

Evan Wiley and the Rune-Marked Realms Sneak Peek

Chapter 1

I'd been in enough trouble that, by this point, I should've been able to sense when it snuck up on me. Or barreled after me to the beat of cheap leather utility boots, as the case may be. A Spidey sense of sorts, but specifically for the messes I always seemed to find myself in. Or create for myself. But no. When Ford Mall security caught sight of me, it took me by complete surprise. It shouldn't have.

I pumped my leg faster, knees tense, the wheels of my skateboard clicking against the grooves in the mall's linoleum floor. One by one, the few patrons shopping dodged out of my way as I skated past, most shooting me exasperated, or downright dirty, looks. Ford was a small enough town that I recognized both security guards chasing after me. Or maybe that spoke more to the number of times they'd run me out of the mall for skating inside. I didn't know why I kept doing it. It was summer break, and the mall was one of Ford's few attractions for the average thirteen-year-old. Skating was simply faster than walking. Or that deep down draw I felt toward doing things I knew I shouldn't. Who could say?

Scanning the storefronts, I banked hard to the left until I saw the stained-glass windows at an odd contrast with the neon sign reading: McCloud's Books and Stationery. The bookstore was a perfect hiding place. Most of the stores in the small shopping mall bore transparent glass fronts and wide-open floors. Only McCloud's shelves were cramped and overflowing with the cranky old man's wares.

Skidding to a stop, I stomped my board into my hand and ducked into the store, quickly weaving between the shelves. I crouched behind a case toward the back of the shop, overburdened with what appeared to be bookends, or maybe paperweights. There, I tried to slow my breathing, glancing around for any sign of Mr. McCloud, who'd never trusted me in his store unsupervised after I spilt a slushy on one of his rare books. But I couldn't see the old book seller, which hopefully meant he couldn't spot me.

Stuffing my skateboard into the straps on my backpack, I slung it back over my shoulders before carefully peering around the edge of the shelf I hid behind. Uh oh! Leena and Owens, the security guards, had apparently caught wise to my hide out. They jogged through the book store's open doors and began searching between the stacks. Leena stood taller than

Owens, a fact I liked to think annoyed the shorter, pale-faced man. Owens was my arch nemesis. As much of an arch nemesis as a middle-schooler can find in a small town like Ford, anyway. I sometimes fantasized about pushing him off the seawall into the harbor when he was particularly annoying, tripping over his meager power. He worked security on the docks in addition to the mall and liked me no better there than here. Either his over-stuffed utility belt would drag him below the depths, or his thick skull would. Compared to Owens, Leena Stirling was downright reasonable, if a bit of a do-gooder. She'd at least joke with me on my way out of the mall, before sternly warning me not to come back. She wore the rent-a-cop uniform comfortably while that same black and green polyester wore Owens like a boy playing cops and robbers dress-up. I preferred the look on her.

Still, it wouldn't do for either of them to find me. Hastily, I lurched toward the storage closet at the back of the store. Too hastily. My foot hit the wobbly shelf that screened me from view and knocked loose one of the paperweights, a dark, shiny stone the size of my palm. I dove for it before it could clatter to the ground and signal my location. In the next movement, I reached for the closet door with my other hand. No shouts followed me. It looked like I was in the clear. At least until they checked my admittedly obvious new hiding place. I mean, a closet, really?

Except, when I closed the door behind me, I looked up and did not see the cleaning supplies or surplus books I expected. No, instead the closet was far larger than it had any right to be, and most of the interior was obscured by dancing silver mist. What in the world?

I took a few steps forward, not sure what I was looking at. Maybe I'd hit my head in my escape from the mall authorities and that was why my vision was foggy? Dark shapes loomed in and out of sight within the mist. I approached one and found a door. Strange markings were carved into the otherwise plain wooden surface. I didn't understand the marks, though they looked familiar. An odd buzzing seemed to emanate from the other side of the door, and the closer I drew, the stronger it became, almost vibrating within me. Faint in my ears, I swore I could hear just the suggestion of birdsong. Perhaps if I pressed my ear to the crack between the door and its frame, I'd know for certain. The wood was warm to my touch. Nearer to it, the mists cleared, and the air smelled reminiscent of the color green mixed with wood smoke. Before I could hear anything further beyond the door though, my hand burned. I still clutched the stone paperweight I'd knocked from the bookstore shelf. It looked no different but seemed to get hotter the

longer I remained wherever I was. Was it really Mr. McCloud's storage closet? Now I wasn't so sure.

A similar heat rested against my chest. With my free hand, I felt for the amulet I always wore around my neck. My gran had given it to me when I was small. It too grew warmer.

What the hell was happening? A drop of fear cooled in my throat. I spun and for a moment couldn't see the door I'd come through, the door back to the bookshop. Suddenly, I really wanted to get back to the mall, even if that also meant returning to the waiting arms of Leena and Owens. Jeez, what if they thought I was trying to steal the paperweight? Better to put the weird little rock back before anyone noticed it was missing.

Stumbling back through the swirling mist, I finally caught sight of the closet door. It looked the same on this side as it did when I first pulled it open to hide inside, a standard wooden door. However, on this side, more of those odd marks were scratched into the surface. The lines and shapes were unreadable, but it felt like the way home, nonetheless. I dragged on the handle and plunged back into the warm bookstore.

And crashed against Leena, whose arm had been outstretched toward the closet door. She jerked back, eyes widening, as a panicked teenager stumbled full tilt into her. I didn't even think to be embarrassed when she reached out to steady me on my feet, at the same time creating a more appropriate distance between us. I was too busy stuffing the cooling paperweight deep in my pocket before either she or her less forgiving partner noticed I had it, now that I obviously couldn't just put it back. Not without getting caught anyway.

"Wiley!" Owens barked. "What do you think you're doing?" His face was red, either from exertion chasing after me or as a product of his notoriously short temper. Probably both.

"I uh..." I wasn't really sure how best to answer, my head still swimming with images of the strange not-a-storage-closet I'd found myself in thirty seconds before.

"You know the rules," Leena reminded me, exasperatedly glancing at the skateboard strapped to my back.

I sighed. I did. And yet, I broke them anyway. “Banned again, huh? Lead the way,” I said, raising my hands above my head like a prisoner at gunpoint, though the most the mall officers packed was pepper-spray.

Owens shook his head, grinning in a way that made me more nervous than the misty hall of doors. Well, almost. “Not this time, punk. You’re headed to our office until someone can pick you up. We’d like to have a chat with your mother.” He spoke with more glee than he had any right to.

My stomach sank. That meant they’d call my mom at work. She’d have to cancel her afternoon classes. Or leave me to rot in mall jail. I wasn’t sure which was worse. Lowering my hands, I sullenly followed Owens to a small office near the mall’s entrance. SECURITY, the door read. At least I could make out the letters on this one.

The more I tried to recall my odd experience, the faster the memory faded, until I started to doubt it had happened at all. Perhaps I’d simply fallen asleep in the closet and dreamt it. Or else, I was imagining things. Worrisome. Yet somehow not as worrisome as being marched to a locked room to wait for my mom to pick me up, watched over by a petty mall cop.

I threw myself into the single faded, blue plastic chair in the “waiting area” - read: cell - exhaling in a huff. The indignance was largely for show, to cover my growing regret. Why couldn’t I keep my nose out of trouble, just once?

Owens stepped into the actual office area, which housed two small particle board desks and ancient, mismatched rolling chairs. He plucked up the old, corded phone, watching me as he dialed. A latch-key kid since second grade, a card bearing my mom’s number was tucked in the front pocket of my backpack, which Owens had only too happily searched.

“Water?” Leena asked softly, crouching down beside me. I shrugged and took the paper cup she offered. “Tell me the truth, Evan. Why do you keep doing this? For the thrill? You know the rules. And you are smart enough to know that Wade will jump at any excuse to bust you.” She peered at me, her warm brown eyes scraping against the defensive walls raised in my own.

I sometimes forgot Owens even had a first name. He and I were locked into our roles, hoodlum and ineffective authority. I barely thought of him as a person. Maybe that was why. Of course, I didn’t tell Leena that. I didn’t want her to know that perhaps I only broke the rules to get a rise out

of Owens, to annoy him. Indeed, for the thrill. Skating through the mall was fun, no question. And like I said, faster than walking, to boot. But even that felt small. All of Ford felt small. A small town where nothing ever happened. And I was bored. When I got bored, I did stupid things.

Eventually my mom walked into the office, her face pinched and tired. So, she'd decided to spring me. I hopped up, holding out my hand to take my backpack back from Owens. He grudgingly returned it, though he'd removed the skateboard and handed that to my mom.

"Again, I want to apologize for his behavior," she said. "This will not happen again. And thank you both, for calling me and looking after him."

I didn't really think busting me merited thanks, but for once, wisely kept my mouth shut.

"Of course, Mrs. Wi – Ms. Hansen," Leena said, shaking my mom's hand. She smiled brightly enough to offset Owens' perpetual scowl.

"Come on," Mom muttered to me, nodding toward the door.

The car ride home was short but felt interminable. My mom didn't speak, though occasionally she bit her lip, her chin trembling and her hands gripped tightly around the steering wheel. Guilt over my actions fully set in now. Not really for the skating or even getting caught. But for making my mom look that way, like she was lost. I didn't have many people in my corner, mainly just her and Gran. I couldn't afford to keep disappointing her. I watched the dense trees zip by on one side of us, knowing the sky opened up over the sea on the other side, but avoiding looking over to avoid watching her. We each pretended the other was fine.

Our house was old, but in a mostly not run-down sort of way. It was technically my gran's, but we'd lived there since I was a baby. It contained four stories: a cluttered basement, my gran's antique and oddities (and junk) shop on most of the first floor, with the kitchen at the back, the bedrooms and bathroom upstairs, and a tiny library converted into a living room in the attic. Gravel crunched under my mom's truck tires when she pulled into the driveway, and under my shoes as I trudged up to the side-door, avoiding Gran's shop entrance. I knew Mom wouldn't want an audience, even if the store was rarely populated.

When we got inside, I tried to run up the stairs.

“Freeze,” Mom snapped.

I did, turning around to sit at the kitchen table, settling in for my lecture. A university science professor, my mom was excellent at delivering them.

“Why, Ev?” she asked, unknowingly echoing Leena’s words. “Please, explain.” She didn’t sound angry. Not anymore. Just...done. “This is the fifth time you’ve been kicked out of that mall.” I had really hoped that since the security guards hadn’t called her on those previous occasions, she wasn’t aware of them. Trust Owens to have enlightened her. “So, tell me what the hell was going through your head when you stepped foot on your board.” For emphasis, she threw my skateboard to the ground, heedless of the scuffmarks it left on the rough wooden floor. If I’d done that, I’d be in for an earful...well, another one.

“I... I don’t know,” I answered, not meeting her gaze. I knew if I did, I’d find tears shimmering there. And she’d seen the same in mine. I felt stupid. And exhausted. More tired than I’d ever been. Yet, part of me chafed under her reprimands, already itching to move, to do it again, or something else equally as forbidden and foolish. That’s just who I was. I told that part of myself to shut up.

“I know that I leave you alone more often than I’d like,” Mom continued. “Your Gran’s shop might not be the most interesting place to hang out, and I wish we could do more things together during the summer, but...”

“Mom, stop,” I pleaded. “It’s not your fault.”

She sighed. “I feel like it is. Without...since we lost your dad, I just worry I’m letting you down, boyo.”

“You’re not,” I tried to assure her, but she went on like she didn’t hear me.

“And when you go and do something like this, it reminds me how much we both have to handle without him, you know?”

“Astrid?” a raspy voice called from the hall leading from the kitchen to the back of Gran’s shop. “I saw your truck pull up. What are you doing home so early?”

Gran walked through the kitchen door, saving me from having to respond. Whenever I got into trouble, Mom got weepy about Dad. That always left my stomach uneasy and tense because I was only three when he died. I didn't remember him well enough to miss him as much as she did. I didn't feel the empty spaces where he should be as often. Or at least, I told myself I didn't.

My mom and my gran were two of the most different people I'd ever met living under one roof. Mom was tall with an athletic build from years on her high school and college swim teams. Her blonde hair was almost always braided back out of her face and her piercing blue eyes never seemed to miss a thing. She still spoke with her faint native Boston accent despite having lived in North Carolina for the last thirteen years. She was the smartest person I knew and one of the hardest working. And while that meant she had pretty high expectations for me, she never made me feel like I wasn't enough. Even on days like today.

Gran, on the other hand, was petite and wrinkled. I wasn't sure exactly how old she was. She never answered questions about her past back in Scotland. Her red hair, always worn loose, had barely faded to grey and her green eyes were clear and clever, but her back was slightly bent and sometimes when she looked at me, it was like she was seeing a time centuries ago. Gran knew everything, though it was a different kind of intelligence than my mom, more folk stories and history than math or Newton's laws. Gran was stubborn and had a short temper, though she'd never turned it on me. Sometimes when she was angry, however, she started speaking in throaty, unintelligible Gaelic. She'd tried a few times to teach me, but the old language hadn't made much sense to me.

Gran glanced between my mom and me, still waiting for an answer to her question. Mom sighed and pulled out a chair to sit across from me at the table.

"Nothing to worry about, Cassandra," Mom answered. "I just had to pick up Evan. Some trouble down at the mall."

"Again?" Gran asked. Somehow, she knew about my past transgressions too? "Was it the skating? Or have you graduated to thieving, Grandson?" Her tone was reproachful, but there was an undercurrent of something else. Mischief? Pride? Maybe that was just wishful thinking.

The mention of shoplifting reminded me of the paperweight still in my pocket. I supposed I had moved up to stealing, albeit accidentally. It was no longer warm, but it left me feeling uncomfortable, nonetheless. I shifted, restless in my seat, eager to get upstairs so I could take it out of my pocket.

“Just the skateboarding, as far as I know,” Mom answered sardonically, shooting me a warning glance.

Gran studied me closely. She always could tell when I was hiding something. I glanced toward the stairs before forcing myself to face her once more. “Did something else happen, Evander? Something you aren’t telling us?”

The tension in my stomach intensified. I hated my full name. People only ever seemed to use it when I was in trouble, or when they had bad news. My mom may not have agreed with Gran about everything, but now they both penetrated me with identical curious looks.

“No, nothing,” I insisted. Snapping my mouth shut, I refused to say anything else. Neither Mom nor Gran looked remotely satisfied by my answers.

My mom put her head in her hands, remaining silent for several moments, each weighing on me heavier than the last. I mean, this was hardly the first time I’d gotten into trouble. So, why did it feel different this time?

“You’re grounded,” she eventually said, pulling her hands away to glare wearily at me. “Three weeks. You are either here in your room or helping your grandmother in the shop. Got it?”

I deserved it. But that didn’t mean I liked it. The shop was dull as an old blade. Or Owens’ wit. Second only to sitting alone in my room, staring at the ceiling all summer. Exhaling in a huff, I shoved away from the table and finally made my way upstairs to my room, leaving a sudden buzz of whispers in my wake. At that point, I was too tired myself to care what they were talking about. Probably me.

Chapter 2

Slamming my door behind me, I was at last, alone. At once, I pulled the stone paperweight from my pocket. I could see myself in its polished

surface. The stone was a dark, iridescent color I couldn't easily name. As I brought it closer to my face, it grew warm again, like it had back in the mall. The shiny surface clouded slightly. For a moment, I thought I could see movement behind my distorted reflection. My amulet warmed as well, almost pulsing against my chest.

I flung the stone away before any more weirdness could ensue. It landed with a soft thump on my bed. Hands free, I tugged my amulet over my head to study it instead. The necklace seemed to be interacting with the random mall paperweight, if such a thing could even be possible.

The amulet looked the same as it always had: a long leather cord bearing a circular, silver-dollar-sized bronze medallion in the shape of a tree. The tree's branches and roots twisted into intricate knots, stretching around to form the edges of the circle. I asked my gran about it when I was younger. Where she'd gotten it. What the symbols meant. She told me the tree was the Celtic tree of life and that the ancient Celts used many knot patterns to represent things like journeys, bonds, or eternity. It made little sense to me when I was like five. It made little more now.

However, when I looked closer now, I noticed small pieces of scuffed, maybe once polished, stone embedded in the metal. Could it be the same stone as the paperweight? That would be one hell of a coincidence.

Gingerly, I knelt beside my bed and laid the amulet on the faded grey quilt next to where the stone had landed. Both objects heated up again, shapes in the stone beginning to shift whenever I tried to focus on it. The strange buzzing I'd felt standing near the door inside that misty hallway returned. I felt as if I stood on the edge of a cliff, staring straight down. On the precipice of...something, even if I couldn't name what it was. And that little voice in my head, the same one that urged me to skate through the mall, screamed at me to step off the edge.

Nope.

I ripped my amulet away from the paperweight. The heat faded and I felt drained, even more exhausted than I had when we'd gotten home from the mall. I didn't know if I believed that the ethereal hall of doors was real or all in my head. I didn't really care. The feeling I got when I held the stone and my amulet close together scared me. Really scared me. The unknown of it all. But also, the nameless energy I felt vibrating inside me. That energy that urged me to move, to act, to grip with my teeth those faintest possibilities I

didn't usually dare reach out for. And well, I'd done enough stupid things for one day.

I shoved the paperweight into the bottom drawer of the small, wooden nightstand beside my bed. I didn't want to think about Mr. McCloud's reaction if he found out I'd taken it. I didn't want to think about walking through a mall storage closet door into an impossible place. I didn't want to think about my mom's face when she came to pick me up today. Replacing my necklace around my neck, I sat heavily on my bed.

Though it was still early – we hadn't even eaten dinner yet – I laid back on my bed, trying to shut off my brain. A difficult task. For a while, I tried to distract myself with a book. When it wasn't assigned for school, I actually enjoyed reading. But even the far-off adventures of gods and heroes and quests couldn't hold my attention for long. The light eventually faded as the sun dipped behind the tall trees and high peak of the house, casting my room into shadow. My windows faced east, so I always lost the sunlight early, even in the summer when the hours stretched longer. I didn't bother getting up to turn on my light. Tossing my book aside, I let my eyelids droop and strove for sleep to find me.

Some minutes later, my door cracked open. "Pizza, boyo," my mom said softly.

I didn't stir, pretending I was asleep. I wasn't hungry anyway. And I knew the tension of today's events hadn't faded. After a moment or two, Mom retreated back downstairs, her sigh audible.

Eventually exhaustion beat out everything I was trying not to think about, and I finally drifted to sleep.

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The sky was an inky blue-black, a fathomless ocean filled with blinking pinpricks of light. I shivered even though the mid-summer air should have been warm. Where was I? Around me, leaves rustled in a soft breeze. The woods. But something told me they weren't my woods. Not the forest that backed up to the house, standing sentinel on one edge of town while the ocean guarded the other. Not the trees I'd run through as a kid, ducking behind the vast trunks before my mom could catch me, or ridden through on my bike with other kids from school. The wind didn't carry that familiar dirt and greenery and slightly salty scent.

These woods felt dangerous. They smelled crisp and cool, like stone and morning dew. And ash. I felt the back of my neck tingle, like unseen eyes watched me. Once again, the sound of footsteps seemed to herald trouble. Slow, heavy stomps crunched through the undergrowth nearby. Whatever walked ever closer was big – bigger than a person, or even the largest deer I'd seen in the forest back home. Whatever it was had me crouching down behind a wide tree, fear tight in my stomach, though I couldn't say why exactly if asked.

Heat bloomed, this time not from the amulet against my chest. The air all around me warmed, matching a growing glow emanating between the trees. I saw a pair of bright orange eyes staring at me, high off the ground. They blinked once, glittering with intelligence. When they blinked again, the scene around me blinked out with them.

A rush of warm air flowed around me and suddenly the sky was bright, the sun shining and leaving me squinting. I no longer found myself in the woods, but rather in a city – though it resembled no city I'd ever seen. Cars and pedestrians zoomed by, hurrying along narrow streets and busy sidewalks. No one seemed to notice me. The buzz in my skull, in my chest, lingered, but felt different than it had a moment ago in the forest. Glimmering skyscrapers rose high in the air. I looked up toward their zeniths and almost toppled over. Amongst the buildings and clouds were flying...people? Yes, one, no two people in brightly colored outfits, straight out of a comic book, were flying through the air. I reached up as if I could touch one of them, though they floated far above me.

Once more, my surroundings shifted, this time tilting sideways, as if the concrete beneath my feet was suddenly the rolling deck of a ship at sea. I stumbled to catch myself and when I regained my balance, I was in total darkness. I couldn't see so much as feel the ground beneath my now bare feet. It was soft, like grass made of silk. The temperature was neither hot nor cool, the air slightly sweet, slightly spicy in my nostrils. I could hear sounds in the distance, either far away or dampened to my ears by something. It reminded me of singing, maybe a melody my gran crooned to me when I was little. I tried to follow the sound but couldn't tell from which direction it came. My steps forward made no noise, each hesitant as I couldn't see where I was going. I figured I should be afraid, but I didn't feel anything.

Eventually, I brushed against a hard, wooden surface. A door. On it were the same markings from the storage closet door back at the mall. Only

now I somehow understood what they said: *Duthchas*. Not that the word meant anything to me. It felt familiar though. I reached for the handle without consciously deciding to do so. It turned easily and swung open.

* * *

I bolted upright in my bed, the quilt tangled around my legs. Weak morning sunshine just peeked around the trees outside my bedroom window. I must have slept for more than twelve hours. And yet, I still felt weary. I tried to recall my strange dreams, but similar to my encounter with the misty interior of the seemingly not a storage closet yesterday, the details faded. It was odd. I didn't usually dream like that, not so vividly nor about places I'd never been.

And I was pretty sure I'd never seen, let alone visited, the places from my dreams. They didn't look or feel familiar. In fact, the strangeness, the alienness of those scenes was one of the only concrete things I could remember. Well, that and the fact I was grounded back here in the waking world.

I slumped back against my pillow, the weight of impeding boredom pressing on me like a boulder. It wasn't that I didn't like spending time with Gran. But customers rarely visited her shop, and besides cleaning, there was very little to do there. Still, I needed to do something, my sleepiness slowing fading to a restless energy.

I took a quick shower, running my fingers through my red-blond hair until it wasn't completely in my face and trying to ignore the new zit on my chin. I'm not sure when I started worrying about stuff like that. Whenever I mentioned it to my gran, she teased me.

By the time I headed down into the kitchen for breakfast, my mom was on her way out. Her advanced physics summer course still had six more weeks, though she did teach later in the mornings on Tuesdays and Thursdays. Today was Wednesday.

"Your gran is waiting for you," Mom said, nodding toward the front of the house. She handed me a Pop-Tart and an orange, managing to sneak in a side-hug as she did so. I wanted to pull away, but didn't, remembering how upset she was yesterday. At least she still felt like hugging me.

I sat at the table, contemplating my orange. What would today have in store for me? And tomorrow? And the next day? Already the monotony had

me itching to grab my bike and head into the woods, or down to the beach. Somehow, I figured my mom would not be a fan of those impulses. Instead, I peeled the orange, nibbled my Pop-Tart, and then dragged myself up from the table to head toward the hall that led between the kitchen and the back of Gran's store.

The shop – a sign hanging over the front door dubbed it “Cassandra’s Curios” – was cluttered with mismatched shelves and tables, some wood, others metal, a few glass display cases interspersed throughout. Soft music, mainly featuring fiddles, flutes, and drums, lilted from unseen speakers. I didn’t see Gran at the counter toward the front of the store. The shop didn’t open until nine. Maybe she was rummaging around in one of the inventory closets. I steered clear, still a little wary of doors that were supposed to lead into boring closets, instead choosing to mill around between the shelves.

Though I’d explored Gran’s shop dozens of times, I always managed to find some random object or artifact I hadn’t seen or asked her about before. My eyes glazed past colorful crystal windchimes hanging like stained glass in the windows, as well as the dusty snow globes depicting darkly forested mountains or coastal scenes. The racks of beaded key chains and charm bracelets and dream catchers were all the same as ever. The stack of notebooks made from recycled materials was new, but after a quick glance, nothing really captured my interest. On a shelf near the back rested a line of old leather-bound books whose titles I couldn’t read. Having investigated them when I was younger to little avail, I almost wandered past them again now. But the symbols on the cover of one caught my eye. They were like those etched into the wooden door in the misty hall in my dream (and maybe in a storage closet at the Ford Mall). A combination of stick-like lines and looping knot patterns that remained unintelligible to me, but somehow scratched familiarly at my brain, nonetheless.

I pulled the book free from the shelf and flipped through it. Page after page of that same indecipherable script. Sadly, unlike in my dream, I couldn’t make any sense of the writing in the book.

“Evander?” a gravelly voice asked behind me. I jumped and spun to find my gran staring at me. Where she’d come from, I couldn’t say. I hadn’t heard her approach. “What’s that you’re reading?”

I shrugged. “Just one of these old books. Not that I’m reading it. I don’t know this language.”

“No?” Gran questioned. “And yet, you study the pages with a curious intensity.”

I wasn’t sure how to explain to her that the language was gibberish to me, and yet I felt as though I should be able to understand it. It wouldn’t let me look away from it.

“Do you know what it says?”

Gran was quiet for a moment. She rarely freely answered my questions. “This book is written in rune-marks. Strictly speaking, it shouldn’t exist.”

Rune-marks? I’d never heard of them. “Shouldn’t exist? Why not?”

She pursed her lips, looking almost reluctant. But so far, she’d been uncommonly forthcoming. Perhaps her reluctance had little to do with telling me about the strange markings. But what it might be about, I had no idea.

Finally, she said, “According to some, rune-marks were said to be the written language of the druids. But druids didn’t record their knowledge in writing. It wasn’t their way. That knowledge wasn’t for outsiders to discover.”

“Druids?” That wasn’t where I expected this conversation to go. “What, you got this book from a druid? Also, what’s a druid again?” They weren’t something I’d learned about in school or from my books, or even video games.

Gran sighed, rolling her eyes up to the ceiling, like I should know the answer to this one. “Druids were ancient Celtic priests or shamen. They kept the mystical secrets of their people, practiced everything from healing to settling disputes to offering advice to the rulers of their lands.”

“What, like wizards? Like Merlin?”

Gran snorted. “No, not wizards. Druids were a much subtler people. Sorcerers are far to flashy and elitist with their magic tricks.”

“Right....” She’d lost me, talking about magic like it was real.

“Don’t patronize me, Grandson. I’m simply answering your question.” Gran frowned at me, deepening the wrinkles between her brows. She hiked her shawl around her shoulders, took the book from my hands, and

marched toward the shop's counter, tucking the book beneath it and out of sight. "Now, as much as I appreciate your interest in ancient history, that floor won't sweep itself. Your mum wants you so busy you can't possibly find trouble. Me, I wonder if such a feat is possible."

I looked away. Usually, Gran laughed off my penchant for mischief, equally exasperated and amused. Or so I'd thought.

"Do you want to talk about it, boy? The incident at the shopping mall yesterday?" she pressed, her tone a touch softer now.

For a moment, I hesitated. Gran knew all sorts of random, weird things. She'd been talking about druids and sorcerers mere moments before. Maybe she'd understand what I'd seen, both in the storage closet and in my dreams. But I couldn't make the words come, a familiar fear churning in my stomach. I'd spent most of last night trying to forget what I'd experienced. And what if it was only my imagination? I didn't want to sound stupid or childish, making up fantasy stories.

"Nah, nothing more to say really," I told her. "Is the broom still in the back?"

Gran paused a moment before nodding. I turned before she could say more and started sweeping. I swept the shop with more diligence than I might usually apply to the task, but I wanted to take up as much time as possible, hoping Gran would forget her prying and the book. Once the floor was swept, Gran set me to dusting the odds and ends in the two big windows at the front of the shop. I carefully maneuvered around a crystal statue of a horse, a silver tea set, more books, a music box, and a necklace of metal woven into leaves and flowers resting around a velvet mannequin's neck. I was pretty sure the same objects had graced those displays since I was a baby. As the duster's feathers floated over the necklace, I noticed again some of those line and knot patterns amongst the flower designs, same as in the book from the back shelf. Same as from the misty hall of doors.

What had the writing on the door said in my dream?

These rune-marks kept showing up. I wanted to ignore it all, but instead I found myself walking back to the counter where Gran sat, knitting something voluminous and green.

"Finished with the dusting already?"

“Yeah, er, almost. Um, Gran? Do you know the word *Duthchas*?” I wasn’t even sure I was pronouncing it correctly. But if anyone might recognize the word, it would be her. And suddenly, I had to know, even if it all turned out to be nothing – all in my head.

She paused. “Where did you learn that word, Evander?”

“Uh, in a book, I think,” I answered lamely. “It looked familiar, I guess? But I don’t know what it means.”

Gran put down her knitting and looked me dead in the eyes. I tried not to flinch away. My gran wasn’t a scary woman. Or at least, I knew she wouldn’t hurt me or anything. But sometimes she’d look at me like she was trying to see right through my skin into my brain or my soul or whatever. I loved her. But it was a little creepy.

“*Duthchas*.” I hadn’t said it right. “It’s an old Scottish Gaelic word,” she eventually explained. “It refers to the mortal world. This world.”

“As opposed to what?” I asked.

“Other realms, boy. Other lands beyond this one. The Faerie lands, lands of magic, lands full of creatures, anything you can imagine, really.”

She took a recycled notebook from the stack beside the counter and flipped it open. With a pen from the jar next to the register, she wrote out the word *Duthchas*, first in Gaelic using letters I knew, then in rune-marks,

with those strange symbols. 

The more I looked between the words, the easier it was to match each rune-mark to the letter or group of letters it represented. It felt almost natural.

Part of me wondered if perhaps those doors I’d encountered led to some of these other lands Gran mentioned. But that would be crazy, right? These other places were only stories. I’d heard several from Gran over the years. Selkies, brownies, banshees. Just bedtime stories. Myths from Scotland, I assumed.

“You know,” Gran continued absent mindedly, “once upon a time, it was said people, like the druids, could see into these other realms, even travel between them. If they had the proper artifacts. Realm stones or scrying pools and the like. But such things have been long lost to time. And so, those skills are only distant memories now.”

A stone? No. Nope. Just another one of Gran's silly stories. I wasn't sure why I even asked her about all this. Why I thought she'd have useful answers. Gran was smart. She knew a lot. But sometimes she got a little caught up in her folklore, a little distant from reality.

"Evan... are you alright, boy? You look pale."

I took a breath and nodded. This was silly. My imagination getting the best of me. "Yeah. Thanks, Gran. I'm fine. Just curious, you know? I'd uh, better finish the dusting."

Gran didn't look convinced, but she didn't push either. She handed me the notebook, and I took it without really thinking about it, stuffing it in my back pocket.