legs had fallen asleep from their prolonged contact with the stone floor, and he stumbled as he got gingerly to his feet.

It was Leila coming up the stairs, and she brought with her the delicious aroma of roasting food.

“What’s going on?” Tristan asked.

“I was going to ask you the same thing,” Leila said. “No sign of Mordechai?”

Tristan shook his head. “I bet they know they’re close. They’re probably getting ready for the final attack.”

“We had a vote,” Leila said as Amber struggled to her feet beside Tristan. “We’re going to take the night off. No watching the barrier. I’ve found a bit of wine, and we’re cooking the last of the fresh food.”

Tristan stretched his arms behind his back. “I like the sound of that.”

Grinning, Leila said, “Come on, then. Food’s ready.”

“Wait.” Tristan ran up the stairs and passed through the barrier to stand outside Alldusk’s ruined classroom. He paused a second, heart pounding in his throat as he waited for some unseen enemy to shoot him. Then he snatched all three of the orbs out of their holders on the wall. Behind him, the hallway was cut off as though by a solid wall of darkness where the barrier ended. He continued taking orbs as he went, hoping he could at least confuse Mordechai’s followers and buy them a bit more time.

“Good idea,” Leila said when Tristan rejoined her and Amber at the end of the hallway leading to the bunkroom and bathrooms.

He handed them each three orbs and then paused. “Where is everyone? I’ll join you in a few moments.”

“We’re in Delair’s classroom,” Leila said, giving Tristan a pained look.

“Go on,” he said. “I’ll be there soon.”

Amber gave him a wan smile before following Leila down the last flight of stairs.

When they had disappeared around the corner, Tristan strode down the hallway, past the bunkroom and the bathrooms, until he reached the rough tunnel leading to the Subroom. Closing his eyes, he started down the dark tunnel, the uneven floor achingly familiar underfoot, the undulating wall catching on his fingers as it always did.

He reached the smooth wooden door to the Subroom at last. Taking a deep breath, he pushed it back and stepped in. He had not been back since he and Amber had feigned their betrayal and joined Ilana’s school.

Everything was exactly as they had left it. Most of the beds were rumpled or strewn with clothes, testament to the earthquake that had forced the school to evacuate only a few short weeks ago, but Tristan noticed with a pang that his bed and Amber’s were still made, the sheets turned down crisply as though in anticipation of their return. Someone had trusted they would make it back all along.

The earthquake did not seem to have touched the Subroom. Tristan ran his fingers across a film of dust that had gathered on their sloping table and sank down onto the familiar sofa before the long-extinct fire.

How safe they had felt back then, as though a simple Prasadimum barrier would keep out all the evil in the world.

Chapter 9: The Last Campfire

When he left the Subroom behind at last, Tristan followed the smell of smoke and charred food back down to Delair's classroom.

To Tristan's surprise, he realized they had lit an actual fire in the remains of Delair's classroom. The desks had been cleared away and a stone circle had been built out of the rubble they dug from the mine.

All of the students were clustered close around the flames, warming their hands against a vague chill that had seeped into their bones from the long days spent underground. Damian's gang was intermingled with Tristan's friends, all of them rubbing shoulders as they stoked the fire and roasted sausages that Leila had dug up from god knew where.

"Hey, Tristan?" Cailyn said, tucking a strand of her frizzy hair behind one ear in an unusually hesitant gesture. "We were talking, while you were away, and—well, we know you're doing your best. It sucks that Eli's gone, and that Rajesh got hurt, but it's not your fault."

Tristan laughed humorlessly. "Don't go saying that now. I'm about to do something you'll never forgive me for."

"It doesn't matter, though, does it?" Leila said. "We might all die tomorrow."

"Now you're really cheering me up," Tristan said, though a bit of the tension chewing its way through his stomach had eased.

He noticed that someone had drawn a set of larger rocks up to the fire, some of them laced with veins of what could have been gold, and he settled on one beside Amber. Jackets and scarves were strewn throughout the room—it was the first time many of them had felt properly warm since leaving Vancouver.

"We never got to have bonfires up in Greenland," Mei Ling said. She glanced at Tristan as she spoke, and he took it to mean she had forgiven him. "It would've been nice, though."

"You mean you didn't burn things to keep warm way up north?" Rusty asked.

"There weren't any trees up there, you idiot," Leila said.

Rajesh glanced at her in surprise. "How do you know that?"

"You have no idea how many hours I spent staring at that spot on the globe where a bunch of auras vanished into the ground. I probably know the landscape better than Tristan does."

"That's not much of an accomplishment," Tristan said. Leila handed him a bent piece of metal with a sausage skewered on the end of it, and he leaned forward to hold it over the crackling flames. "All we ever saw was a bit of snow between the cave entrance and the stream where we harvested water magic. And there wasn't anything to see out there."

"You might be surprised," Mei Ling said.

The more Tristan looked around, the more food he saw. He couldn't believe it. There were potatoes and apples and marshmallows in addition to the sausages, and even a few sweet potatoes. "Where'd this come from?"

Leila grinned. "Wait until you see the best part."

At her cue, Trey carried a soup pot with a ladle into the circle beside the fire. Tristan expected to smell food, but instead the potent aroma of sweet alcohol wafted around the room.

"What's *that*?"

"Mulled wine," Leila said proudly. "Cailyn told us about it. Her parents drank it once when their family was traveling around Europe. We had to bastardize it a bit, but it tastes pretty damn good."

Tristan leaned closer to see inside the pot. It was filled with some sort of red wine, and floating on top were orange peels and cinnamon sticks and cloves.

"Where the hell did you get the wine?" he asked in amazement.

“Turns out Alldusk had some hidden in his office,” Rusty said proudly. “We went looking when we were trying to find marbles. Maybe he was secretly an alcoholic.”

Tristan felt a pang as he thought of his dad, but that was soon replaced by a hollow ache. None of his friends knew Alldusk was dead.

“And what about the rest of the food?” Tristan asked, trying to keep his voice light. “Don’t pretend he had a pot and a ladle sitting in his office as well.”

Leila rolled her eyes. “All right, I raided the kitchen while I was keeping a lookout last week. There was no one around!”

Tristan didn’t even care, but he sighed and shook his head as though he was exasperated with Leila’s recklessness.

“It’s worth it, trust me,” Leila said.

As she began ladling mulled wine into the assortment of cups Hayley produced from behind her, Tristan pulled his sausage from the fire and bit into it. The end was already charred deliciously.

“Eli would’ve loved this,” Trey said sadly as he accepted his glass from Leila. He raised it in a silent toast, and those who already had mulled wine joined him.

When Tristan took his mug from Leila, noticing as he did that it had come from the Subroom, he tried to banish his dark thoughts. As he chinked his glass with Amber’s and raised it to his lips, he managed to summon a real smile.

The mulled wine was delicious, any acidity disguised beneath layers of rich honey and orange and cinnamon. A few ashes floated on the top, sharp and bitter when Tristan swallowed them, and the warmth spread right through his core.

“To being alive—for now,” Zeke said. He downed his mug in one long gulp and held it out for a refill. Leila shook her head at him, smiling, but obliged.

Tristan sipped at his mulled wine with more reserve, enjoying the sweetness and the feeling of being warm and full once more. Eventually he noticed that Amber was watching him intently.

“What are you thinking about?” she asked, clutching her cup with both hands. Her lips were tinged red with the wine, a startlingly bold note in her otherwise ghostly face.

“How all the good things never last,” he said grimly. “The only reason everyone’s decided to forgive me is because they know we’re doomed.”

“I know,” Amber said, sipping at her wine. “But it was a losing battle from the start. We knew it from the moment we joined Ilana’s school—she just has too many followers.”

Tristan nodded grimly and glanced around the room. He noticed that Rajesh and Mei Ling had disappeared sometime in the past half hour, while Rusty was lighting sticks on fire and tapping them contemplatively against the stone circle. On his other side, Leila and Zeke were in deep discussion, both uncharacteristically serious and sitting so close their knees were touching.

After a moment, Leila got abruptly to her feet and came around with the pot of mulled wine for refills; Tristan held his mug up gratefully, though his head was getting a bit woozy. Laughter broke out every now and then around the circle, but it was quickly stifled. Their cheer had an edge of desperation to it, as though they were trying to force eighty years of happiness into one frantic night.

The room was beginning to fill up with smoke, and on the opposite side Tristan thought he saw Damian and Cassidy kissing, Damian’s hands wound through Cassidy’s hair. “Do you want to get out of here?” Tristan asked Amber. “Escape the smoke for a while?”

Amber nodded, the hint of a smile on her lips.

In unison, they each took one last sip of the mulled wine and abandoned their mugs beside the fire circle.

As soon as Tristan got to his feet, he felt dizzy. He hadn’t realized how much he had drunk; this was the first time he had ever been tipsy before, and it was both disorienting and oddly empowering. Emboldened by the wine, he took Amber’s hand before they had left the classroom. Only Cailyn, watching sadly from the other side of the circle, seemed to notice.

“Where were you, earlier?” Amber asked as they started down the hallway.

“I went back to the Subroom,” Tristan said. “It was exactly the way we left it. As if we were there yesterday.”

“I want to see.”

So they retraced the familiar path back to the Subroom, as though they had just left another one of Delair’s elemental magic classes. When they passed through the Prasadimum barrier into the cozy room once more, Amber stood in the middle of the room and turned in circles, taking everything in.

“Those are Eli’s cards,” Amber said sadly, nodding to the rumpled deck that was scattered all over the ground beneath the wooden table. It was the only sign that the earthquake had touched this room.

“I hope he’s still alive.”

“Do you?” Amber gave him a curious look, and with a shudder he remembered that she had been tortured at Ilana’s school. She had never spoken of that day since. “But let’s not think of that now.” She made a circuit of the room, tapping each orb to extinguish it, until Tristan could see nothing at all.

“This is a bit creepy,” Tristan said, backing up until his legs were pressed against the table. With nothing to orient himself with, he felt as though he was tilting forward, in danger of falling into a yawning abyss.

He gave a start as Amber grabbed his hands. “I think the darkness is rather beautiful.” He could hear the smile in her voice.

“Well, at least you don’t have to look at my ugly old scars now.”

“You forget I can see in the dark,” Amber said. She leaned forward and kissed Tristan gently on the lips. “I like the scars. They show how brave you are.”

“I’m not brave,” Tristan said, slipping his hands around her waist.

“And you’re the most honorable person I have ever known,” Amber continued, as though Tristan had not spoken. “You were never afraid to go after Ilana, even when I wanted to run away. And—and you always notice the people who are left out. Like me. I was jealous last year, when you asked Evangeline out, but I could see you were paying attention to her when no one else did. Which was why you started talking to me.” Amber put her hands on Tristan’s cheeks, her skin soft and cool, and traced his jaw. “Whatever happens tomorrow, I will be right here, beside you.”

Tightening his grip around Amber’s waist, Tristan pulled her towards him and kissed her fiercely, his senses full of the taste of mulled wine and the smell of campfire smoke in her hair.

Once they broke apart, they lay down on the mattresses side by side, hands entwined, gazing into the darkness. Tristan imagined he could see the brilliance of a million glowworms sparkling overhead, and he felt in that moment powerful enough to face anything that came.

* * *

That night, all sixteen of them slept in a huddle in Delair’s mine tunnel, nestled atop a mess of blankets salvaged from the bunkroom. If the magicians made it through the barrier near the bunkroom corridor, one last barrier would protect them from harm while they prepared for the final battle.

Tristan held Amber tightly in his arms, conscious of every curve in her delicate body, wishing the moment would never end. Someone else’s back was pressed against his, and he had seen Leila and Zeke tangled up together near the back of the tunnel.

A soft chorus of snores began to rise from the huddle, and at last the darkness and warmth lulled Tristan to sleep.

When Tristan woke in the middle of the night, he thought his overfull bladder had roused him.

Then he heard a faint roar that seemed to be coming from the ground itself, followed by a clattering of rocks just outside the mine tunnel.

“Earthquake!” he shouted hoarsely, sitting upright and throwing off the blankets. The ground was swaying gently underfoot, every now and then buckling sharply.

The others were awake now, and a lantern flared to life at the end of the tunnel in the midst of the chaos.

“What are we supposed to do?” Hayley said frantically. She was trying to get to her feet, but the rippling floor kept jolting her off balance.

“We can’t leave,” Leila said, her voice eerily calm. “They’ll just kill us.”

“Are you serious?” Damian roared. “I’m getting out of here!”

When he jumped to his feet and grabbed the lantern, stepping on several hands as he stumbled through the cluster of students, Cassidy, Ryan, and Stacy followed his lead. The only one of his gang remaining behind was quiet, studious Finley. He dropped his chin to his chest as though trying to hide.

Hayley sank back down and huddled against Trey, who wrapped an arm around her shoulders.

“Protect your heads!” Rajesh said, hunching forward with his arms over his neck.

The others followed his advice, leaning against one another for comfort, all except Amber, who pressed one hand to the wall.

“Can you lend me a bit of power?” she asked Tristan in a barely audible whisper.

He gripped her hand, not bothering to protect his skull, and reached for the readily available vein of power within. He channeled as much as he dared to Amber, sending it in a slow stream so he would not burn himself out immediately.

Across from him, Hayley was crying silently, her cheeks blotchy. Cailyn had taken her hand, her own face set as she sheltered beneath one arm.

The halls around them continued to shake, clattering and shifting like the beginnings of an avalanche. Amber had closed her eyes, her expression serene.

A thunderous rumble echoed from overhead, as though the entire school was sagging in on itself. Rusty was rocking back and forth, gripping Leila’s arm, while Zeke had his forehead pressed to hers.

Tristan was beginning to grow woozy, so he cut off the flow of magic to Amber. None of this seemed real. He leaned back against the swaying stone wall, wondering if he could go back to sleep and pretend this was all a dream.

Suddenly, Amber’s eyes flew open. “Get out of here. Into the hallway. Now!”

Someone screamed, and all at once they were falling over one another in their desperation to escape. The distant rumble was closer now.

Tristan had to lean against the wall as he stumbled after the rest of the students. He was dizzy and lightheaded, close to losing consciousness. Amber grabbed his waist and supported him the final two steps into the marble hallway.

He stopped there, unable to go on. The shaking seemed to have ceased—at least, none of them had been thrown off their feet this time—but the rumble only grew louder.

Hayley, Trey, and Evvie were hurrying down the hallway, while the others had stopped outside the mine tunnel. They knew, as Tristan did, that nowhere in the world was safe for them. One stretch of hallway was as good as the next.

As the rumble reached its crescendo, rocks began falling from the blockade in the mine tunnel, skidding over the nest of blankets and clattering into the marble hallway.

All at once, a cascade of rocks exploded from the wall. The whole barricade sagged, rocks slumping to cover the blankets entirely, and Tristan jumped back into Delair’s classroom to avoid the rain of stones.

Then the noise subsided.

The earthquake was over.

“Do you think Mordechai has another globe?” Leila whispered.

“No,” Rajesh said. “That’s probably the enchantment.”

“That’s hundreds of miles north of us,” Tristan said in horror. “It must be growing fast.”

A distant sound echoed down the halls, like a large amount of earth settling, and the cloud of dust that had erupted from the mine tunnel began to drift to the floor.

“The barrier is gone,” Amber said after a moment, leading the way out of Delair’s classroom and back into the rock-strewn corridor. “I wonder if the other one held.”

Tristan took her hand and started down the hall. Hayley, Trey, and Evvie were out of sight, and Damian’s gang had yet to reappear. Tristan hoped they had not joined Mordechai in a desperate attempt to save themselves. He doubted Mordechai would spare them.

The corridor was cluttered with rubble, the stairs slick with a fine sheen of marble dust; Tristan realized for the first time that someone must have swept them clean a few days ago while he had been busy sulking.

“Did you hold the ceiling in place?” Tristan asked Amber softly as they started up the stairs.

“Yes. I think so, anyway. We poured a lot of magic into the walls.”

Tristan was opening his mouth to ask how she had done it when someone came barreling down the stairs.

“Cailyn! *Cailyn!*” It was Hayley, her face lit up. “Eli’s alive!”

Cailyn shoved Tristan aside and broke into a run up the stairs. There was Eli, looking haggard and dirty but very much alive, and to his left stood—

“*Ori?*” Rajesh said incredulously.

Tristan couldn’t believe his eyes. He blinked several times, wondering if they had all breathed in too many fumes from the fire last night. But when Ori gave a tentative smile and patted Eli on the back before stepping forward, Tristan had to admit he was very much real. He wasn’t sure if he was more amazed that Ori was alive or that he could actually walk.

Mei Ling gasped and dashed forward to hug Ori, Rajesh close behind. Tristan was wary—he couldn’t be certain Ori was still on their side.

“Where’s Pavlina?” Mei Ling asked, releasing him at last.

“She never made it out,” Ori said harshly, his face wracked with pain.

That decided it. Tristan jogged the last two steps and gave Ori a hug, clapping his friend on the back and checking covertly whether his leg was intact. As far as he could tell, it had healed flawlessly.

“What about me?” Eli said, grinning, and Tristan turned to embrace him as well.

“You okay?” Tristan asked Ori.

“I’m getting there. I hope I’m not too late.”

“What about your family?” Rajesh asked.

He gave a lopsided shrug. “I couldn’t find them. A lot of people have fled my hometown in the last couple years, and no one knew what had happened to them.”

Mei Ling’s eyes widened. “I’m so sorry. And Pavlina? What happened to her?”

Ori’s mouth tightened, and for a moment Tristan thought he was going to cry. “Later,” he said tersely.

“What I want to know,” Cailyn said loudly, “is how you guys got away.”

Eli and Ori shared a look. “I’ve been hiding out in the woods for a few days now,” Ori said. “As soon as I was well enough, I wanted to come find you guys. I knew where your school was, because we’d watched it about a million times on Ilana’s globe this past year, so I headed there on the off chance I would find you.”

“And no one saw you?”

“They’re not keeping watch very carefully,” Ori said with a shrug. “I don’t think they expect anyone to attack from the forest. Eli told me the rest of your school is fighting the rest of ours up north.”

Mei Ling nodded.

“You should know that they’ve been digging through a cave about ten minutes outside the meadow. I think they’re looking for a back entrance to your school.”

Tristan and Leila exchanged a horrified look.

“And how did you get Eli out?” Hayley asked, hugging her arms to her chest.

“I noticed him right after I got here.” Ori glanced at Eli, who gave him a barely perceptible smile. “They had him tied to a tree right next to the clearing and under guard. When the earthquake started, everyone was running around panicking, and the whole meadow caved in. The tree Eli was on started caving in too, so the magician who had been watching him ran away. I jumped in, got him untied, and hauled him away from the tree just as the whole place caved in. We ended up in a part of your school, and Eli led the way down here.”

“I think all the barriers are gone now,” Amber said. “Do you think they plan to attack?”

Eli shook his head. “We got out of the ballroom just in time. It’s completely caved in now, and there’s no way through. It would take weeks to clear that.”

“So what you’re saying is we’re going to starve to death before the magicians even get to us?” Zeke said wryly.

“Unless they make it through the cave,” Leila pointed out. “They could already be inside.”

Just then, Damian, Cassidy, Ryan, and Stacy appeared from the bunkroom down the hall and stalked over to rejoin the rest of the students.

“Too scared to face Mordechai?” Zeke teased. “I knew you wouldn’t make it far.”

Damian’s face went blotchy with anger, but he didn’t rise to the bait.

“Let’s see how bad it is downstairs,” Tristan said, trying to defuse what looked like a fight about to break out. “If you think Mordechai might actually make it through the cave, we need to start looking for a different way to get into the Map Room.”

“I can show you the way the magicians dragged us out of the cave,” Hayley said unexpectedly. “I still remember it.”

“That would be great,” Tristan said in surprise. “Then we can put up a few more barriers.”

When they reached Delair’s mine, at first it appeared that the number of rocks had doubled, obliterating all of their previous days of toil and burying their blankets. Then Leila sidled forward and held up a lantern to the mound, and Tristan noticed what he had not seen before—rather than breaking new rocks from the ceiling, the earthquake had merely caused the mound of rocks to sag. A gap had opened between the rubble and the ceiling of the tunnel.

“Oh!” Mei Ling exclaimed, climbing up a few unstable rocks in the pile to peer down the long gap. “I think it goes all the way through!”

“Then we just need to widen it,” Tristan said. “I never thought I’d say this, but thank goodness for the earthquake!” He felt somehow as though the earth magic of this place was deliberately working in their favor. “Let’s get back to work.”

“Do you want me to set up a new barrier?” Amber asked.

“Not yet,” Tristan said. “If we can get through this by the end of today, we might not need to worry about a barrier anyway.”

What with Eli and Ori’s return as if from the dead, the atmosphere was one of quiet jubilation as they continued to dig. First they cleared a small crawl space at the top of the rock pile, and then Mei Ling—the smallest of them by half a head—fitted herself into the notch and handed rocks one after another to Rajesh. They passed the rocks hand to hand down the line of students before depositing them in the marble corridor outside.

Tristan’s back was aching before long, his hands tender and covered in scratches from the rough surfaces of a thousand rocks, but he tried to ignore it, focusing only on the way Mei Ling continued making steady progress through the gap.

They stopped for a brief lunch of cobbled-together scraps when Eli complained that his stomach was eating itself, and when Tristan noticed Rajesh and Mei Ling cornering Ori at the front of Delair’s classroom, he slipped over to join them.

“I want to hear about Pavlina,” Mei Ling said. “I’ve been dreaming about you and her ever since we left New Zealand. Awful dreams, of Mordechai torturing you both. I won’t be able to sleep properly until I know the truth.”

Ori’s mouth tightened, and for a moment Tristan thought he would refuse to answer. Then he began slowly.

“I was so angry when she showed up in the cave again. I heard the fighting outside, and the explosion, and I knew you had succeeded. She was supposed to have fled with you. It wasn’t supposed to happen like that. I was fine with dying; it didn’t matter any longer. But she refused to leave. She rolled me onto a sleeping mat and dragged me to the pit you guys had gone down. She said she wanted to lower me down, and I refused, saying she was stupid. I was probably going to bleed to death anyway. Then she said she would throw herself into the pit if I didn’t let her do it, so we rigged up a couple ropes and a pulley system so she could lower me down without me hurting my leg. Then—”

Ori’s face twisted at the memory, and Mei Ling put a gentle hand over his.

“Then she said there was one last thing she had to do, and she said I should start crawling down the tunnel. I shouldn’t wait for her. A few minutes later, I heard the biggest explosion I’ve ever heard, bigger than when the globe blew up. I knew at once what she’d done. She had detonated the rest of Ilana’s marbles. And I waited all day, but she never came back. She hadn’t made it out in time.”

Mei Ling’s mouth was open in horror. She sank onto a jagged rock, and Ori sat dazedly beside her, blinking rapidly as though to dispel tears.

“I wanted to keep waiting for her, but I knew there wasn’t any point. I couldn’t move my right leg at all, but I could drag myself along on my left knee, so I crawled through the cave. I slept right next to that stream, and the next day I was mostly swimming through the water there.

“I made it out in the middle of the night, and I slept next to the cave mouth. It was so cold I thought I would

die. When I woke up, Tony was there, and he had wrapped me in a sleeping bag so I didn't freeze. He said most of Ilana's followers had already left, and he had hidden in the cave as soon as the barrier was down. He was scouting around to see if anyone else had run off, and he had found a few others. Most of them were Mordechai's students. He had a locator beacon, so he called a rescue helicopter to pick us all up. I would've died if he hadn't been there."

"What happened to the other kids he found?" Tristan asked. He wondered if the little girl who had blown up one of the fuel canisters and given them the idea of how to destroy the globe had been among them.

"Tony's looking after three of them, and two of them went back to their families," Ori said heavily. "Tony's still in New Zealand. He doesn't want anything to do with magic now." Amber joined the circle beside Tristan, her shoulder pressed against his, and Ori gave her a grim smile. "You saved me, you know. I wish you hadn't done a bloody thing sometimes, but still—thank you."

Amber's eyes widened. "I thought I had ruined your leg."

Ori pulled up his pant leg and revealed a prosthetic ankle. "You did a brilliant job. And Tony paid for this. I thought you were soft for trusting him, Tristan, but he really did have a good heart."

"I'm so sorry," Amber said, looking horrified. "This is my fault."

Ori stood and grabbed her arm; she flinched but did not pull away. "No. If you have to feel sorry for someone, pity Pavlina, not me. I'm very lucky."

Leila and Rusty joined them just then, the others gradually moving closer.

"Shouldn't we do proper introductions, Triss?" Leila asked.

"You already know who Ori is," Tristan said. "He's the one I thought had died back in the cave in New Zealand. We would never have destroyed the globe without him."

Rusty stepped forward first and shook his hand. "I'm Rusty. I'm glad you found us."

"Leila," Leila said, eyeing Ori with what could have passed for suspicion or merely intense curiosity.

Everyone except Damian's gang took turns introducing themselves to Ori. "How do we know you're not a repeat of Helene?" Damian asked coldly, folding his arms and surveying Ori with distaste.

"What do you mean?" Ori asked, taking a half-step backwards.

"Helene showed up a month ago, back when we were camping up near Ilana's spell, and she pretended to be helpless and lost," Mei Ling said. "We took her in and looked after her, and she betrayed us."

"I wouldn't have trusted her," Ori said. "She was always too perfect. Too obedient."

"So were most of us," Mei Ling said sadly. "I wanted to give her a chance."

"How did you even get here?" Rajesh asked. "We're a pretty long way out in the middle of nowhere."

"I got a flight to Vancouver, and then chartered a smaller plane to take me to Millersville. Tony's pretty well-off, you know, and his parents were so happy to see him that they practically threw money my way. I knew exactly where your school was after how much time we spent watching this area on the globe last year, and I found a map and started walking from Millersville. Tristan had said he'd done it, so I knew it was possible."

"With your leg like that?" Rajesh said incredulously. "You're insane!"

"Not as insane as you are," Ori said. "You're going to die if you stay here. It would be smarter to leave and find another way to stop Mordechai."

"Ilana's spell is getting too powerful," Tristan said. "That earthquake nearly did us in. The enchantment is like a big dome that sends out disasters, and even in the time we stayed there, it kept getting larger by the day. We could run off and hide somewhere and defeat Mordechai later, but we might not have that much time. And without our globe, we have no chance against the enchantment."

Ori's mouth tightened. "Well, I'll do everything I can to help. I'm as trapped as the rest of you now."

"Okay, now back to work," Leila called from the doorway.

"How close do you think we are?" Rajesh asked Mei Ling.

"Just halfway. But when I held the lantern up to the end, I could definitely see to the other side."

They abandoned the remains of their sad lunch—stale trail mix and crackers and peanut butter—and returned to their positions in the mine tunnel. Eli gave Ori's hand a brief squeeze as they took their places, and a rare smile flickered across Ori's face.

As he fell back into the mindless routine of passing rocks from Zeke to Rusty, Tristan remembered what

would come when they finally broke through to the Map Room. A hard knot of dread settled in his stomach, and he found he could not take part in the cheerful conversations all around him.

Back in the hallway, Amber was working furiously on another barrier, her eyes flickering up every few minutes as though she suspected Mordechai's magicians to come barreling around the corner at any time.

With no light to tell the time by, Tristan could only record the passing hours by the progress Amber made on her barrier frame. When she was putting the finishing touches on the framework—cobbled together from splintered chair legs and broom handles—Mei Ling gave a shout from the end of the crawl-space.

"I can feel the end! We're nearly there!"

A ragged cheer went up from the students.

They redoubled their efforts—Rajesh was now lying flat in the gap behind Mei Ling so he could reach the rocks she unearthed—and soon they heard a clatter of stones as Mei Ling broke through the other end.

"We've done it!" Rajesh shouted from the crawl space. "We're through!"

"I just finished the frame for the barrier as well," Amber said. "Should we put that up before we widen the gap?"

"Yeah, come on," Tristan said, breaking from his place in line and squeezing past the others into the rock-strewn marble corridor. "If Eli and Ori made it down here, there might still be some way through the ballroom."

After some discussion, they decided to put the barrier above the bunkroom corridor, so they would still have access to the bathrooms.

This time, his chest swelling with hope, Tristan tapped into his internal magic almost without trying. They had almost made it. What had seemed impossible was now within their grasp. He had to be careful not to overextend himself, though—he had already stretched himself almost to the brink during the earthquake.

Within minutes, the barrier began to stretch like a transparent bubble across the frame, which faded into nothingness as the barrier expanded to fill the corridor.

"Now, to the Map Room," Tristan said, jumping to his feet as soon as Amber released his hand.

"Shouldn't someone keep watch, just in case?" Leila asked.

"I can do it," Cailyn said. "I haven't taken a turn in a while."

"I'll stay with you," Hayley said, with a significant look at Cailyn that suggested she had some sort of secret she wanted to discuss.

As the rest of the school turned back to Delair's mine, the two girls sat down beside the barrier, backs against the wall. Hayley's plain face was still flushed with happiness after Eli's return, and Cailyn was hiding a smile, her frizzy hair splayed like a halo against the wall.

"I seriously never thought I'd live to see you guys again," Eli said.

"Same," Tristan said. "You or Ori." Despite everything, a sliver of hope had reignited within him.

They resumed digging with renewed enthusiasm, Mei Ling and Rajesh now joined in the crawl space by Rusty—the blockage went back farther than they had first expected.

"Try widening it, too," Tristan called past Rusty's feet, which were all he could see of the excavation taking place. "Some of us won't make it through so easily." He was thinking of Damian and Ryan as he said this; the two boys were very solidly built, with broad shoulders and thick chests.

He heard a clatter of stones just then, followed by a surprised cry from Mei Ling.

"Is everyone okay?" Tristan shouted.

"I'm through!" Mei Ling yelled back, her voice muffled by the wall of stone.

Another rumble of stones came from the opposite end, as though the entire cave was collapsing, and Rajesh called triumphantly, "I made it through as well!"

Rusty wriggled forward on his stomach, shadows swallowing him as he went, and finally, with an "Oof!" and another cascade of rocks, fell through the other end as well.

"You want to go next, Damian?" Tristan asked, stepping out of the way. "I'm not sure you're going to fit. Ryan, you can go too."

Damian gave Tristan a very suspicious look before clambering up the slope of rocks and sliding into the gap on his stomach. With much grunting and cursing, he began working his way through.

Rocks continued to clatter on the other side, as though Rajesh, Mei Ling, and Rusty were widening the end

of the crawl space even as Damian struggled along; when Tristan heard a louder crash, for a moment he didn't register it as anything new.

Then he dashed out of the mine tunnel and listened as the distant sound reverberated through the Lair.

"What was that?" Amber whispered.

"Probably just more of the ballroom collapsing," Tristan said. "I hope." He didn't want to imagine what else it could be.

"Damian's through," Rusty's voice called from deep within the mine.

"Your turn, Ryan," Tristan said.

Ryan gave a grunt of displeasure and flexed his arms before following Damian through the gap.

He had just landed on the other side with a distinctive thud when Tristan heard a scream from upstairs, followed by a resounding BOOM.

"Hayley!" Trey shouted, turning on his heel and sprinting down the hall. "Cailyn! Hayley! What's happening?" He was fumbling in his pocket as he ran, and Tristan thought he saw a glint of green light as he closed his fingers around an earth marble.

"What's going on?" Damian roared from the end of the mine. "If that's another earthquake, I'm going to murder you, Tristan!"

"Stay where you are!" Tristan bellowed. "The rest of you, get to the other side. Now!" He shoved Leila and Zeke towards the mound of rocks and took two steps backwards, half-tempted to follow Trey around the corner and up the stairs.

Just as he picked up momentum, Trey came hurtling back down the stairs, dragging Hayley behind him. Her face was smudged with dirt, her hair singed, and she was trying her hardest to dig in her heels and stop.

"They're here!" Trey panted, tightening his grip on Hayley's wrist as he started down the hallway towards the mine. "Mordechai and about twenty others!"

Chapter 10: The Power of the Globe

Trey's face was lined with fear and something else, and he was almost violent as he dragged Hayley after him.

"Where's Cailyn?" Tristan asked in horror.

Trey shook his head sharply.

Stunned, Tristan staggered backwards until he collided with Amber.

"What's happening?" Leila asked, pausing halfway up the mound of rocks.

"They're here!" Tristan snapped. "Get into that mine!"

Leila's eyes widened as she saw Trey and Hayley round the corner, and she obeyed hastily. Zeke scrambled after her, followed by Finley and Ori; Eli and Evvie, who had always been close to Hayley and Cailyn, remained on the ground. They grabbed Trey and Hayley and pulled them into the mine tunnel, demanding to know what had happened.

Just then, a chorus of running footsteps sounded on the stairs, and Tristan shoved the remaining students forward angrily. "Get a move on!" he yelled. "We don't have time for this!"

Panic fueled his anger, as well as gnawing grief for Cailyn, who had been so happy to see Eli again.

Evvie gave a yelp and ran onto the pile of rocks so quickly she sent half of them sliding away beneath her feet; she fell forward and clawed her way back up. Trey and Hayley followed her, Hayley moving like a robot that had grown rusty, and Eli sneaked one last glance down the hallway before climbing after them.

"I'll go last," Tristan told Amber. "If something happens to you, we'll never be able to stop Ilana's enchantment."

She gave him a fierce kiss and then clambered into the crawl space, leaving Tristan alone in the hallway.

A crowd of magicians burst around the corner and came barreling down the hallway, led by Mordechai and the tall black professor, who was evidently too valuable to sacrifice for the sake of bringing down a barrier.

Tristan stood frozen, half-tempted to fight the magicians on his own and end his life as a hero rather than a villain, but when Amber yelled at him to hurry up, her voice was enough to propel him forward and through the crawl space.

It was horribly claustrophobic as soon as his body was completely stuffed into the gap. He was amazed Rajesh had volunteered to help Mei Ling dig without complaint, after the way he had struggled to venture into the dark confines of the cave in New Zealand. It was too short for him to crawl properly, so he used his hands and toes to push himself along, head cracking against the ceiling wherever a piece jutted out.

He was gasping for air by the time he reached the end, and he would have fallen headfirst into the mine if not for the lantern that flared to life just in time.

Leila and Rusty grabbed him by the shoulders and hauled him none too gently out of the crawl space just as the magicians stormed into Delair's mine.

"Run, little brats," Mordechai sneered from the other side of the heap of rocks. The pounding footsteps died around him, leaving a taut silence that pressed on Tristan's ears. "Too cowardly to stay and save your friend. The girl screamed like a baby when she died—I'm sure you heard, even down in your hidey-hole."

Tears were pouring down Hayley's face, yet she held herself erect.

"It's just a taste of what will come."

"Marbles," Amber hissed. "Give me any marbles you have."

Tristan passed her the only marble in his pocket, and Trey handed her three more.

"There are sixty-five of us and less than twenty of you," Mordechai continued, taunting, "so we can take our time. Enjoy the process. See how brave you really are when your friends are bleeding out in front of you."

Without any warning, a stream of fire blasted through the crawl space. Tristan swallowed a shout and dropped to his knees, his head feeling singed. The greasy smell of burning hair filled the mine, and Cassidy shrieked as she realized her beautiful red hair had caught on fire. Damian beat it out with his hands, and Tristan stripped off his coat and threw it over her head.

Cassidy fell against the wall, coughing, and then shoved Tristan's jacket away to feel the damage.

The light that was visible from the opposite end of the blockage vanished all at once—the magicians were coming for them.

“Run!” he shouted.

Everyone except Amber took off at a dead sprint for the side hallway leading to the Map Room. Left without a lamp, her hair faintly visible in the dim light that spilled around the sides of the magician squeezing his way through the gap, Amber pressed a hand to the wall and closed her eyes. Tristan reached for her other hand and felt the fistful of marbles she had gathered there. He focused on extracting the power from the marbles one by one and channeling it to Amber.

Tristan could hear the magician grunting as he pushed his way forward. Luckily he was larger than any of the students—he seemed to be trapped momentarily.

It was enough. Amber's grip tightened on Tristan's hand for a second, and then the mine gave a thunderous rumble and began caving in.

The magician trapped above the rocks bellowed in pain as the ceiling above the blockage came down on him.

“Run,” Amber said, her voice barely over a whisper.

Tristan pulled her away from the wall and took off running down the mine and into the side corridor, rocks cascading from the ceiling all around them.

Around two more bends in the tunnel, they nearly collided with the rest of the students, who waited with their lantern held aloft.

Leila gave a squeak of surprise and hugged both Tristan and Amber, her face lined with worry. “What was that?”

“Amber brought the whole tunnel down on them,” Tristan said. “She's bought us more time. But they'll probably be through in a day or two. Maybe even in a few hours. We need to get to the Map Room.”

They didn't need any further prompting. Tristan took the front of the group, familiar as he was with the route to the Map Room, and behind him Rusty held the lantern up, throwing a shifting yellow light on the walls of the tunnels as they ran.

As they continued deeper and deeper into the earth, it sank into Tristan that they were trapped underground, with no way out except through their enemies. It would be all or nothing, then. If he didn't succeed, this would be the end for all of them.

Tristan kept expecting to round a corner and find the way blocked, an unsurpassable mountain of rocks walling off the passageway, but the tunnel was remarkably clear, only a few stray rocks scattered along the ground. These tunnels had clearly been constructed more soundly than Delair's mine.

At last, with the faint threads of Delairium glowing in the walls to guide the way, Tristan reached the familiar door to the Map Room. The door was intact; when he pushed it open and touched one of the lamps along the base of the domed ceiling, sending light flaring around the room, he found everything exactly as it had been the day he and Amber had feigned their escape, albeit dustier. He was struck anew by how large the globe was. Easily three times as tall as Ilana's, it overpowered the high-ceiling chamber.

“The earthquake hasn't touched this room, has it?” Leila breathed.

Hayley immediately dropped to the ground and pressed her face into her knees. Eli, Trey, and Evvie joined her, arms around her shoulders as though they could shield her from the truth.

Tristan's throat tightened as he imagined Cailyn's body sprawled on the marble floor, her last smile fading away. He tore his eyes from Hayley and her friends—there was no time to grieve now.

He strode across the room and put a hand on the globe, where the metal disc was fastened over a blank stretch of Greenland. Prying the disc loose, he turned the globe beneath his fingertips and finally repositioned it over their familiar valley. He bent to retrieve the glass quill, its four marbles glistening innocently within, and crossed over to the stone table that was slowly morphing into the shape of their familiar valley. The half-ruined

buildings rose above the caved-in meadow, stately even in their decay, and all around, the slopes were swathed in trees.

As the table finished molding itself into the mountain scene, many dozens of bright auras began appearing, manifesting as tiny glowing dots hovering just above the stone.

Most of them were grouped around a small mound off in the woods to the right, which must have been the collapsed entrance to the cave that provided a back entrance to the Lair; the lights were milling in and out of the cave, winking out each time they passed underground, but evidently there was no way through.

A few other auras hovered in the meadow, tending to camp or whatever else Mordechai required. Yet there were too few. Mordechai and the rest of the group that had just stormed the Lair must still be underground.

“What are you waiting for?” Amber asked quietly, glancing around to make sure no one else had heard.

“I want Mordechai and the rest of his group aboveground. If we do anything now, they’ll see it isn’t safe and stay underground.”

“Ah.” Amber pursed her lips, staring hard at the auras.

“Close the door, will you?” he asked. “See if you can lock it.”

They waited with bated breath, Tristan listening hard for any sounds of an approaching ambush.

At long last, a ragged trail of auras emerged from the wreckage of the meadow.

“It’s not enough,” Leila said fretfully. “Some of them are still down here.”

Tristan counted the auras as they appeared—fourteen of them, some moving so slowly he thought they were injured.

“What are you planning?” Rajesh asked in a low voice. Tristan remembered with a start that he and Mei Ling were so skilled at creating disasters they could plan them down to the last marble.

“I hadn’t thought that far ahead,” Tristan said.

“We need something that will keep them from running off,” Mei Ling said. “But we can’t let them return to the Lair to find shelter.”

“A forest fire, maybe?” Tristan said, because it was the only disaster he felt completely competent at producing.

“That would be easiest,” Rajesh said.

Tristan lowered the quill to the stone table, the point touching down between two miniature granite trees, and closed his eyes. The waiting reservoir of magic sprang to his command almost at once, and the quill grew warm in his hand as the marbles began to glow. Slowly he began tracing a jagged line through the trees, enclosing every one of the auras in a lopsided circle. As soon as he closed off the circle, he drew a smaller circle through the meadow surrounding the entrance to the Lair.

Then he stepped back.

After a long pause in which he worried nothing would happen, a familiar ghostly orange line began following the shape he had drawn. Flames began licking at the grasses and undergrowth, quickly expanding to the trees, and clouds of smoke gushed from the forest.

Eli, Trey, and Evvie crossed over to join Tristan; only Hayley, still huddled over her knees beside the wall, did not join their silent vigil over the table.

It was eerie watching the translucent flames climbing higher amongst the trees. The only sign of their progress was the auras winking out one by one.

A group of magicians must have thrown some spell at the wall of flames, because around ten auras broke through and took off running into the woods. But their smaller magic was no match for the globe, and Tristan easily surrounded them once more, this time spiraling his jagged line around and around so the entire space they had been running through was instantly engulfed in flames. They were burned alive within minutes.

“Can we look for the professors now?” Evvie asked softly as the fire continued to rage. Tristan looked into her pretty face and saw a helpless fear in her eyes. He guessed she felt lost without a figure of authority there to take matters out of her hands, to reassure her that everything would eventually end well.

“Not yet,” Tristan said tightly. “We need to watch this fire until it burns out. There might still be five or ten magicians underground, and I want to catch them if they try to escape.”

More importantly, he could not let anyone see what he was about to do. One of his friends would surely put

a knife through his back rather than let him carry out Drakewell's orders.

"You guys should get some rest. We've been digging all day. If Mordechai manages to dig through those rocks, I don't want us all to be exhausted when we face him."

"What about you?" Leila asked.

"I'll join you once the fire is out," Tristan lied.

Eli and Trey were the first to obey. Taking Hayley gently under the elbows, they lifted her to her feet and led her out of the Map Room to the dark hallway beyond. The others gradually began following suit, though Leila and Rusty lingered several minutes after the others, until Tristan said, "Go! I'm serious!"

"Wait," Leila said. She crossed to the opposite side of the room, away from the door, and lifted the trapdoor up from the floor. For a moment she disappeared belowground; Rusty looked half-ready to follow her before she reappeared, pockets bulging and hands filled with gold marbles.

"Just in case," she said, handing a pile each to Tristan and Amber. Rusty helped her carry the remaining marbles, and only then did they retreat into the tunnels with a last look back at Tristan.

At last, only Amber and Tristan stood in the vast chamber, the door hanging a fraction ajar behind them. Amber's face was so stony she could have been in a trance; when Tristan reached for her hand, she nearly jerked her fingers away in surprise.

"Are you going to be okay?" he whispered.

"I guess. Are you?"

Tristan nodded slowly. He would manage because he had no other choice. If it destroyed him, that wouldn't matter—at least the rest of the world would be safe from Ilana's enchantment.

"I think that's all of them," he said at last, scanning the miniature stone landscape for any lingering auras. Stepping away from the table, he returned to the globe, where everything was on such a large scale that the death of dozens of Mordechai's followers did not seem nearly as significant. Removing the metal disc, he raised the glass quill—now slippery in his sweating hand—and drew the gentle billowing shape that called up clouds and rain.

With a growing feeling of dread, he rotated the globe just slightly to the north in search of Ilana's enchantment. He had expected the epicenter to be immediately obvious, yet it took a moment for him to spot the dome, nestled in the barren valley between two ridges. It gave off the faintest light, like the outermost tendrils of magic vapor rising from a fire, and it wavered in the air like a near-transparent soap bubble.

"What does it look like to you?" Tristan asked Amber, fighting to keep his voice steady.

"Like a very powerful aura," she said gravely. "Like the aura itself, not the speck of light that usually marks it on this map, I mean. I think it comes from all the power it has fed on."

Tristan shivered. It took a moment before he noticed the cluster of much fainter auras off to the right.

"Those can't be magicians, can they?"

"Who else would be out there?" Amber said. "Maybe the enchantment has fed on them so much their own auras are diminished."

Tristan's hands were shaking so violently he mislaid the metal disc. He struggled to nudge it a few degrees farther to the right and then stepped back, gripping the quill tight enough to snap it in half.

As he stepped over to the stone table, feeling as though someone else had taken control of his movements, Amber took his hand once more.

At first he was relieved to see dozens of faint auras dotting the hillside—evidently some of his professors, and perhaps the school's former graduates as well, had survived. Maybe the enchantment had weakened the other magicians enough that they could do no lasting damage.

But his relief turned to disgust as he remembered the task before him.

"I wish we had some way to talk to them," Tristan said shakily. "Just to make sure they haven't changed their minds."

Amber closed her eyes and put a hand on the side of the miniature ridge, as though she expected to feel their thoughts pulsing through the ground itself.

"I don't know how to do it." Tristan's voice was too loud in the empty room. "I'm not sure a fire is going to work this time." He looked around the barren stone landscape below him, searching for inspiration. The tundra

around them was so cold and soggy that he was afraid a fire would have nothing to latch onto.

“We could try an ice storm,” Amber whispered.

“I don’t remember how to do that.”

With her fingers, Amber sketched the short lines that denoted an ice storm in midair. Tristan understood—she wouldn’t stop him, but she was unwilling to do the deed herself.

Even as he watched, one of the auras winked out. “They could already be dead,” he said desperately. “Maybe we’re worrying for nothing.”

“I hope so,” Amber said.

To his disgust, it was easy to disconnect the grey rock map dotted with lights from the chaos that was going on in the north. As he closed his eyes and sent his own power flooding into the quill once more, a deathly stillness descended on him.

There was no going back now. The rest of his life would be defined by this moment.

Slowly he began to trace the unfamiliar short lines that summoned an ice storm, starting from the east and moving over the ridge towards Ilana’s enchantment.

Nothing happened until he severed the flow of magic powering the quill. Then a layer of unseen clouds began to unleash first rain and then large spears of ice on the hilltop.

The auras swarmed like ants around the hillside, some of them disappearing into tents that were quickly sliced open by the relentless ice, others huddling together as though their own bodies could act as a shield.

Seconds into the storm, the first aura winked out, followed almost immediately by a second and a third.

The quill fell from his hands.

Tristan staggered back, feeling sick, and dropped to his knees.

Amber stood motionless, hands clenching the edge of the table.

The silence pressed on Tristan’s ears, and he imagined he could hear screams and the howling wind of the storm he had summoned. He ground the heels of his palms into his eyes, trying to drown everything out.

It seemed only moments later when the door banged open.

“What the hell are you doing?” Eli demanded.

Swallowing back the sour taste in his throat, Tristan turned.

“Why are you on the ground?”

Eli was standing in the doorway along with Ori, Rajesh, Zeke, and Leila. As they approached, Amber released the table and reached out her hands. Her skin was refreshingly cool, and Tristan managed to pull himself to his feet with her help.

“Natasha gave orders,” Amber said when Eli opened his mouth. “We are out of time.” Her spine was straight, and her eyes blazed with hardened determination.

With Amber at his side, Tristan approached the table once more, afraid of what he would find.

The ice storm had moved on. In its wake, auras continued to move about the hillside—fewer than before, but still too many.

“We need to finish them off,” Tristan said hoarsely. “Rajesh, can you think of anything?”

“Maybe a volcano?” Leila suggested. “I know there isn’t a volcano up there, but maybe you can make one?”

Tristan felt a surge of affection for her—she was not questioning him; she trusted him blindly.

Rajesh stared at Tristan. “Your teachers are out there.”

“Yes. And they gave the orders. Drakewell said nothing was more important than stopping Ilana’s enchantment. Nothing.”

“What the hell?” Eli shouted, charging forward.

Ori grabbed his arm. “Tristan is right. We don’t have any hope unless we can stop Ilana’s magicians.”

Eli whirled to face Ori, looking half-ready to punch him. Then he let out a shaky breath and stayed where he was, cursing under his breath.

“How do you start a volcano, Rajesh?” Tristan asked softly. He would much rather have Rajesh do the deed, but he could not ask something so terrible of his friend.

“Just touch the quill to the table and try to—to reach inside. You’ll know when you reach the magma, because you’ll feel it moving. It feels—powerful.”

Tristan bent to retrieve the quill he had dropped, avoiding the eyes of his onlookers. They did not know he had already murdered many dozens of Mordechai's followers.

Touching the quill to the top of the ridge, just north of the scattered auras, he tried to force all thought away and draw on the deep layer of magma swirling beneath the earth's crust. His stomach twisted painfully, and he felt close to passing out—he wanted to die, to give this job to someone else, to leave this cursed place and never return.

Soon he was aware of a small flicker of movement beneath his quill, like a butterfly trapped beneath a pin. As he forced his consciousness deeper still, the movement became a wave. Raw power churned beneath him, the entire force of the earth lying in wait for his command. It was a terrifying, heady feeling—he was tapping into a force much more powerful than the combined might of every magician on earth. The magma wanted to be released; it wanted to surge forth and shape the earth anew, to carve its searing mark across the dead crust and revitalize the dying planet.

The faces of Alldusk and Natasha and Quinsley and Gracewright swam before him, determined, ready to sacrifice everything for the cause they had already given their lives to. Had they felt the raw power of the earth, or did the globe remain mysterious to them, something to guard and fear but never to use?

As he thought of Ilana's many students each trying their hand at controlling her smaller globe, he thought of Rajesh and Mei Ling and Ori and Pavlina and Tony. How many more were there, students who remembered their former lives and recalled enough to nurture a simmering hatred of Ilana's ways? How many teachers would have followed Tony's example if they had only been given the chance?

The earth's lifeblood tugged at his quill, urging him to release it from its bonds.

Soon, he thought, as though the earth was a living creature.

Then Alldusk appeared before him once more, his eyes closed, his white face at peace. And Mei Ling was there as well, sprawled across a barren hillside, her cheek grazed and her dark hair flung across her face. Rajesh lay by her side, worry etched on his rigid face, his hand brushing against hers. And there were children too, young boys and girls whose faces were still round and innocent, lying so peacefully they could have been sleeping.

Tristan felt sick—he clutched at the table with his free hand, steadying himself, as Cailyn's smiling face came into view, and that was cruelest of all because he knew she was dead—

"No." He wrenched the quill away from the table.

The combined force of the earth's power and their own pool of marbles snapped back at him, burning him like an open flame, and he was thrown backwards onto the floor. The visions dissipated, and he was back in the Map Room, trying to focus on the stone ceiling that seemed to swim above him. He was panting, the breath nearly knocked out of him, and a moment later he rolled onto his side and retched.

Chapter 11: The Final Barrier

When his eyes focused at last, he rested his head against the cool stone floor and tried to make sense of his surroundings. Amber dropped to her knees beside him, and the soft sound of footsteps told him the others were approaching as well.

He wanted them all to leave.

His arm still stung—when he tugged his sleeve up, his skin was as red and blotchy as if it had truly been burned.

“Tristan,” Amber said softly.

It was the fear in her voice that made him struggle to sit up.

“We—we need—” His voice came out raw and scratchy; he coughed and tried again. “We need to stop Ilana’s enchantment.”

“What about Drakewell’s orders?” Leila asked.

“No one else is going to die,” Tristan said harshly. “You didn’t see—” He stopped short. He wasn’t ready to tell anyone about Alldusk and Grindlethorn, or the fire he had sent raging through their meadow.

“What now?” Eli said tersely. “What are we going to do?”

“We need to stop Ilana’s spell,” Tristan said. The words were forced from him with a tremendous effort. “Nothing else matters. We were sent back here to break her spell at any cost, and we can’t fail.”

“I’m starting to think it might not be possible,” Amber said in a very small voice.

Tristan gripped her arm. “What do you mean?”

She flinched, and he quickly released her. “The spell was enacted through Ilana’s globe, and Ilana’s globe is gone. That might have been the only means of destroying it.”

“Is that it, then?” Eli said furiously. “We’re going to turn around and go home and say that’s the end of that? And all the while we’ll be sitting around waiting for the disaster that kills us all?”

“No,” Amber said, getting to her feet. Her voice was surprisingly strong. “We are not giving up. We will try to destroy it before we do anything else, but I think the best option we have is to contain it.”

“You mean another barrier?” Leila asked curiously.

“Yes. But we need something stronger than I have ever seen before. That enchantment will just feed off the power of anything weaker than it.”

Leila bent and retrieved the glass quill from the ground. “Do you want to take a turn first?” she asked Tristan. “See if you can destroy it?”

Tristan came onto his knees and very slowly got to his feet once more. It took all of his self-control not to flinch as he took the quill. He half-expected it to burn him once more. Yet the glass had gone cold, lifeless. He turned the quill over in his hands.

“Do you want a turn?” he asked Amber.

She took a step back. “You’re better at this than me.”

“Rajesh is better than any of us,” Tristan pointed out. “And Mei Ling and Ori, too.”

“They can have their turns,” Leila said impatiently. Her eyes flicked to the ceiling, and Tristan realized she was afraid of another earthquake. He didn’t blame her.

As Tristan stepped forward, trying not to watch the auras streaming off the hillside away from the epicenter, he discerned a ghostly light flickering along the far hillside. As improbable as it seemed, the tundra was burning.

Briefly he wondered about the auras that had flickered out as he watched—had the magicians killed one another, or had the enchantment thrown so many disasters at the surrounding area that it had claimed lives? If any of his professors were still alive out there, they had probably blamed the ice storm on the epicenter, not on

their own globe.

Before he tried sending anything at the shimmering enchantment, Tristan simply lowered his quill to the top of the translucent dome and gave it a sharp prod.

A jolt of power assaulted him, almost like a fierce electric shock, and he stumbled backwards.

The enchantment had grown so powerful that even its avatar was dangerous.

Angry now, he lowered the quill a hair's breadth away from the enchantment and sent magic flooding its way in the jagged line that indicated a wildfire. To his surprise, no new fire appeared near the enchantment. Instead, he could feel the quill vibrating in his hand even after he had stopped casting the spell.

Horried, Tristan yanked the quill away from the globe. The vibration ceased abruptly.

"This is dangerous," he said, turning to the others. None of them seemed to realize what had just happened. "That enchantment started feeding on all the magic I sent its way. I tried to start a fire, but nothing happened—I think the spell just ate it up. If we try doing anything to it, the enchantment will burn through our stockpile of marbles."

Eli cursed.

"Are we just going to give up?" Zeke asked angrily.

"You can have a try, if you want," Tristan snapped. "But don't let it go too far."

"Let Rajesh try," Zeke retorted. "He's way better than you."

Both hurt and relieved, Tristan handed Rajesh the quill and stepped away from the table. "Cut it off as soon as it gets out of control."

Rajesh nodded. Holding the quill delicately, he used the same motion Tristan had almost used to summon forth a volcano. When he finished, he stood watching for a long minute. Nothing happened.

Then, exactly as Tristan had, he jumped away from the globe and yanked the quill as though severing an invisible thread of magic.

"It was doing it again," he said grimly. "I don't think we should use any more magic against it."

"So that's it," Eli said. "We can't do a damned thing about it. We couldn't touch it from the valley, and here it's just eating up anything we throw at it."

"Unless we put a barrier over it, like Amber suggested," Tristan said.

"A barrier fueled by our marbles here," Leila said slowly. "What if it just eats through that as well?"

"The barrier will have to be impervious to magic," Amber said. "That way the enchantment will never affect it."

"But we'll keep an eye on it anyway," Tristan said, rubbing his eyes. He was exhausted. "We can't let it get away from us."

Amber hung her head. "I was hoping to reuse one of the domes that used to stand over the Lair, but it looks as though Ilana completely destroyed them."

"You know what would be awesome?" Rusty asked. "If we made a barrier out of Delairium. It'd be like this huge metal shield!"

Tristan looked at him in surprise. "That might actually work."

"It would definitely be stronger than the woven domes we used before," Amber said slowly. "But I have no idea how we will melt the metal. I can't do it underground, and I think Mordechai might still be waiting for us if we try to leave the Lair."

Rajesh had set the quill down on the stone table, along a flat section of ground that was probably covered in swamp, and Tristan stared at it for a long time, the beginnings of an idea coming to him.

If an enchantment in the real world could reach through the globe to pull magic from the quill, why couldn't Tristan use the quill to channel magic into something besides the globe?

"Does anyone have a bowl?" he asked. "Made out of pottery or stone or something really solid so it doesn't break?"

"Sorry, I forgot to bring my mortar and pestle when I was running away from those lunatics," Eli said.

The ghost of a smile flickered across Ori's face.

"Any idea where we could get something like that?" Tristan asked, not amused.

"There were rooms full of junk off this tunnel, weren't there?" Leila said. "I bet we could find something."

But how on earth are you planning to melt solid metal? We don't have a furnace or even a fire pit."

"And where is this Delairium, anyway?" Mei Ling asked.

"I was thinking we could use the quill to magnify the spell until the Delairium gets hot enough," Tristan said. He wasn't sure where he was going to find Delairium, though.

"Like a magic wand," Leila said sarcastically. "Right. That's real smart, Triss."

"I think it could work," Amber said.

Tristan glanced at her in silent thanks. "So, who wants to go look for a bowl?"

"I'll do it," Leila said.

"I can help," Zeke said.

Leila snorted. "Fine. You can shield me if Mordechai gets through."

Tristan was hoping he would find a few discarded chunks of Delairium in one of the abandoned rooms lining the tunnel. He followed Leila and Zeke to the door of the Map Room, leaving behind the brilliant orange glow of the orbs as he slipped out into the dark hallway.

He stopped short.

Of course—the walls of the tunnel were lined with seams of Delairium, glowing like silver threads in the stone.

"What is it?" Amber whispered.

Tristan pointed. "There's our Delairium."

She gave a soft gasp of understanding. Tristan turned and slipped back into the Map Room, where he would wait for Leila and Zeke to return. Now that they were idle, there was nothing to distract him from the revulsion he felt for what he had done. What if his ice storm had dealt the fatal blow to Quinsley? What if Tony's favorite little student, Emma, had been caught in the fire out in the meadow?

He paced the Map Room like a caged animal, feeling sick, the walls blurring before his eyes. Eli, Ori, Rajesh, and Mei Ling pretended not to see him as they sat near the door muttering to one another. Only Amber stood apart, motionless, her eyes haunted.

It seemed hours before Leila and Zeke returned. Tristan had given up on his pacing and slouched down against the wall on the far side of the globe, where he didn't have to look at anyone.

At last the door creaked open once more. Tristan jumped to his feet and edged around the globe, half-expecting to see Mordechai, but it was just Leila and Zeke, each carrying several bowls.

"We found a whole room of old kitchen stuff," Leila said. "We grabbed a few, just in case they weren't the right kind."

"That's great," Tristan said. They set the bowls down in the middle of the room—eight altogether, some chipped along the rims and others unblemished—and Tristan and the others clustered around. There was one thick ceramic soup bowl that immediately caught Tristan's eye, and he picked it up to inspect it for cracks. He could see none. "This one will do."

"Did you actually find some Delairium?" Leila asked in surprise.

"Come and see," Tristan said.

He led the others back into the dark tunnel, the quill grasped tight in one hand, the bowl in the other. They were lucky—he suspected the quill would stop working if he brought it too far away from its magic supply.

Tristan touched the quill to the top of the thickest seam of Delairium and reached for his own magic to start the conduit's connection flowing. Instead of using one of the patterns that denoted a disaster on the globe, he simply concentrated on sending as much intense heat into the wall as he could.

It was working. Warmth began radiating from the base of the quill, at first a gentle heat like a stovetop, and then a more concentrated heat, like an open flame.

The burn on Tristan's arm began searing again at the heat, and he switched the quill to his left hand, rolling up his sleeve as he did so to keep it from catching on fire. His forehead was itching from sweat.

Leila stepped forward and held the bowl beneath his quill, leaning back as she did to keep her face out of the blasting heat.

At last, just as the heat was growing so intense Tristan thought he might pass out, the narrow line of Delairium began to soften slightly. Leila raised the bowl up closer as the Delairium began melting and flowing down the wall

like molasses. She trapped the stream of Delairium in her bowl, where it left a silvery streak before pooling and hardening at the base; carefully, she began rotating the bowl as more dribbled down the wall, coating the ceramic with a burnished silver sheen.

“That’s probably enough,” she said at last. The layer was not very thick, but with any luck the metal was strong enough to hold its shape.

Wary of burning himself again, Tristan eased up on the spell, tapering the flow of magic until the cool air in the tunnels had swirled away most of the lingering heat. Then he lifted the quill, severing the last threads of magic, and wiped away the beads of sweat on his forehead.

“Should we get the others?” Eli asked.

“Yeah,” Tristan said. “Tell them it won’t take long.”

As Eli turned to leave, Tristan glanced at Amber. “Do you know what you’re doing?” he muttered, giving her hand a brief squeeze. “You’re not going to hurt yourself, are you?”

Amber did not look at him. “If it works the way the other barriers work, it should be easy.”

Just as Eli reappeared around the doorway, Trey and Hayley behind him, the floor began shaking again. Ribbons of dust streamed down from the ceiling, and Tristan remembered vividly the damage that had been caused when a huge section of the roof caved in two years ago.

The rest of the students nearly knocked Eli over as they shoved their way into the Map Room, as though it would offer safe haven from the earthquake.

“I’m sorry,” Tristan said over the roar of the earthquake, speaking mostly to Damian, whose gang looked ready to mutiny. “I didn’t mean for it to happen this way.”

The shaking grew worse, like waves buckling underfoot; Tristan had to grab Amber’s arm to stay on his feet.

Just as it looked as though half the students were considering running for it, the tremor subsided.

“Let’s get this done,” Leila said, releasing her grip on the stone table and staggering over to Tristan’s side. “What do we need to do, Amber?”

“Exactly what we did to put up the barrier last year,” Amber said. “Make a circle around the globe, and link hands. Send me as much power as you can—from yourselves, from the marbles, anything. The enchantment might fight us.”

Leila held up a thin metal dome. She must have cracked the ceramic bowl off of it while Tristan had been distracted by the earthquake—the metal was shiny and unbroken, a perfect half-sphere.

“This will be perfect,” Amber said, taking the dome of Delairium reverently and turning it over in her hands. Then she crossed to the globe and carefully placed the dome over Ilana’s enchantment.

Tristan dug in his pocket for a handful of the extra marbles Leila had given him. He transferred five of them to his left hand and took Amber’s hand, pressed on top of the dome, with his right. The others fanned out without further instruction until they had formed an unbroken link around the globe. Rajesh ended up on Tristan’s left, and he gave Tristan a solemn nod as he stepped into place.

“You don’t regret coming back with us, do you?” Tristan asked softly.

“Never,” Rajesh said.

Beneath his right hand, Tristan could feel the metal dome vibrating with power, as though the enchantment fought to throw it off.

“Are you ready?” he asked Amber.

She swallowed. “I think so.”

Tristan raised his voice so the others could hear him all the way around the circle. “Send your power to Amber now. And be careful.” They had never channeled more than one marble to another before; for all he knew, working with this much power could end up with one of them dead.

Closing his eyes, Tristan focused on the pressure of the six marbles clamped between his hand and Rajesh’s. He wanted to channel them one at a time, but he had no idea how.

Already his arms were growing hot and beginning to tingle from the flow of power streaming around the circle, and he concentrated first on making sure it went to Amber. Then he singled out one marble—the one tucked beneath his thumb—and pulled the power into him. To his relief, the other five marbles remained intact.

The ground started shaking underfoot as he fought to keep his concentration intact; his eyes flew open, and

he saw his friends looking around wildly. He met their eyes one by one and shook his head, not daring to break Amber's concentration.

Even as the shaking grew fiercer still, the power continued to sift through him to Amber; her hand grew hotter by the second, until he feared they would boil her alive.

Amber's eyes were locked on the metal dome, unblinking, her face rigid.

Just as her hand grew so hot that Tristan gritted his teeth to keep from shouting in pain, she began channeling the power into the dome of Delairium, pressed to the globe by their interlocked hands.

Tristan could feel it flowing through her fingers, like a stream of hot air enveloping the dome.

The shaking was so bad now that Rusty was leaning his shoulder against the globe to stay upright, while Leila and Zeke were supporting one another with matching looks of panicked resignation.

Tristan forced himself to ignore it all. He closed his eyes for long enough to send the power from two more marbles flooding towards Amber, and then resumed watching her with apprehension. She was in over her head—they all were—and everything depended on this succeeding.

Tristan was about to give up and call this foolish attempt off before anyone got hurt when the dome began fading beneath his hands. Though it felt as solid as ever, the burnished metal grew translucent, until it resembled nothing more than a soap bubble clinging to the globe. At the same time, the vibration from Ilana's enchantment grew ever fainter until it ceased abruptly.

At the exact moment the vibration vanished, the ground fell still with an eerie abruptness.

"It is done," Amber gasped. Then she crumpled to the ground, her hand sliding limply out of Tristan's.

Chapter 12: Mordechai

Tristan dropped to his knees beside Amber and grabbed her wrist, feeling for a pulse. She hardly appeared to be breathing.

“No,” he muttered. “No, Amber, stay with me.”

“Are we safe?” Evvie asked in a small voice. The sound seemed to come from far away.

Tristan raised his eyes to her, hatred burning so fiercely in him that he almost lashed out at her. How dare she voice a selfish fear when Amber was dying, fading away before his eyes?

“We’re trapped underground, Mordechai might be waiting to ambush us as soon as we try digging our way out, and Cailyn is *dead*,” Eli spat. “Of course we’re not effing safe.”

He turned on his heel and stalked out of the room, followed closely by Ori, Trey, and Hayley.

“Maybe we should search for a back way out,” Leila suggested, after watching Tristan for a moment and realizing he wasn’t about to give orders. “See if we can find a way through the cave.”

“I’ll go with you,” Rusty said. “If that’s okay, Tristan?”

Tristan jerked his head in a nod. He didn’t care what the others did. “We need to get Amber outside,” he said. “She’s cut off from her power down here.”

“We’ll do our best,” Leila said. She gave Tristan’s shoulder a squeeze before following Hayley out the door, Rusty and Zeke trailing behind. Damian slouched out not long afterwards, followed by the rest of his gang, and Tristan was left alone with Amber, Rajesh, and Mei Ling.

“I’m sorry, I don’t know anything about healing,” Rajesh said, approaching Tristan cautiously. “That wasn’t something Ilana felt the need to teach us.”

Tristan shook his head. “We learned plenty, but not about this. Not about how to fix someone if they burned through too much of their own power. You guys can go. There’s no point staying here. See if you can help dig through the tunnels and find a different way out.”

“Are you sure you’ll be all right?” Mei Ling asked.

Tristan smiled grimly. “No. But there’s nothing any of us can do for her right now.”

Only when he was alone, the footsteps of his friends fading in the distance, did the truth of it all come crashing over him. Cailyn was dead. Amber was close to following her. And he had been seconds away from murdering his own professors.

Tristan gripped Amber’s hand, one thumb pressed against her wrist to make sure her feather-light pulse did not fade away, and shook with sobs. No tears came, nor any sound, but his whole body was wracked with the pain of it all. He gripped his burned wrist until he nearly screamed in pain, yet even that agony could not dull his suffering.

Agony passed. He could have sat like that for a year, his knees growing steadily colder and number on the floor, time rendered inconsequential by the steady, unceasing glow of the orbs ringing the ceiling of the Map Room. No one returned to see if Amber was still alive, so he assumed they had found some promising route through and were busy digging their way out. Or maybe they had all died in a cave-in. Even that awful thought could not stir Tristan to leave Amber’s side.

At long last, the door swung in. Tristan glanced up, not caring who it was, knowing they would be unable to help.

But it was not one of the students who stood before him.

It was Mordechai.

Tristan sat bolt upright, fury coursing through him.

“Well, well. Isn’t this a nice surprise.” Smirking, Mordechai stepped into the Map Room and closed the door

behind him, carefully bolting it shut. “For a moment I was beginning to worry you kids had been crushed in the earthquake. That wouldn’t have been much fun, would it?”

Tristan jumped to his feet and moved away from Amber, hoping Mordechai would not accidentally harm her if he threw a spell at Tristan.

“I must admit, I underestimated you,” Mordechai said. “I thought you would be useless without your professors. But that was a clever little trick, running underground while the rest of us attacked your camp, and your dead girl there was quite good at her barrier spells, wasn’t she?”

Tristan had hardly drawn breath for a reply when Mordechai gave a flick of his hand and sent a wall of air slamming into Tristan like a block of cement. He was thrown off his feet and went sprawling on the stone floor, and still the pressure did not cease. His ribs were about to snap—he could not draw breath, could not think—

Then, as fast as it had come, the pressure ceased.

“You didn’t even try to block me, did you?” Mordechai taunted, his eyes wild with cruel pleasure. “Oh, I remember now—you don’t even know how!”

He stalked closer to Tristan, and Tristan scrambled to regain his feet, hoping Mordechai needed time to recover his power.

“But as useless as you are, you’ve killed more people than I ever have,” Mordechai said, his smile twisting. “Look at yourself. See what you’ve become. Maybe you would have been suited for Ilana’s school after all.”

Tristan’s chest contracted, and for a moment he thought Mordechai had thrown another spell at him. “Death doesn’t mean anything to you, does it?” he said furiously. “It’s all just part of your sick game.”

Mordechai laughed. “Oh, it means plenty. I love that moment when someone realizes I’m no longer willing to spare them—when they know they’re actually going to die. It’s a beautiful thing. And then it’s over.”

Tristan flicked his eyes around the room, trying to find the quill. He had put it down—why had he thought he was safe?—and his only defense was the handful of marbles still weighing down his pocket. He slipped them into one hand as Mordechai laughed.

“You never learn, do you? One pitiful little marble will never be a match for me. Those marbles are your greatest weakness. You’ll never become powerful if you keep using them as a crutch.”

Filled with reckless anger—at himself, at Mordechai, at his professors for ordering him to do the unthinkable—Tristan did something he knew was incredibly dangerous. Instead of converting each marble into a separate spell and throwing them at Mordechai, he took the power of them up into him, one at a time, as though he was about to channel them to Amber for another barrier spell. His hands burned with the intake of magic. By the fourth marble he felt feverish, and by the sixth he felt as though his blood was on fire.

He dropped the remaining three marbles behind him, where they clattered on the ground.

Mordechai laughed louder this time. “Too scared to even fight properly? Poor little Tristan, you never were a very good magician, were you?”

“Try me,” Tristan said under his breath. The pain was giving way to an almost intoxicating feeling of power, almost like the earth’s magma had felt swirling beneath the quill.

“I want to see what you can do,” Mordechai said softly. “What will it take to provoke you?” His eyes roved the room until they alit on Amber. “Oh, how obvious. Your little dead girlfriend. Maybe she’s not dead after all. Should we see?”

That was all the provocation he needed. As Mordechai turned to Amber, Tristan raised his hands.

Power exploded from him. The room descended into a fiery inferno, rocks flying through the air at Mordechai, flames building to consume every corner of the room. It was wild magic, more powerful than anything he had seen before, and he had no control over it.

It felt so freeing to act with reckless abandon, to burn his power dangerously low. Half of him was hoping he would stretch himself too far, extinguish his own light as the flames died.

Someone was yelling—he didn’t know if it was himself or Mordechai. The blazing heat felt like a warm hand against his face, and he fell forward into the fire’s embrace, welcoming the darkness that enfolded him.

He woke to an urgent murmur of voices. When he tried opening his eyes, the room swam before him, so he gave up and tried swallowing back the soot that had coated his throat instead.

“Triss!” Leila’s voice rose above the hushed muttering. He felt a cold hand on his cheek and then on his forehead, and a second later Leila was holding a water bottle to his lips. He gulped gratefully at the stale water and nearly choked.

Something soft was balled up and shoved under his back as he tried to sit up; at last he was able to pry his eyes open and make sense of the scene before him.

The rest of the students had returned to the Map Room, and they were clustered near the door as though afraid to come any closer. Only Leila and Rusty had approached Tristan.

“What have you done?” Leila asked softly.

Tristan coughed and forced out, “How long have I been—”

“I don’t know,” Leila said anxiously. “We’ve been away hours—I have no idea how long it’s been, I can’t tell in the dark—but when we got back we found you like this. The whole room looks like it’s been on fire, and I think that’s Mordechai there...”

Tristan looked past Leila and saw a charred corpse lying in the middle of the room, much smaller in death than he had ever appeared in life.

“Amber looks like she’s been burned, too. What happened, Triss?”

That did it. Tristan scrambled to his knees and dragged himself over to Amber, who still lay motionless in front of the globe. The ends of her white hair had blackened and shriveled up, and several large holes had been singed in her clothes. He put two fingers to her neck and had to reposition them four times, pressing harder with each try, before he felt the faintest flicker of a pulse.

He let out a ragged breath. “She’s still alive. But barely.”

“You did this, did you?” Leila asked.

“Mordechai dug through the barrier. He was about to kill us.”

“That was very dangerous, Triss.” Leila folded her arms over her chest as though she was cold. “You could’ve killed yourself. I didn’t know you were that powerful.”

“I’m not,” he said harshly. “I took in the power of about five marbles before I tried the spell. I wasn’t sure what would happen, but it was my only chance. Mordechai was too strong for me.”

“Is it safe to go outside now?” Leila asked cautiously.

“It should be.” Tristan used the stone table to pull himself to his feet. Ilana’s enchantment was muffled beneath their translucent dome of Delairium; all around, the auras of the remaining magicians already seemed to have strengthened. Even as he watched, the auras split themselves into two separate groups, one trailing south along the ridge, the other much smaller one descending the ridge back towards the swamp they had come from.

A few of their professors had survived after all. If not for his fear for Amber, Tristan would have nearly collapsed in relief to know they were not entirely alone.

Just to be certain, he wrenched the metal disc away from Ilana’s enchantment and repositioned it on top of their own valley. The landscape was barren, many of the trees reduced to charred sticks, but it had worked. Not an aura was in sight.

“I need to get Amber out of here,” Tristan said under his breath, turning away from the globe. Though he was still weak, he knelt beside Amber and put an arm beneath her shoulders. Then he fumbled for one of the marbles he had dropped earlier and drew on its power to supplement his failing strength.

The others stepped back to let him pass as he staggered towards the door, Amber limp in his arms. As he stumbled along in the dark, relying on a faint glow from the single lantern behind him and the spiderwebbing veins of Delairium running through the walls to guide his way, he half-expected the ground to begin shaking again as their dome came crashing down.

But it never happened.

The tunnels were silent and still, apart from their shuffling feet, and Tristan could hear his own ragged breathing echoing back to him. When his arms began to grow numb and his back felt as though it would snap in half, he reached deep into the dregs of his own magic for another jolt of power. The magic gave him a moment of relief, though it was quickly followed by a deepening sense of exhaustion. He was stretching himself too thin.

His feet carried him back along the familiar route almost of their own volition, so that he was snapped out of something close to sleepwalking when he stumbled into Delair's mine tunnel and came to the dead end.

"Are you okay?" Leila asked when he paused before the crawl-space.

Tristan swayed on his feet. "Of course." His voice came out harsher than he had intended.

"Almost there," Leila said gently, squeezing his shoulder. "You were very brave. You and Amber both were."

Tristan's knees buckled slightly, and he nearly dropped Amber as the urge to collapse overwhelmed him. "Can you help me with her?" he muttered as he put one foot onto the sloping mound of rocks.

"Sure." Leila held out her arms and lifted Amber with a grunt as Tristan crawled through. With some difficulty, Leila managed to fit Amber halfway through the gap, while Tristan took her under the shoulders and dragged her out the other end. He didn't stop and wait for the others, instead drawing on his last ounce of magic to give himself the strength to stand once more with Amber safely in his arms.

Down the hallway, up the first flight of stairs—his heart nearly stopped as he came across a body sprawled on the marble, face obscured by a halo of frizzy golden hair. But Tristan could not stop for Cailyn, because if he set Amber down now he would never make it out of the Lair.

Eyes stinging, he continued up two more flights of stairs. When he passed Brikkens' classroom, he found the door hanging open, the sweet smell of lemons wafting into the stale hallway. Tears streaked down his filthy cheeks; it took every piece of his resolve to continue moving, to persevere. He was so close to lying down and giving up.

The ballroom was in ruins. The entire ceiling had caved in, and it looked as though someone had blasted a hole in the rubble to clear a path down a sloping boulder field of broken marble. No one was behind Tristan—they must have stopped to pay their respects to Cailyn—so he started up the mound of shifting rocks alone. Several times he nearly fell as a rock tilted underfoot, but somehow he managed to stay upright, keeping his precious burden safe.

When a shaft of sunlight fell through the ruined ceiling onto Amber's face, Tristan realized he had injured her on the way through the cave. A shallow scrape ran from her forehead to her cheekbone, and blood had dried on her lip.

A split second later, the smell of wood smoke and ash drifted down to meet him, and all at once the damage he had wrought in the Map Room was all too real.

At last he reached the top of the rock slide and came out on solid ground.

The landscape had changed irreparably. Where once the forest had hugged the edges of the meadow, the landscape dark and sheltered beneath its pines, the trees had now been reduced to a cluster of thin, charred sticks. The ground was still smoking, filling the ruined woods with a grey haze, and ash had settled atop the grass like snow.

Even after the rainstorm, he thought he could still see flames flickering off in the distance, devouring all that was left of their once-beautiful valley.

Tristan set Amber gently down on the grass, feeling numb.

He had done this.

The valley was ruined. Their familiar meadows and groves and streams would be dead, choked with ash, never to grow back the same way again. And he had ended so many lives. Only now did he see how innocent he had been after Marcus's death. He did not recognize the person he had become.

So many had died. He hoped sweet little Emma had gone safely away with Tony. She did not belong in this fight.

He wondered which of his professors would be returning. Had any of them survived, or was he a fool for hoping?

Tristan was still standing there when the sun began to sink over the smoldering western ridge and the rest of the students climbed up the sloping mound of boulders to join him. Hayley's eyes were puffy and swollen, her cheeks blotchy with tears, and Trey and Eli had evidently both been crying as well. Even Evvie's nose was red.

Leila joined Tristan with a sigh. "Is that it, then?"

"I don't know," Tristan said sadly. "It depends on whether Ilana's surviving followers give up or not. They might come back and take down the barrier we put over Ilana's enchantment, and it will be my fault."

Leila's expression was sad as she gave Tristan's shoulder a squeeze. "How is Amber?"

“Her breathing is almost normal again. I think she might be okay.” *If she ever wakes up*, he didn’t add. He couldn’t help but think this would be a repeat of Drakewell and Ilana, only he knew he would never leave Amber’s side, no matter how many years she remained in a coma. He had nothing else left to live for. He felt an unexpected wave of sympathy for his former headmaster—Drakewell would understand. He would understand the way Tristan felt deadened, cut off from everyone else, as though he watched them from behind a thick wall of glass.

As Leila turned and brushed soot from her hands, Tristan knelt beside Amber. She was lying peacefully on the ruined grass; her chest rose and fell delicately as she drew breath.

“I don’t know if it’s worse to leave her sleeping or try to wake her up,” Tristan said, taking her cold, limp hand between both of his and trying to warm it.

“Leave her sleeping,” Rajesh said. “I’m not sure she would recover otherwise.”

“But if she’s awake, she might be able to draw on the forest for strength,” Tristan said.

Rajesh frowned. “That sounds dangerous.”

Tristan got to his feet, trying to banish his dark thoughts at least long enough to make sure his friends would be safe. “What sort of supplies do we have?”

The others glanced among themselves, looking guilty. “We didn’t think—” Rusty began.

“We can scavenge tomorrow,” Tristan said heavily. “I don’t think the Lair is safe enough for us to stay in for long, but we can go down to fetch supplies and watch over the globe when we need to. We’ll have to keep feeding that dome over the globe, as long as we can.”

As darkness fell, Eli and Zeke put aside their long-standing enmity and worked with Ori to build a fire from the charred remnants of the forest. There had been some debate about whether it was smart to draw so much attention to themselves, but Evvie pointed out that they were already camping in the most obvious place in the entire valley, so there was no point in hiding. Tristan wondered if she hoped to be rescued.

Tempting though the warmth of the fire was, especially as the air grew crisp and the wind picked up, Tristan refused to leave Amber’s side. He caught the occasional strain of conversation drifting from the circle—Eli’s shoulders were shaking, and Trey and Hayley each had an arm around him.

“Cailyn was the first person I ever told,” Eli said softly, his voice breaking. “Even my parents didn’t know. They still don’t.”

As he wiped his nose on his sleeve, Tristan turned away, ashamed to be eavesdropping on Eli’s sorrow. He felt disconnected from the rest of the students, hollow and drained—he could only think of Amber. The others who were lost did not seem real the way Amber’s cold, motionless body did.

The rest of the students eventually curled up in groups beside the fire, their bodies so close to the flames that they were in danger of getting singed by wayward sparks; Tristan thought he saw Zeke huddled around Leila, and Ori seemed to have his arm around Eli’s waist.

Tristan slept with his body molded against Amber’s motionless form, trying to warm her without jostling her. Several times he bolted awake, afraid that the last spark of life had fled her body while he slept, but still her chest rose and fell.

In the morning, she was exactly the same as before. A fog had descended overnight, coating everyone with dew, and Tristan hugged his arms across his chest to ward off the chill.

“Maybe she needs a doctor,” Rajesh said quietly as he handed Tristan a bowl of oats cooked over the remains of their campfire. “Remember my sister?”

Tristan shook his head, sitting with a groan. “She needs the forest to heal her. She won’t recover otherwise.”

As Rajesh turned away, Tristan realized the truth in his words. There *was* no forest in this valley, not any longer. Reaching out tentatively, he tried to sense one of the free-flowing strands of magic that had previously hung between the trees.

Nothing.

Testing himself, he reached for his own magic; when that came easily, he knew there was nothing left of the forest’s power. His fire had stripped the valley dry.

He scrambled to his feet, almost falling over again as the blood rushed to his head. “I need to get Amber to the forest down by the lake,” he told Leila urgently. “She can’t recover here. There’s no magic around.”

“So you won’t wait for the professors to show up?” she asked.

“If they even do,” he said bitterly.

“I’ll come with you,” Rusty said.

“Me too,” Leila added.

With the utmost care, Tristan lifted Amber into his arms, trying not to let her head flop limply off his shoulder. Zeke joined their grim procession as well, giving no explanation for his presence, and they started off across the meadow and through the charred remnants of what had once been an elaborately carved arch.

As they picked their way down the hill—the last traces of the forest fire ended halfway down to the lake, giving way to a swath of grass that had already turned the reddish-brown of autumn—Tristan couldn’t help but think back to their arrival at the academy, when he had stayed behind to wait for Amber. She had looked like a ghost then, a haunting memento of his brother; now she was nothing less than the most beautiful girl he had ever known. Tears sprang to his cheeks as he glanced down at her still face, at the delicate white eyelashes gracing her cheeks.

They stopped and set her down as soon as they reached the first trees, these ones betraying no sign of the mayhem that had descended on the valley above.

“Do you really think this will help?” Leila asked softly.

“I don’t know,” Tristan said, kneeling carefully beside Amber. “But it’s the best thing I can think of.”

Now that they were here, the woods felt crowded, his friends hovering over him with no idea how to help.

“You guys go on,” Tristan said. “There’s not much you can do for her anyway. I’ll make sure she stays comfortable, and—”

“I’ll stay,” Leila said, her face lined with worry. “I don’t trust you out here alone.”

Tristan grimaced—did she think he would drown himself in the lake if Amber never woke? But he was still chained to the school; he had a responsibility to keep the barrier up, no matter what happened. He was not selfish enough to neglect that, no matter how miserable he was.

“I’m staying too, then,” Zeke said.

Tristan sighed inaudibly. He suspected Zeke was jealous.

“Me too,” Rusty said.

Tristan groaned. “Fine. But don’t be annoying.”

Hours passed. Tristan grew colder and colder as the heavy fog that had descended overnight worked its way through his layers.

When he heard a distant rumble, his first thought was that a thunderstorm was rolling in. As the sound grew louder, he recognized it for what it was. He jerked upright as though coming out of a trance. The lower half of his legs were numb from where he had sat on them, and he staggered when he rose to his feet.

An airplane was approaching.

Leila, Rusty, and Zeke had wandered off through the woods, but they materialized almost immediately.

“You don’t think it’s Gerry, do you?” Leila whispered urgently.

“What if it’s Mordechai’s followers?” Rusty asked.

“Go see for yourselves,” Tristan said. “I’m staying here.”

Leila gave him a pleading look, but when Rusty and Zeke started around the lake towards the runway, she fell in behind them. Tristan’s heartbeat quickened as the roar of the airplane grew louder and louder. He still couldn’t see it through the fog—and then, all at once, it seemed to drop out of the clouds and touch down in the woods across the lake.

He almost didn’t want to see his professors again. Because this would be the moment when he learned who had made it through...and who had not.

His heartbeat was thudding painfully in his chest by the time he heard the soft padding of footsteps over decomposing pine needles.

“Triss. *Tristan!* It’s Gerry!”

Tristan’s heart swelled as Quinsley emerged from the forest, followed closely by Leila, whose face was flushed with relief.

Rusty and Zeke trailed behind Leila, and behind them came Drakewell and Natasha.

“Is anyone else—”

Quinsley shook his head heavily. “This is everyone.”

Tristan’s breath caught in his throat. Gracewright was gone, then. Grindlethorn too.

As Drakewell came fully into view, however, Tristan was wrenched away from his thoughts. Drakewell had a young girl in his arms—no more than two—with bright red hair.

“Who is that?” Tristan asked in surprise. She looked familiar; he thought he had seen her in Ilana’s arms many months ago.

“Ilana’s child,” Drakewell said sourly. “Ilana’s followers were about to abandon her.”

As the girl turned to look at the source of the commotion, wide-eyed, Tristan felt a surge of sympathy for his headmaster. Even after everything Ilana had done, Drakewell still cared enough for her to worry about what happened to her child.

He was too wary of Drakewell to say anything, though. “What about the other magicians?” he asked instead. “The backup that was supposed to come help you?”

“Three of them died in the fight,” Quinsley said. “Several more left when it looked like we were all going to be slaughtered—some of them had families back home, so I don’t blame them. And the six who remained behind to help us are in Millersville now. They have business elsewhere.”

“Leila tells me that Amber was injured,” Natasha said. “Should we help her first and leave this for later?”

“I don’t think there’s much you can do for her,” Tristan said bitterly. His professors had almost no experience with treating those who had overextended their magical reserves, reluctant as they had been to use their internal power in the first place. Relief at his professors’ return was quickly replaced with anger. He wished they had stayed away.

Natasha knelt beside Amber and felt for her pulse. “You’re lucky,” she said. “She’s faring better than I expected. She seems to be stable.”

“Can you help her?” Tristan asked bluntly.

Natasha sat back on her heels. “Not here.”

“You’re not taking her anywhere,” Tristan snapped.

Leila gave him a reproving look.

“She needs a doctor, Tristan,” Natasha said gently. “Rowan was the same way at first, but Ilana would never have recovered without medical attention.”

“I know what happened!” Tristan said loudly. “Ilana had a head injury! But Amber’s just drained herself of magic. If you take her away from here and cut her off from the forest, she’ll never wake up.” He knew it to be true with every fiber of his being, yet at the same time he knew Natasha and Drakewell could do whatever they chose and he would have no way of stopping them.

“This could mean her death,” Natasha said, a warning note creeping into her voice.

“Leave it,” Drakewell said heavily, to Tristan’s utter bewilderment. “We should continue on. See what sort of state the Lair is in.”

“It’s—not very good,” Leila said. “I’m not sure if we’ll be able to live in there again.”

Tristan took a seat beside Amber once more, zipping his jacket up to his chin to keep out the cold mist. “Go back up with them,” he told Leila, Rusty, and Zeke. “I don’t know how long this will take.”

Rusty looked like he wanted to refuse, but Leila must have seen something in Tristan’s expression, because for once she didn’t argue.

“We’ll come check on you later,” she said. “Bring you some lunch.”

“Thanks,” Tristan mumbled.

As Leila, Rusty, and Zeke picked their way through the pines after the three professors, their feet crunching in the slightly damp layer of needles, a taut silence settled over the woods.

Amber’s pulse was growing weaker now, her skin so cold Tristan didn’t know how she was still alive. Remembering once again the wraithlike figure that had once followed him across the lake, Tristan grew angry. The lake would not claim Amber.

Though he knew it was dangerous, and though he hardly knew how to begin, he decided at last that he would restore Amber’s power from the forest. It was too dangerous to leave her here, lying motionless in the cold.

Tristan drew in a deep breath, the sweet, earthy aroma of the forest floor mixing with the vanilla scent of pine sap. He tried to pick apart every detail—the hushed whisper of wind against the pine boughs, the distant lapping of the lake on the shore, the chattering of squirrels in far-off branches. As the forest filled him, he began to pick out its power as well, delicate threads woven between the trees that hummed with magic.

He reached for one of the tendrils of power and was surprised when it held fast in his hand, like a wire made of heat and movement rather than anything solid. He pulled it down to Amber, the humming filling his ears, and pressed it against her ribs.

Then he reached for another, and another. Each one stuck where it had first touched Amber, funneling power through her.

So wrapped up was he in sensing the hanging threads of magic that he didn't notice Amber's eyes had opened until she said his name.

Tristan fell backwards in surprise. "Amber! My god, I thought I'd lost you!"

When he managed to right himself, he reached for her hands and grasped them.

"What have you done?" Amber asked, running a finger along the strands of magic that still clung to her.

"I didn't know how else to heal you," Tristan said. "I knew it might be dangerous, but I couldn't let you go."

"Thank you," Amber said, cautiously sitting up. She gave Tristan a tentative hug, as though afraid her ribs would shatter under the pressure. "What happens if I sever it, do you think?"

"That's your area of expertise, not mine," Tristan said wryly.

Amber gave him an unexpected smile. "You did brilliantly, you know that? I had no idea you could manipulate the magic of the forest like this."

"Neither did I, until now," Tristan admitted. "I just hope I haven't hurt you by waking you up too soon."

"I don't care either way," Amber said. "How long has it been?"

"Almost two days now. The barrier is in place—it's working. And Quinsley, Drakewell, and Natasha just got back."

Amber suddenly frowned. "What's wrong, Tristan? You look—haunted."

"No, I'm just happy you're awake again," he said quickly. "I'm so damn glad you're alive."

"I know how it feels," she whispered, raising a hand to him but stopping short.

Tristan straightened in surprise. All at once he remembered the way Amber had retreated into herself after she killed two magicians in battle, how she had spent countless hours wandering in the woods, a ghost of herself.

"Did you want to kill yourself?" he asked hoarsely.

"Yes."

This time she took his hand.

"I think Alldusk would be very proud of you."

Tears sprang to Tristan's eyes, and he shook as Amber drew him into her arms.

"I just want it all to end," he said brokenly.

"Remember, I'm still here. Your friends are still here. You're not alone. Think about that, and try to forget everything else."

Tristan swallowed. "I'll try. If you hadn't woken up—"

"Come on," Amber said. She stood carefully, as though afraid she would shatter, and held out a hand for Tristan. "We should head back to the Lair."

"Wait," Tristan said.

When Amber gave him a surprised look, Tristan pulled her into his arms and kissed her hard. Some of the anger and self-loathing he had been carrying for weeks now seemed to dissipate, and he gave her a half-smile as they started up the hill back to the Lair.

Chapter 13: Guardians of the Globe

Back in the ruined meadow, Quinsley had taken over Ilana's baby while Drakewell and Natasha spoke to the students. At first, from their matching grim expressions and folded arms, Tristan guessed they were reprimanding the students. But as Tristan and Amber drew closer, they caught Drakewell's words.

"...might not be safe to return to the Lair for any extended period of time again," he was saying. "We need to arrange alternative accommodation. After what has happened, this school cannot go on as it was before. If any of you would like to return home, we could arrange for it."

At this, the students turned and began muttering to one another. Natasha looked as though she was about to add something when she glanced up and caught sight of Tristan and Amber passing beneath the ruins of the wooden arch.

"Amber!" she called. "Welcome back!"

Leila came running, followed closely by Rusty and Mei Ling. Amber nearly toppled over backwards as they enfolded her in a group hug.

"How are you feeling?" Natasha asked, hugging Amber as well once the others had released her. "Did you just wake up naturally?"

She exchanged a look with Tristan before saying, "I feel fine. And no, Tristan helped."

As they took their places at the end of the half-circle the others had formed on the lawn, the muttering died down almost at once.

"I won't be staying much longer," Natasha said as though there had been no interruption. "I will help escort anyone who decides to return home, and after that I need to track down the rest of Ilana's followers and see what needs to be done about them. Some of them might need to be dealt with. But she also had a number of very young children at her school, and some of them might still be hidden away somewhere. We can offer them a safe haven here if they don't have anywhere else to return to."

"What, you mean that crumbling old place?" Eli asked sarcastically.

Natasha gave him a pointed look. "Once we know how many of you plan to stay, we can decide what the next step will be. Obviously housing is a priority. Just to get a general idea, who might consider returning home?"

Evvie put her hand up at once. After a pause, Ryan and Stacy—the two members of Zeke's gang about whom Tristan knew the least—raised their hands as well. Tristan looked from Damian and Cassidy to Finley; Cassidy's hand twitched as though she wanted to raise her hand, but instead she smoothed the uneven chunks of her singed red hair.

"What about you, Rusty?" Tristan asked. "You can go find Christa, if you want."

Rusty's eyes went glassy. "She's better off without me. She wasn't a criminal anyway; I'd just ruin things for her."

"You could always bring her up here," Leila teased.

"Maybe someday. If she still remembers me."

"What about you two?" Tristan asked Leila and Zeke. "Are you staying here?"

"Course," Zeke said. "My family sucks. No way I'm going anywhere near them again."

Leila gave Zeke's arm a sympathetic squeeze. "You know I wouldn't abandon you, Triss. And besides, I don't feel like I belong anywhere else now. You probably feel the same way, don't you?"

Tristan nodded.

"Where're we gonna live?" Rusty asked, looking around the forest. "I love camping and all, but it's gonna be winter soon."

Natasha and Drakewell exchanged surprised looks.

“We need quite a bit of housing, it seems,” Natasha said. “We can’t hire anyone in, because we still can’t give away our location, so we’ll have to build a log cabin. Or four. We can work quickly if we use a bit of magic along the way.”

“As for those of you who return, I’ll help explain everything to your parents or whichever guardians you choose to live with. If you want to apply for college or get a job, you will have the chance to live a normal life again. But understand that if you cause trouble again, we won’t be there for you.”

Ryan and Stacy nodded solemnly.

“Could I go with you?” Evvie asked Natasha in a very small voice.

Natasha blinked. “What do you mean?”

Evvie looked at her feet. “I don’t think my foster family would take me back in again. I don’t have anywhere to go. But if I can help—”

“If you’re up for a challenge, I would love the company,” Natasha said.

Tristan stared at Evvie. He would never have expected this of her. His respect for her increased tenfold.

“Are you staying here?” Tristan asked Drakewell.

“Of course. My duty remains. And the child will need socialization.”

Tristan found he didn’t mind. It was reassuring to have a figure of authority to answer to once again.

Meanwhile, Quinsley was bouncing Ilana’s baby in his arms to distract her. In between making faces for the child, the lines of his face settled back into a haunted expression. Tristan knew he was dwelling on the ones who had not returned.

“We will make arrangements tomorrow,” Natasha said. “And in the meantime, we picked up a few more supplies when we dropped off our former students. Who wants to help set up camp?”

* * *

That night they ate better than they had in weeks, feasting on pasta with fresh vegetables and tomato sauce. Tristan had forgotten how much he missed Quinsley’s cooking. An odd atmosphere hung over the meadow—any laughter was quickly stifled, and most of the students huddled in small groups and hardly dared to raise their voices.

As Tristan was scraping his tin cup clean, Drakewell called him over. His sunken eyes were unreadable in the firelight. “I wanted to thank you for disobeying my orders,” he said slowly. “Too many have died already.”

Tristan nodded, not trusting himself to speak. He waited for a moment, but Drakewell said nothing more.

Beyond the glow of firelight, a cluster of tents stood waiting. It still didn’t seem real—that the fight was over, that the ones who were lost would never return. He slowly returned to his seat between Amber and Leila, pausing to warm his hands over the leaping flames.

“What if they were right?” Amber asked softly. “I’ve been thinking about it ever since we returned to the Lair.”

Tristan frowned at her.

“What if the world doesn’t stand a chance without someone around to keep everything in balance?”

“We still have the globe,” Tristan said. “If we need to use it, we can. But until then, I’d rather not.”

She nodded slowly.

When the last of the pasta was scraped out of the pot and the fire was beginning to die, Natasha told them she was planning a candlelight vigil for those they had lost.

“Can we go down to the lake?” Tristan asked. With the fog still hanging low over their valley, the lake seemed as it once had—a border between this life and the next.

Other voices seconded this idea, and so they made a silent procession down the hill to the rocky shore, each gripping an unlit candle. Not a single one remained behind.

Standing on the lakeside, Natasha lit her candle with a burst of magic, and the others followed her lead, lending their flame to those beside them who could not work the spell. The light refracted off the mist, creating an eerie halo around their group, and the still lake reflected the flickering candles.

How long they stood there, cupping the fragile flames, Tristan could not say. Tears came at last, hot and silent as they rolled down his cheeks, and he imagined he could see their smiling faces just out of reach beyond

the fog—Alldusk and Gracewright and Cailyn and Grindlethorn and Brikkens. Marcus joined them too, his eyes bright and innocent, his young face preserved exactly as it had been three years ago.

The silence expanded, bringing the ghosts of those who had not returned closer still, and he imagined they could hear the scattered heartbeats of those who stood watch.

As the night grew later, people began slipping away in twos and threes. When Tristan turned at last and made the lonely trek back up to the meadow, only Eli, Hayley, Trey, and Quinsley remained beside the lake.

The tears had dried on Tristan's cheeks; as he climbed the hill, candle still in hand, he felt a burden lift off him. He was still alive, and so many of his friends too, and they had a reason to continue living. That was all they could ask for.

* * *

Natasha left the following day, along with Evvie, Ryan, Stacy, and Quinsley, who said he would be back by the end of the week. Damian seemed diminished without his gang beside him, and Cassidy had been very subdued ever since their return to the Lair.

As the week wore on, they rescued more and more supplies from the Lair. Odd bits of food and cooking supplies were dug up from the kitchen, and a few tools were salvaged from the junk room behind it. Though Tristan had ventured down just to reassure himself it was still intact, the Subroom was left untouched until they had somewhere safe to relocate their treasured belongings to. Throughout the day they continued to harvest marbles and pile them up for the next trip down to the Map Room, and they began making arrangements to relocate their entire camp to the shores of the lake.

Once they had carried everything down to the safety of the woods below the academy, they started cutting down trees for their planned cabin, using a combination of an axe from the junk room and a half-melted saw they had found in the ruins of Gracewright's greenhouse.

Drakewell spent most of his time watching over Ilana's child these days; he did not seem eager to involve himself in their work. He still had not given her a name.

When Quinsley returned at long last, Leila was the first to greet him. With his help, the work proceeded much faster than before, not least because he knew what he was doing. Using brute force to strip back the bark of each tree they felled, and magic to lift the logs into place, they made swift progress on the first of the log cabins.

The nights continued growing colder, frost descending almost every morning now, while the hills were beginning to turn red with the coming fall. The aspen grove Tristan had once admired near the cave was gone, of course, but patches of golden leaves dotted the forest by the lake, which he saw each time he returned down the hill from the Lair. They had a new forest to explore now, a new life to settle into.

For a while, Tristan kept expecting Damian and Cassidy to beg Quinsley to take them home. But they remained, and though they never would become his close friends, they pitched in and did their share of the work with only a minimum of grumbling. Cassidy had chopped off the ruined ends of her hair, and as she waited for it to grow back, she hid it beneath one of Gracewright's knitted wool hats.

It took until late November before the first cabin was finished, a tiny structure that would barely fit all of them sleeping side by side in the loft. They had been camping in the snow for a month already, grateful for the warmth of many bodies crammed together. After the first snowstorm, they had lugged eight mattresses from the Lair to their tents—only the extra layer of insulation had kept them alive as the temperatures plummeted at night.

When the door was fitted onto its frame at last and the bolts slid into place, Leila insisted that Tristan should be the first to step inside, since he had done more than his share of the construction work.

He set aside his hammer and stood facing the cabin for a long moment. It was humble, yet it felt more like home than anything he could remember. Slowly, he stepped through the doorway, breathing the sweet scent of pine sap and taking in the sturdy walls of their new dwelling.

"Welcome home," he said, holding the door open so the others could join him on the wood floor. He smiled at Amber as she passed, and her eyes lit up.

"It's not very big, is it?" Eli asked, squinting at the corners. The loft was barely higher than his head, and accessed by a knobby ladder that could be lifted up if they needed more space down below.

“There are four perfectly good tents out there just calling your name,” Leila said.

Eli made a face.

“It’s wonderful,” Quinsley said. “Good job, everyone.”

“We’ll have another one by next winter, right?” Zeke said. “Then we can banish Damian and Cassidy.”

Damian ignored the slight for once. “And who’s going to wade through all that snow to keep adding marbles to the globe?”

“We can wait until spring,” Drakewell said. He had appeared unannounced from the trees. “Until then, we store what we gather. The globe will not run out in the meantime.”

As the others started bringing in supplies and dragging the damp mattresses out of the tents, Tristan stood out on the front porch and looked out into the snow, where he could feel the magic hanging just beyond his reach.

Until the end of his days, he would remain here, buying time until the end of the world.

Yet it no longer felt like a burden. They might not have much here, but it was enough.

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