

## The Bridge

Finlay Balder threaded his fingers through the wire mesh of the fence and peered into the gloom. He could see the shape of the familiar stone bridge beyond, its ancient arches traversing the river flowing lazily beneath. Once the main roadway connecting the nation's capital, Winchester, to the royal hunting grounds of the New Forest, the now defunct road was nothing more than a bridge leading nowhere, which had been fenced off for as long as he could remember. Bright red and yellow warning signs, fluorescing in the headlights of passing cars, were prominently displayed along the modern dual carriageway, notifying the curious of the weak structure and giving dire predictions of injury or death for anyone trespassing. Even the local youths had given up trying to scale the high barrier. Instead, they risked life and limb by leaping into the river from the other side of the road.

The sound of wings made him look up briefly, his hand shielding his eyes from the misty rain falling steadily. A large black bird landed on the top of the fence, its dark feathers bleeding into the encroaching night sky. A lorry rumbled past, its lights illuminating it clearly momentarily. The bird stared at Finn for a second before burying its head under one wing, carefully preening its blue-black feathers.

Finn's phone buzzed, and he reluctantly tore his gaze away from the shadowed bridge. He pulled his mobile from his pocket and glanced down. A message from Dee demanding to know why he was late. He sighed as he shoved the phone back into his pocket and rubbed his forehead. Despite being in his late twenties, his friend still worried if he didn't arrive home at exactly the same time, and he didn't feel like being berated for spoiling dinner again. Besides, he could feel the tension building up behind his eyes and knew that a headache was imminent. They had started a couple of months earlier, and he had tried several analgesics, but Dee's herbal remedies were the only thing that eased the debilitating pain. Finn screwed up his face as a spasm pulsed in his head. He should get home. He would need to have one of her concoctions soon, otherwise it would incapacitate him for the rest of the evening.

Easing back, he loosened his fingers, but a slight movement beyond the fence caught his eye and he pressed his face against it once more, searching the darkness for the figure he had glimpsed the week before. Seconds passed. Finally, he could make out a hulking shape shuffling across the bridge at the far side. It stretched for a moment, and the figure was briefly lit as several cars raced by. Lank, unkempt hair, long hairy limbs and a muscular torso. It froze momentarily in the headlight's glare, before squatting down against the parapet, its silhouette merging with the shadows until Finn could no longer make it out.

When he had told her about it, Dee had tried to persuade him the figure was a figment of his imagination, but he knew he had seen something. He took a deep breath and closed his eyes for a moment. He had wondered whether she was right, and it was a relief to know he wasn't going completely crazy. Nevertheless, there were still things he couldn't explain. A strange compulsion kept drawing him back to this place, as if it held answers to questions he didn't even know he had. Someone, or something, lurked in the bridge's shadow, but who were they and what were they doing?

Another stabbing pain across his brow finally roused him at the same time as a second text buzzed from Dee. He glanced back at the bridge, but the early winter night made it almost impossible to see more. He quickly typed an answer and sent it before turning away. The bird croaked once and flew off, and Finn reluctantly headed for home, pulling his coat tighter against the chilly north wind. Solving this particular mystery would have to wait a little while longer.

“Where have you been?” Dee demanded as soon as he walked into the brightly lit kitchen. He winced, both at the lights and her scolding tone. She pushed a strand of white hair from her distinctive amber eyes and frowned as she glared at him. Then her face softened.

“Another headache,” she stated, turning back to the kettle and flipping the switch. “Sit down. I’ll make you a herbal tea.”

After hanging his coat on the hook by the door, Finn slumped into a formica chair crammed into the corner of the room. Closing his eyes, he leant on the small scratched table and laid his head on his arms with a low groan. He could hear his friend measuring out the herbs into a pot and pouring the boiling water over them. “I saw it again,” he mumbled.

She paused her stirring. “I don’t know why you keep going there.”

“Neither do I, to be truthful,” Finn said. “But there’s something about it. It calls to me.”

Dee huffed. “It’s a condemned old bridge that goes nowhere. Here. Drink this.” She pushed a mug of steaming liquid in front of him.

“Thank you. What would I do without you?” She patted his shoulder before turning back to her dinner preparations. He blew on the infusion and took a sip. He could smell the pungent ginger and peppermint, but also recognised a hint of lavender and thyme. The rest of it was a mystery that Dee refused to divulge. He didn’t really care about her secret ingredients as long as the tea cured his pain.

Until more recently, the headaches had been sporadic, and he had put them down to the stress of meeting deadlines at the office. The architectural firm he worked for had been busier than usual and the pressure was being felt by all the employees. He had been staying on longer and missing breaks in order to keep up with his assigned jobs. The headaches hadn’t surprised him.

Now they seemed to occur at least once or twice a week, and Dee’s herbal remedy was the only thing that drove them away. He vaguely wondered if he ought to make an appointment with his doctor, in case something more sinister was going on. What if he had a brain tumour? He’d heard stories of people falling down dead in the prime of their life because they refused to believe they had a serious health condition. He made a mental note to book an appointment the following day.

Dee busied herself at the stove, leaving Finn to drink his brew in peace. At least the headache had saved him from another tongue-lashing. He watched as she stirred the contents of a saucepan, occasionally tasting it and adding a pinch of salt or other flavouring. Her movements were graceful and fluid, almost as if she were dancing to a song only she could hear. His stomach grumbled, and he realised he hadn’t eaten all day. He had skipped lunch in order to finish the blueprints for a spa complex being constructed in the inner city. It made a change from the steady influx of houses popping up everywhere, and he wanted it to look perfect when the client viewed it.

The front door opened and slammed shut again with a loud bang.

“Oaf,” Dee muttered, another frown appearing on her pale face.

Finn smiled to himself. Heavy footsteps came down the hall and a small, black man entered, throwing a heavy old backpack on the floor and pulling out the chair opposite Finn.

“Take your boots off,” Dee snapped without turning around.

The man ignored her as he climbed up on the chair. His obsidian eyes looked at Finn with pity. “Headache?” he asked, nodding at the almost empty mug.

“Yeah.”

“Killian, I said take your boots off.”

Killian kept his eyes on Finn. “Go to the bridge?” he asked.

Finn smiled. “Yeah.”

“See anything?”

Finn nodded, and Killian raised a bushy eyebrow. “It’s huge, maybe seven or eight feet tall, and really hairy.”

Dee smirked. “Maybe it’s your big brother,” she mocked, pointing her spoon at Killian’s bushy black beard.

“Dee,” Finn warned, but his caution went unheeded.

“Shut up, old hag,” Killian replied.

“Or what? You’ll bite my knees? I presume you have teeth behind that mass of black fuzz on your face.”

Finn got to his feet. “I’m going to get changed,” he said, but neither of his friends noticed. They were too busy hurling insults at each other.

Dee and Killian had hated each other from the very beginning of their relationship when the three of them had once been residents at the Landford Home for Foundlings. Despite their mutual antagonism, however, they had both attached themselves to Finn as allies and protectors against the bullies who considered the younger Finn an easy mark. Killian had learnt to use his fists against those who viewed him with derision because of his short stature and black skin, whereas Dee preferred to rely on her wit and intelligence against those who mocked her pale skin or willowy stature. The three of them had become inseparable. When they finally left the home, it had seemed a natural progression to get a place together. Finn had never known a time when they hadn’t been there for him.

He winced when he heard a crash from the kitchen and hurried to the bathroom, shutting the door behind him. Stripping off his clothes, he turned on the shower and stepped in, luxuriating in the hot water sluicing over his skin.

His friends fought constantly, but it was almost like a habit they had fallen into and couldn’t break, rather than with true animosity. Finn had noticed moments of affection in between the inevitable arguments, especially once they reached adulthood, and he had often wondered if there was some unspoken attraction between the two of them. He smiled as he squeezed liquid

into his palm. The idea of his best friends getting together filled him with a strange satisfaction. Perhaps they needed a nudge in the right direction, he mused as he rubbed the shampoo onto his scalp. He would need to give it a bit more thought, but the idea appealed. Although. His smile faltered. Where would that leave him? Would they still want him around if they made a life together? He rinsed the suds from his fair hair. Best not to go too far down that road.

When he eventually returned to the kitchen, silence reigned once more, and Finn noticed with amusement that Killian's boots had disappeared. The linoleum floor was clean, so he knew the food hadn't been used as a weapon in their altercation this time. Dee pulled bread rolls out of the oven, and Finn's mouth watered. He grabbed the butter dish and cutlery while Killian filled glasses with water. As soon as they set the table, Dee ladled a rich stew into large bowls and placed them in front of the hungry men, who dug in greedily. Finn groaned in appreciation as the flavours flooded his mouth.

"You are amazing," Finn said as he bit into a hot crusty roll dripping with butter. "This is sensational."

Killian simply grunted, which Finn always took to be grudging praise.

"Thank you," Dee said, smiling sweetly at Finn. "At least someone appreciates my skills." She cast a baleful glance at Killian before turning her attention back to Finn. "How is your headache?"

"Gone, just like magic."

Killian coughed as he took a mouthful of stew, splattering gravy drops across the table. Dee glared at him. "Jerk."

"Crone," Killian replied automatically.

"Not again," Finn muttered. "Your constant bickering drains me. No wonder I'm getting headaches. It would be so much easier if you only admitted that you liked each other."

"What?" Killian roared. "I can't stand the harpy."

"Well, you're an ignorant gnome, and I hate you!" Dee shouted, crossing her arms.

Killian flung down his spoon and stomped off, muttering obscenities. Dee watched him leave before pushing back her chair and collecting his half-eaten food. She filled the sink with hot water, adding too much washing-up liquid, creating a foaming mountain. Finn hurriedly finished his meal and took his empty plate to her, glancing at her face reflected in the window. He saw a tear trickling down her cheek.

"Are you crying?" he asked, aghast, as he turned her around to face him. She sniffed and wiped her face with the back of her hand.

"It's the onions," she said softly, avoiding his eyes.

Finn sighed. "Dee..."

"Don't. Say nothing."

"I didn't mean to upset you," he said, pulling her into his arms for a hug. Despite him being almost six feet tall, she was still several inches taller than him.

“You didn’t,” she mumbled against his shoulder. After a few moments, she pushed away, and Finn let her go. Between them, they washed up and tidied the kitchen. As Finn put away the glasses in the cupboard, he glanced over at Dee.

“Scrabble?” he asked with a small smile.

“You must really enjoy losing,” she said, as she wiped the pristine table.

He walked across and tapped her nose. “What can I say? I’m feeling lucky this evening.”

After the cleaning was finished, they moved to the cosy front room. Dee had purchased all their furniture at bargain prices and Finn found the eclectic assortment of colours and fabrics strangely pleasing. Although small, their middle terrace was warm and comfortable, a haven from the world outside. A place to relax and be themselves.

Finn grabbed the game from the cupboard, and Dee pulled a huge black dictionary from the bookshelf. In a household where the slightest thing stoked an argument, for the sake of a convivial evening they had all agreed the book was the final arbiter if someone laid out a disputed word. Finn suspected Killian was secretly studying it to find the most obscure words contained within, simply to watch Dee’s face when he was proved right again and again.

Almost as if summoned, Killian appeared and, without a word, sat on one of the three mismatched easy chairs arranged around the low table. While Finn opened up the board, Killian put the letters in the bag and passed it to Dee, who pulled one out.

She grinned as she waved it in front of her. “First again,” she crowed, displaying the letter A.

Finn laughed and put his W back in the bag. When it was his turn, he picked out his seven tiles, placing them carefully on the rack. He settled back in the cushions and let his eyes wander over the letters, trying to make a word out of the jumbled tiles. Before he even had a chance to study them properly, Dee laid all seven of hers out on the board.

“Charmer,” she said with a satisfied grin, totting up the points and writing them down. She grabbed the bag and picked more tiles out. Killian frowned at the board and scratched his head before pulling out four tiles and placing them carefully down. “Scold,” he said, winking at Finn.

Finn rolled his eyes and looked down at his own selection. He moved two of them to different positions, trying to find the best combination. As he concentrated on the letters, his vision suddenly blurred and the room seemed to shrink.

“Concentrate, Finlay,” a deep voice said. A large hand came into view, its finger tracing the strange symbols in front of him. “A summoning is a tricky spell. You can’t afford any mistakes.”

“Father,” Finn whispered.

“Gods, the candles. I forgot,” Dee hissed urgently, jumping to her feet. She crossed to the old fireplace and quickly lit several fat purple candles arranged on the mantle.

“Finn, are you playing or not?” Killian demanded loudly, shaking his arm.

“What?” Finn mumbled as the room swam back into view. He inhaled the aromas of lavender and thyme as the vision faded from his memory. “Sorry, I must have zoned out for a minute.”

“He’s tired,” Dee said, returning to her seat and glancing across at Killian. “This will be like taking sweets from a baby.”

“No doubt you’ve had enough practice doing that,” Killian said. Dee glared at him, her mouth tightly puckered.

“Yes, I’m tired,” Finn said with a yawn, “but I bet I can beat both of you with my eyes closed.”

“Fighting talk,” Killian said, sitting back, his black eyes glittering. “That’s more like it. Let’s see what you’ve got, then, pretty boy.”

Laughing, Finn picked up his letters and placed them on the board. “Hex.”

## The Interdict

Finn stared out of the window at the marina below, bustling with activity as boats came and went from the little harbour. In the distance, huge cranes rotated in the nearby docks, lifting containers from the massive ships moored at the quayside. The water bobbed up and down hypnotically, and he found his mind roaming.

“Mr Balder,” a voice said loudly next to him, and he blinked. Embarrassed at being caught daydreaming, he cleared his throat and looked down at the Office Manager, who, despite being only five feet tall, ruled her realm with an iron fist. “Sorry, Polly. I was mulling over something.”

She pursed her thin lips and handed him a piece of paper. “Personal items are not to be submitted for photocopying,” she said pointedly.

He stared down at the sheet with a puzzled frown. “What’s this?”

She raised one perfectly plucked eyebrow. “This,” she said, pointing to the paper, “was labelled as the plans for the waterfront property. It appears you have been wasting company time doodling instead of working.”

Instead of the sketches for his client, there was an intricate drawing of two bands, one smaller than the other. Strange symbols filled the space between them. Inside the outer ring were several more circles tightly interweaving with each other like an elongated Venn diagram, containing what looked like carefully inked runes. He rubbed his forehead.

“I do have other things to do,” Polly prompted.

Finn hurried to his desk and rifled through the papers, finally pulling out the half-completed sketches. He gulped. His incompetence would certainly make it back to his boss unless he could fix it. Polly was known for her scathing judgements, and had no qualms in making her views known to those higher up the ladder. He turned to her with a smile pasted on his face. “Of course. I, er, I’ll get them to you before lunch.”

“Mr Balder, it’s already past midday.”

He glanced up at the clock. "Right." He winced inwardly. He would need to skip his break to get them finished in time. "An hour."

She patted her immaculate grey bun and nodded once before marching across the open plan office back to her desk, her heels clicking on the wooden floor. Finn picked up his pencil and sketched feverishly. Forty-five minutes later, he handed them over with relief and returned to his desk. His head was already throbbing, and he popped a couple of painkillers into his mouth. As he gulped them down with water, he eyed the other piece of paper.

Something about it seemed familiar, but although he recognised his hand in the design, he had no recollection of having drawn it. He traced the circle with his finger, wondering what it meant. He shivered and felt the hairs on the back of his neck rise. Finn drew his hand back and stared down at the intricate runes.

His client's distinctive laugh interrupted his reverie. Shoving the paper into his briefcase, he forced a smile on his face and strode across to the conference room for his meeting, accepting the files with a grateful nod.

Despite the compulsion to return to the bridge, Finn headed straight home. Normally, he would get off one stop early and walk across the flyover. This time, he barely glanced at it through the grimy window as they sped past. When he got off the bus, his head was throbbing and his eyes hurt. He could feel the nausea rising in his stomach and almost ran down the dimly lit street as he neared his house. He stumbled through the front door with a groan, barely able to see, and shouted for Dee, who came running down the hallway and grasped his arm. Pulling his coat from his shoulders, she pushed him into the lounge. "Lie down," she whispered. "I'll get the tea."

"It hurts," he moaned.

"I know," she said, leading him to the sofa. She lifted his legs as he slumped down, yanking his shoes off before covering him with the throw kept on the back of the sofa. When he was settled, she pulled the curtains closed, mercifully plunging the room into darkness. Crossing over to the mantel, she lit several of the ever-present candles. "I'll be right back."

Finn tucked his legs up and draped one arm over his eyes, shielding them from the meagre flames of the flickering candles. Even that small light seemed to stab him straight in the head. Mentally, he berated himself for not remembering to make an appointment to see his doctor. He breathed deeply of the familiar aromas and finally felt his muscles relaxing. Dee appeared at his side and lifted his head.

"Drink," she said. "I made it stronger than usual. It should help."

He sipped the concoction eagerly. "Thanks, Dee. What would I do without you?"

She smiled. "Live in a pigsty with no clean clothes, eating cheese on toast every dinner time."

"I like cheese on toast."

She stroked his hair as he rested his head back on the cushion with a sigh. "Sleep now. Everything will be fine when you wake up."

"What did you put in the tea?" he slurred, his eyes growing heavy.

“Secret ingredient,” she whispered.

He wanted to press her for an answer, but his eyes closed. Moments later, he was asleep.

Finn stirred and slowly opened his eyes. The pain had gone, but he still felt drowsy. The candles had burnt down to a third of their size and he wondered how long he had been asleep. Someone had replaced the throw with a fleecy blanket as he dozed, and the warmth soothed him. He heard a low noise and struggled to understand the hushed voices outside the room.

“How long?” Killian asked.

“Less than a week. Maybe as little as two days,” Dee replied.

“So soon?”

“I thought you’d be pleased.”

“I am. I’m just worried about him.”

“He’s strong. He can take it.”

“I hope you’re right.” Finn heard paper rustling. “How in the name of the gods did he know about this?” Killian asked.

“His memories are breaking through the Interdict, despite my efforts. That’s what is causing the pain. His mind is trying to bridge the two realities, but although weak, the Interdict still holds.”

Killian huffed. “Do you think he’ll ever forgive us?”

“Does it matter?” Dee whispered.

There was silence for a moment. “Yes. Strangely enough, it does. Despite everything, I care for him.”

“As do I.”

“Do you think Garridan will release us now?” Finn tried to recall if he’d ever heard the name before, but as he searched his mind, the pain began to build near his eyes. Dee didn’t answer, but he heard a small sob.

“Hey, you old hag,” Killian said softly. “None of that now. Come on, or you’ll wake him with your weeping. Let’s go and sample some of my stash. It’ll put hairs on your chest.”

“What a dreadful thought,” she said.

Finn heard a sniff and a quiet laugh as their footsteps receded down the hall. There was a soft click as the kitchen door closed. The stillness enfolded him, and his eyes drifted shut once more.

Feeling rested, Finn walked into the kitchen to find Dee and Killian sitting at the table, a half-empty bottle of Ardbeg between them.

“Well, look here. The dead have come back to life,” Killian said with a grin.

“How are you?” Dee asked with a small frown.

Finn grabbed another glass from the cupboard and slid it across the table. “Much better,” he said as Killian poured a generous measure and passed it back. “What are we celebrating?”

“What makes you think we’re celebrating?” Dee asked.

Finn took a large swig and smacked his lips. “Killian only gets the good stuff out on special occasions.”

“On Thursday, it’ll be twenty-four years since we met,” Killian said, tapping the table with his finger. “Is that a worthwhile occasion?”

Finn wrinkled his nose. “You mean I’ve had to put up with your squabbling for almost a quarter of a century? No wonder I’m getting so many headaches.” He laughed, but they didn’t join him. “Okay,” Finn said, swallowing back the rest of the drink. Remembering the earlier whispered conversation, he decided to broach the subject directly. “Let’s talk about something else. What’s the Interdict?”

Dee turned even paler than usual. “I don’t know what you’re talking about,” she said, but Finn could hear her voice waver.

“Yes, you do. I heard you earlier,” he said, narrowing his eyes.

Killian and Dee looked at one another, an unspoken question passing between them. Killian nodded once and turned back to Finn. “The witch can tell you.”

Finn frowned. “I wish you wouldn’t call her that.”

“It’s okay, Finn,” Dee said, taking a deep breath. “I do have skills that some would call witchcraft. That’s why I was chosen to accompany you. Killian and I are your protectors.”

Finn laughed as his friends shared another glance. “Protect me? From what? I’m an architect. I play Scrabble and read thrillers. The most daring thing I’ve done is cycle the wrong way down a one-way street.”

Dee laced her fingers together. “Our instructions were to keep you safely hidden. Someone else was searching for you. We had to make sure you couldn’t be found.”

Finn swallowed, his mouth suddenly dry. “What are you talking about? Are you saying someone wants to hurt me? Why? I don’t understand.”

Dee stretched across the table to hold his hand, but he snatched it away. She dragged her hand back slowly. “You’re not who you think you are.”

“Then, who am I?”

Killian grabbed the bottle and splashed more whisky into their glasses. “You’re the son of a sorcerer,” he said, placing the bottle onto the table with a thud.

Finn stared at him, his drink forgotten. Sometimes at night, as a young, lonely boy, he had made up stories about his lineage. In his imagination, his parents were desperately looking for him. Perhaps someone had kidnapped him, or he had got lost, and it was only a matter of time before the police found him and returned him to his family. In his fabricated dreams, his true home was a magnificent mansion, of course. So much better than the drafty halls and impersonal dormitories of the orphanage. His own bedroom would be filled with toys and books, which he didn't have to share with the other children. Finally reunited, beyond grateful to have him home, his deliriously happy parents would shower him with the love he craved, enough to fill up all the empty, dark places in his soul.

As time went by, he had stopped his flights of fancy, but in his wildest dreams, he had never thought of something as outrageous as being a sorcerer's son. He wanted to laugh, but Killian's stern face gave him pause. He was serious.

"That's ridiculous," Finn said finally. "There are no such things as sorcerers."

Killian looked over at Dee, his eyebrows raised.

"Finn, it's the truth. Your family..."

"I have no family," Finn said firmly, crossing his arms. "I'm an orphan. We all are."

Killian shook his head. "When you were only a small child, Garridan sent you across the void into the mortal realm under our care. He wove a powerful forbidding, the Interdict, to stop you remembering anything of your former life."

Finn's mouth went dry. "No, I don't believe you."

Killian ignored him. "We were ordered to watch over you until it was time for you to return. Dee thinks that the Interdict is finally weakening. When it falls, your memories will return, and we'll be able to return you to Vanaheim."

"You can go home," Dee said with a bright smile that didn't quite reach her eyes.

"This is my home," Finn said. He was finding it hard to breathe.

Dee shook her head. "This was only ever supposed to be temporary until it was safe for you to return."

"You're not making any sense," Finn said, rubbing his forehead.

"You don't belong in this realm. Your home is—"

"Stop saying that!" Finn shouted. "I do belong here."

Killian slammed down his glass, making Finn jump. "This realm is a prison. A cage we've been forced to live in for far too long. A place I am desperate to be free of."

Dee looked down at the table, refusing to meet his eyes. Finn struggled to make sense of the words. They were talking nonsense, but, even so, something seemed to niggle at the back of his mind. He winced as pain lanced across his eyes, making him groan.

"Don't try to remember," Dee said with a sigh. "It will only hurt more."

The table swam out of focus and he clutched the edge as a wave of dizziness washed over him.

He was being lifted up, but despite his struggles, he couldn't get free. He screamed for his father. His heart was pounding furiously, fear coursing through his body. He was roughly shoved into the arms of a tall woman who seemed to shine like a white light. "Take him," someone rasped. "You have half a day to reach the crossing. Don't fail me."

"Finn, drink this. It will help," Dee said loudly, pressing a mug of hot liquid into his hand. He sipped it automatically. The memory faded, and he stared down at the concoction.

"What is this?"

"Something to take the pain away."

"No," he said slowly, putting the mug down and pushing it away. "You're stopping me from remembering."

"Your memories will come back, eventually. In the meantime, I'm trying to make sure the pain doesn't send you mad."

"She knows what she's doing, Finn. You can trust her." Killian said.

"Trust her?" Finn said. "How can I? You're both talking nonsense." He shook his head and pressed the heel of his hand to his eyes. "I don't believe any of this. It's foolishness." His chest was tight, and he felt as if he couldn't breathe. He stood, causing his chair to bang against the wall. "I don't know... I can't..." The walls seemed to close in on him. He needed space to think and fresh air to clear his head. "I've got to go."

"Finn, wait."

Ignoring Dee's pleading, he fled. Slipping on his shoes, he grabbed his coat from the peg and left, slamming the door behind him. He buttoned up his duffel coat and pulled up his hood as he marched down the deserted street, uncaring of the drizzle that lashed across his face. Shoving his hands in his pockets, he walked in a daze, his mind whirling.

Why were his friends acting so strangely? It was ludicrous to imagine he was from another place. He would know, wouldn't he? They said they were his protectors, but they had only been children when they first met. Why would anyone send someone so young? Surely it made more sense to put him in the care of adults? But, on the other hand, there were the intricate symbols he had drawn that morning, and the brief glimpses of another time and place. Could it be possible? Were his memories really trying to break through somehow?

He felt nauseous. If it were true, his whole life was a lie, and his friends...

His stomach rolled. Who were they really?

He stumbled along the pavement, taking no notice of his direction until he reached a wire fence. Instinctively, he had found his way back to the stone bridge. He stopped and peered down into the inky water flowing below before raising his eyes. Why was he here again? What was it that drew him back time after time?

The bridge seemed more eerie at night. The street lamps lit the wall nearest to him, but the rest was hidden in shadow. He traced its path from the blocked entrance to his left, out across the water towards the train tracks on the far side of the river, where it suddenly stopped. He squinted, searching for the strange figure again, but nothing moved. Finn walked closer to the entrance, hunching his shoulders against the rain. A car roared past, its headlights shining

straight into Finn's eyes. He shut them tightly as a wave of pain surged into his head and his focus lurched.

"Draw the runes again, Finlay."

"What did I do wrong, Papa?"

A hand came past his shoulder and pointed at a glyph. "This tail is too short, meaning you won't have time to finish the spell." The finger moved across the page, the stone in the large ring shining brightly in the sunlight. "This one is pointed instead of arched. The creature will see it as a weak point and press against it. This one is crossed in the wrong place, giving too much movement to the creature. It must be tighter, otherwise you risk it breaking free."

The voice faded, and Finn groaned as rainwater seeped into his clothes. Awareness returned, and he realised he was lying in a puddle of water. He must have fallen. He needed to get up and go home, but another wave of pain sliced through his skull, sending his mind spiralling away.

"Hide him until the time comes for him to return to me. Remember your pledge. If you fail me..."

"You have my word," a gruff voice replied.

Finn whimpered as his head throbbed.

"Not now, son."

"But father, I can do it."

A hand came to rest on his shoulder. As Finn turned to face his father, the features melted away to black. "Tomorrow," the voice said, drifting away. "We'll try again tomorrow."

Someone knelt next to him and lifted his head. "Drink this, Finn," Dee said. He felt a lukewarm liquid dribble against his mouth, and he opened wider, gulping as she slowly tipped up the flask.

"We need to get him back. He's too close to the crossing."

"I know that, Killian, but he can't walk anywhere in this state. Do you want to carry him the whole way?"

"I will if I have to."

"I know," Dee said, the admiration clear in her voice. "You're strong, even for a dwarf."

"Is that praise I hear? Someone pinch me. I'm hallucinating."

"I take it back."

"Hush crone," Killian said with a hint of laughter. "Give him the rest of the potion."

Finn drank again as the liquid touched his lips before he passed out altogether.

## Plans

Finn opened his eyes and looked around his bedroom. The pale green curtains were open, allowing the daylight to flood in. He could see tiny rivulets running down the window as the rain continued to fall outside. He yawned and rubbed his face, feeling the scruff beneath his fingers. The first order of business was a shower and a shave.

He glanced at the clock on his bedside cabinet and frowned. It was after ten in the morning. He was very late for work. He knew he should make haste and rush to the office, apologising to his boss for having overslept, but his body refused to move. Instead, he felt a strange lethargy steal over him. Part of him wanted to hide beneath the covers and forget about the previous day altogether. He wanted his life to go back to normal. The other, much more curious part, demanded to get the entire story.

He needed answers, and he wouldn't find them at work or burrowed deeply in his duvet.

Reluctantly, he sat up. He gazed around his room. It wasn't big, but was perfect for his needs. He remembered how wonderful it felt after living in a large dormitory to suddenly have a room all to himself. A desk under the window meant he could make the most of natural light when working. The laundry basket that never seemed to overflow, despite his ad hoc use of the washing machine, stood by the door. A small bookcase housed his architectural books, several dog-eared thrillers, a modern translation of the Poetic Edda, a Christmas present from Dee that he'd never read, and his books on free-diving, something he had a keen interest in. A dresser and small wardrobe held his clothes.

It all looked perfectly normal.

He swung his legs out of bed and picked up a discarded t-shirt and pants. As he shuffled through to the bathroom, he noticed the stubs of several candles on his dresser. Dee must have lit them while he slept.

In the shower, he stood under the water, his hands braced against the tiles, letting the heat wash over his head and down his back. How had he managed to get back home? Had Killian carried him all the way? He tried to imagine his friend lugging his almost six-foot frame over his shoulders, but couldn't picture it. More likely, he had stumbled back, even though he had no recollection of doing so. He pursed his lips.

Dee's herbal remedy. Was she really helping him, or was there something more sinister going on?

Finn switched off the shower, and after drying himself, wrapped a towel around his waist. He rubbed at the condensation filming the mirror above the sink and stared at his reflection. His

blond hair darkened by the water framed a thin face. He looked tired. Dark shadows ringed his blue eyes and his cheekbones seemed more prominent, as if he had lost weight.

The son of a sorcerer.

He shook his head slowly. Did they realise how absurd that sounded? Magic wasn't real! He glanced down at his fingers and turned his palms up. But if it was real, how would it work? Did he have a wand somewhere? He suddenly lifted his arm and pointed at his reflection. "Thinkus rememberus," he hissed. The face in the mirror morphed from fierce concentration to a wry smile. He blinked twice before mentally giving himself a shake.

Grabbing the soap, he lathered his face and picked up the razor, but paused, his hand visibly trembling. Dropping the razor, he closed his eyes and took several deep breaths.

Every day. He had spent every single day of his life with his friends. They had laughed and cried together. Grown up together. Made plans and dreamt of travelling the world. They were his family. He thought he knew them. But now? Was he nothing more than an inconvenient task to complete?

Deciding to forgo the shave, he roughly rinsed his face and scrubbed it dry. Throwing on the tatty T-shirt and loose jogging bottoms, he plodded down the stairs, his feet bare. He walked into the front room and stopped short when he saw Killian in his usual chair, his black eyes wary.

"I thought you'd be at work," Finn said shortly.

"You are my work."

"He doesn't actually have a job at the docks," Dee said as she entered, setting a plate of toast and a cup of tea in front of him. She sat next to Killian and folded her hands in her lap. "He follows you when you leave the house and keeps watch over you."

"Oh, so not just lying to me. You've been spying on me, too."

"Guarding you," Killian said gruffly. "There's a difference."

"Whatever." Finn sank into his chair and grabbed a piece of toast. "Wait. If you don't go to work, then how are we paying for everything? I know I don't earn enough on my own."

"Garridan gave us plenty of money. We have everything we need."

"Huh."

They sat in silence while Finn ate. There was so much he needed to know, but there was only one question he wanted answering.

"Why should I trust you?" he asked. His voice caught as he spoke.

"Everything we have done has been about protecting you," Dee said patiently. "Think back. Was there ever a time when you didn't feel safe with us? We've been there for you all these years, through thick and thin. Not once have you ever been alone." She paused for a moment. "Look, I realise this has come as a huge shock..."

"Oh, you think?" Finn said sarcastically.

She glanced at Killian and sighed. "We're sorry about that. To be honest, we never really considered what would happen when the Interdict fell. Perhaps we should have thought it through and come up with a plan to explain everything. Only, it's been so long..."

Killian patted her hand. "We never expected to be here more than a few months, a year at most," he said. "You were a child. We weren't going to complicate things. You were going through enough as it was."

"I'm not a child now," he pointed out.

Killian shrugged. "As time went by, we fell into a routine. It never seemed like the right time to broach the subject, especially as we weren't sure how long we would have to be here."

Finn drew his legs up, fighting the urge to run away and hide. He felt lost and very alone. He swallowed. "You said some things last night about a void and the mortal realm."

Dee nodded. "There are nine realms in all. We call this one Midgard, the mortal realm," she said, spreading her hands wide. "There is no magic here, or at least, not much to speak of, rendering you safe from a magical attack. Bringing you here was inspired, actually. No-one would think of searching for the son of a sorcerer in a land devoid of magic. They would expect powerful wards and complex spells to surround you instead."

"This entire realm is ringed by a void that can only be crossed at certain points, taking you to other realms," Killian explained. "This house is not very far away from one crossing."

"The stone bridge," Finn said with certainty. No wonder he had been drawn to the place. "Where does it lead?"

"Vanaheim. The realm of the sorcerers. Your true home," Dee replied.

Finn rubbed his chin. "What about my... family? I remember a man. My father. Where's my mother? Do I have siblings?"

His two friends glanced at each other. Killian cleared his throat. "We can't tell you much. We have had no contact with Vanaheim since crossing over. Your father was still alive when we left. As for a family..." He shrugged. "We never saw a wife or other children."

Finn's mouth fell open, and he rubbed his chest. He forced himself to speak. "What do you mean, still alive?"

Dee twisted her hands together. "Garridan and Ofnir are... were... great rivals. Garridan suspected Ofnir was plotting to kill him, which is why you were brought here. Our orders were to keep you safe and hidden until we were told to return or the Interdict fell, whichever came first." Dee kept her eyes firmly fixed on the carpet. "We never received a message."

"You think this other sorcerer killed my father?"

"We don't know," she whispered.

"But that's what you suspect. Otherwise my father would have sent for me. He would have wanted me back, wouldn't he?"

Dee looked at the floor. Killian glanced at Finn before his gaze shifted away. "There could be all kinds of reasons..."

Finn felt cold inside as Killian fell silent. Unexpected tears suddenly welled up in his eyes. This was worse. So much worse than a fantastical tale of magic realms and sorcery. His breathing sped up, and he felt light-headed. He shook his head as he recognised the beginnings of a panic attack, even though he hadn't had one since he was a child. As he struggled to regain his composure, part of his brain wondered if there was a spell to stop it. Inexplicably, he chuckled. Dee and Killian watched him cautiously as he threw back his head and clutched his stomach, his feelings of loss and disbelief clashing with the absurdity of it all as he laughed. Tears trickled down his cheeks, and he wiped them away, his laughter suddenly subsiding with a sharp sob. "All these years," he said. "Now you tell me that the father I didn't even know I had may well be dead."

"I'm sorry, Finn," Dee whispered.

He waved a hand dismissively. "For what? For taking me from my home and my family? Keeping me here? Lying to me for years?" He thought back to their time in the orphanage, their constant presence a welcome respite from his feelings of abandonment and fear. "Was any of it real?" he asked. "I thought you were my friends. How could I have been so stupid?"

Killian shook his head and looked away.

"We are your friends," Dee insisted. "That hasn't changed. I know that you're angry," she began, but Finn cut her off.

"Do you? I don't think you have any idea what I'm feeling right now." He closed his eyes and rubbed his forehead, trying to keep calm despite the clashing emotions roiling within. It would do no good to lash out or run away. He took several deep breaths before opening his eyes once more.

"So, what happens now?"

"While you were sleeping, we came up with a plan of sorts," Killian said, shifting in the chair. "We think it would be best if you take an extended leave of absence from work, starting immediately. Blame health issues or say you have a family crisis. We've already made excuses for you today."

"I suppose I could do that, but why now?"

"Your headaches are getting worse. You should stay here where I can keep an eye on you," Dee said.

Killian nodded. "We don't know how the falling of the Interdict will affect you."

"It'll probably be fine," Dee said with a wan smile.

"Or it could kill you," Killian said blandly.

Finn's eyes narrowed when he noticed Killian's mouth twitch.

"After the Interdict falls, and we're sure you are suffering no ill effects, we'll make the crossing into Vanaheim.," Dee continued after glaring at Killian. "We'll need to make some discrete enquiries. If it's still too dangerous for you, we may have to come straight back."

"I'm not a child anymore," Finn said, rolling his eyes. "I can look after myself."

Killian opened his mouth to speak, but Dee interjected. "Of course, we know that. We're only being cautious."

"So, this is your plan," Finn said tightly. "Sit here and wait." He sighed. "I hate waiting," he muttered, pushing his hand through his hair. He took a deep breath. "Okay, so tell me more about this other realm."

Dee hesitated. "I don't think that's a good idea."

"Why not?"

She sighed. "The pain starts when you try to remember. If I talk about something that triggers a memory, it'll hurt, which is exactly what I'm trying to avoid."

"We can tell him a little," Killian argued.

Finn flopped back into his chair with a faint grunt as the two of them quarrelled. He groaned as yet another memory suddenly broke through.

"Let me see," a deep voice said. A large hand enfolded his smaller one, turning it over to peer closely at the scorch marks on his fingers. The image blurred as tears welled up in his eyes. He hadn't expected it to hurt this much. Suddenly, a blessed coolness washed through his arm, taking the pain away. He blinked and looked at his hand. The skin was pink and healthy again, without even a scar to show he had been injured. He was pulled into a gentle hug, and he buried his face in the familiar robes, inhaling the scent of lemon and brimstone.

"This is what I'm talking about!" Dee scolded as she lit the candles, and the vision faded away with a sharp stab across his forehead as he breathed in their aroma. "Stop trying to remember, Finn."

"Sorry," he groaned. "I promise, I wasn't. It just seems to hit me out of the blue."

Dee raised her eyebrows and looked at Killian, a satisfied smile on her face. "See? Admit it. I was right."

"I'd rather dwell in Helheim," he griped with a scowl.

"That can be arranged." She turned back to Finn. "Come to me at the first sign of a headache. I'll keep an infusion ready to heat up in the microwave. I've got plenty of candles, but I'll make some more in case we need to burn them throughout the day."

She stood up and pulled her top straight. "Now that both of you will be home during the day, I'll make a list of jobs that need doing. I wouldn't want you to be bored."

"Jobs?" Killian muttered.

"Yes," she said, putting her hands on her hips. "The oven needs a deep clean, all the bedding needs to be washed, and the house hoovered. After that, you can start weeding the garden."

Finn groaned.

"It'll be lovely having you both around more," she said, walking out.

Killian growled. "I can't wait to get this finished and be rid of you."

“I heard that!” she shouted from the kitchen. “I’ll be glad to see the back of you. Your hairy face gives me indigestion.”

“No, that would be your cooking,” Killian shouted.

“In that case, you can starve to death for all I care you ingrate.”

“Termagant,” he hollered, pushing himself off his chair.

“Where are you going?” Finn asked as Killian put on his boots.

“Somewhere. Anywhere.”

“Don’t leave me here alone,” he hissed, his eyes wide.

“Sorry, boy. There’s no way I’m cleaning the oven. I didn’t sign up for domestic duties.” He patted Finn’s arm. “You’ll do just fine, though.”

“I thought you were supposed to protect me,” he grumbled peevishly.

Killian snorted. “Nice try, but it won’t wash. I’m not getting between you and that dragon.”

Moments later, the front door slammed. “Ignorant homunculus!” Dee yelled after him.

Finn closed his eyes as saucepans clattered angrily in the kitchen. He relaxed back in his chair. Strangely, the return of their bickering was reassuring after all the disturbing revelations. It was good to know that some things hadn’t changed.

“Finn,” Dee shouted. “It’s no good making yourself comfortable. This won’t clean itself!”

He pushed himself up with a sigh.