

GREYSONS OF GRIMOIRE  
A WORLD OF MAGIC

TPAUL HOMDROM

*Greysons of Grimoire: A World of Magic*

*By: Tpaül Homdrom*

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More information at: [tpaulhomdrom.com](http://tpaulhomdrom.com)

*For the Dreamers*



# CHAPTER 1: DARK TIDINGS



Caleb Greyson leapt from one rooftop to the next, sprinting across the ceramic tiles. Vaulting a chimney into open air, he let gravity take hold of him. He grinned and reached into his pocket as the cool night air embraced him.

Out came a silver pocket watch. With a click of the top button, it opened, and Caleb held it out like a shield between him and the oncoming street below. A pulse of white light burst from the watch's face, and time slowed to a crawl. Out from the watch flew a dozen shining white discs, which formed a floating pathway through the air. Caleb pivoted, landing on his feet on the first disc. He dashed ahead, closing the watch as he ran from disc to disc, climbing his wide, improvised staircase to the top of a tall tower. Time resumed its original course, and Caleb heaved a sigh, wiping sweat from his brow.

Green fire flashed in the streets below. Not much farther now. In the flickers of emerald light, two forms appeared and disappeared. One was clearly human.

The other, clearly not.

Caleb opened his watch again and leapt from the tower, slowing time around him once more. The discs flew forth, forming a safe pathway to the low rooftops on the left — a perfect pathway to meet up with his fighting companion. Landing on the first disc, Caleb felt a familiar pressure in his chest.

*"Time Magic takes a terrible toll."*

So he'd been told by many wise mages throughout his youth as his unique abilities became apparent. Now in his twenties, he was reminded of it time and again, as he used those abilities night after night.

Like clockwork.

Not that he regretted training in Time Magic. He loved it, and being the only living person able to use it was exciting.

*Besides, there's nothing wrong with a little pressure.*

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Caleb heaved a sigh and let time resume its natural course as he landed on the rooftops and continued along them on a path parallel to the battle below. Silver moonlight illuminated his way in this neighborhood devoid of streetlights, and as he approached the battle, the green bursts of flame added an ethereal tint to the world.

“You’re taking your sweet time!” his companion called.

Caleb laughed. “You said *time*.”

A sigh. “You’re insufferable.”

Finally close enough to join, Caleb leapt from the rooftops once again. He landed in the street, rolling to break his fall, and then was on his feet and charging into battle.

His companion, Chelsea Reiner, was the source of the green fire. In each hand she wielded a silver lighter. Emerald flames shot forth as orbs, walls, spiraling coils, and lancing daggers. She moved like a warrior dancer, graceful and powerful. Her dark hair, just shorter than shoulder-length, whipped around with her movements, framing fierce eyes that shone with verdant light.

“Coming on your right!” Caleb called out. Chelsea responded wordlessly, stepping left, keeping the beast that was their target wrapped in flames and cornered.

Vicious and hideous, their target was a Hollow — soulless monsters, they came in many forms, terrorizing the citizens of Grimoire in the deepest hours of the night. This particular Hollow was a Howler, and looked like a hairless wolf, covered in murky skin tattooed with glowing red markings. Empty black pits took the place of eyes. Obsidian teeth and claws glittered scarlet whenever it attacked.

“Awfully feisty for a Howler,” Caleb said, eyes flashing as he swung his watch in a wide arc overhead. Chains of white light shot forth, wrapping around the Howler’s legs and muzzle, forcing it to the street as it growled and thrashed.

“Well, now it’s finished,” Chelsea said, grinning as she blasted the beast with emerald fire. With one final, throaty howl, the wolf-like Hollow turned to ash. Where it had once been was now a large black scar, and in its center, a single crystal fang.

“Aww, only one,” Chelsea said, giving Caleb a pleading look.

Caleb chuckled as he closed his watch and returned it to his pocket. “Ladies first.”

Chelsea smiled, stepping forward and kissing Caleb on the cheek before sauntering

over to her prize. “You’re a sweetheart.”

“An insufferable sweetheart?”

Chelsea shot Caleb a grin. “My favorite kind.” She lifted the crystal fang, twirled it between her fingers, then placed it in a pouch on her belt.

“Think that’s the end?” Caleb asked.

Chelsea pulled out her cell phone, eyed the screen for a moment, then nodded. “One o’ clock. We’re all set. Ready to head home?”

“Definitely. I’m beat.”

They began the walk to their apartments, navigating the narrow, dim streets with comfortable familiarity. Few knew the winding labyrinth of Grimoire’s roads and paths better than Caleb and Chelsea.

They passed the gargoyles guarding the gate to Jacob Crowley’s mansion, wreathed in shadow even as a full moon shone down on it. They strolled under the Hibidian Arches, and took the Moonstone Bridge across Lunaria Lake, its placid waters gleaming an otherworldly silver.

Chelsea twined her fingers with Caleb’s and leaned against his arm.

“Have you heard back from your sister yet?” Chelsea asked.

“From Fae?” Caleb asked. Chelsea nodded, and he sighed. “She hasn’t replied. She hasn’t said or texted a word to me in almost a year.”

Chelsea bumped her shoulder against his playfully. “Maybe you should pay her a surprise visit.”

Caleb rolled his eyes. “Yeah, she’d love that.”

“You know, you two could learn a bit from each other. Fae could use some of your sunshiny optimism. And you could use some of her realism. She actually uses more than one Talisman, like most mages.” Chelsea cast a meaningful yet teasing look Caleb’s way.

Caleb chuckled, his hand brushing against his pocket watch. “I’m fine with one. My mom has one, my dad has one. I like to think they set the gold standard.” Beside him, Chelsea went quiet, a distant look in her eyes.

*She always gets weird when I mention my parents.*

But Caleb didn’t voice his thoughts. He’d tried broaching the subject once, and

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Chelsea's reaction had been enough for him to leave it alone ever since.

A chirp from Caleb's phone caught his attention. He knew that tone — it was his sound for messages on Re-Code, a messaging app valued for its group chat features. Grimoire's Hunters had their own Re-Code group to stay in contact and check in with each other. If a message was coming through this soon after Hollow Hour was over...

Caleb's heart sank as he read the message.

"Three kids tonight," he said softly.

Chelsea was looking at the same message on her own phone, and nodded slightly.

"Where do those Pipers go?" Caleb asked, gripping his phone tight.

"That's what we're all trying to find out," Chelsea said.

Caleb put his phone away as they started climbing the stairs of the apartment complex. "All our efforts, all our fighting, and still the Pipers slip through our fingers. This can't keep going on. And I..."

"What is it?" Chelsea asked.

Caleb sighed. "This probably sounds weird, but I feel like there's something darker at work here. Pipers didn't use to steal children away. Now they do it every night."

"You think someone's pulling the strings?"

Caleb nodded. "I do."

"But who could control Hollows? And why would they want to kidnap so many innocent children?"

"I don't know. But I don't like it. We need to do better. We protect a lot of people, but if we can't keep the most defenseless among us safe..." Caleb's free hand clenched into a fist. "We don't deserve to be Hunters. We don't deserve to come out here and brag about how many Hollows we destroyed if we can't save a few children."

Chelsea squeezed his hand. "So let's investigate. Let's find a way to keep this from happening. But for tonight..." Chelsea pulled away. They'd arrived at the floor of their apartments. "Let's sleep and recover. Tomorrow we'll take up the hunt again. Unless you have plans?"

Caleb shook his head. "Not plans, but..." He thought for a moment. "I think the twins and Delilah are on Fall Break. I should drop by."



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Chelsea gave him a meaningful look. “Don’t forget about Fae.”

“I’ll see if I can bring backup to visit her,” Caleb said with a chuckle. “Shana’s always been her favorite.”

“Nice strategy. Just don’t use up all your energy before midnight.”

“I know. You can count on me.”

“Can’t I always?”

Caleb smirked. “Good night.”

“Good night.” Chelsea leaned up, kissed him on the cheek. She cast a teasing glance at him as she walked towards her apartment. “You insufferable sweetheart.”

## CHAPTER 2: IN PURSUIT



“Fall break is too *long!*”

The one complaining was Shana Greyson. She had a slim build, with dark hair and eyes, and her easy smile and energetic nature made her eyes sparkle and her angular features seem softer and kinder. She lay back on the couch staring at the ceiling, kicking her feet along with her whining.

Lying on Shana’s stomach and staring at the kicking feet was a cocker spaniel puppy with glowing blue fur and deep black eyes. His head followed her kicking feet, ears perking up whenever Shana spoke.

“I think you’re the only high school student to ever think that,” said Shias Greyson, sitting in the chair near the couch, his feet propped up on the coffee table while he read a book. He was definitely a Greyson, with his slim build, angular features, and dark hair and eyes. His eyes had a particular focused glint to them, even as his lips turned upward in a small amused smile. “It’s only an extended weekend.”

“But I miss my *friends*,” Shana whined back. “And we don’t get to do any club activities during break.”

“All of that will still be there when we go back to school,” Shias said. “You should think about taking up a hobby.”

“I have lots of hobbies,” Shana shot back with a pout. “But I was reading all day yesterday. Everything else requires other people.”

“What do you have four siblings for?”

“But Caleb’s away working, Fae’s off at college and never comes home anyway, and Delilah’s out with mom and dad.” Shana sat up suddenly, scooping her dog into her arms, eyes sparkling as she stared at Shias. “But my *twin brother* is here!”

Shias sighed, putting his book down. “It took you that long to realize you’re not here alone?”

Shana pursed her lips. “Don’t make fun of me. It’s mean.”

“I’ll consider it.”

“So?” Shana leaned forward hopefully. “Wanna do something?”

Shias tapped a finger on his chin. “I should train. You could join me.”

Shana groaned. “Come *on*, you know I don’t care about that stuff.”

“Well, you were born into it,” Shias countered. “You don’t have to care, but you can’t just ignore that you have magic.”

Shana sighed, hugging her dog tight. He nosed his way upward, licking her chin. “What’s so wrong with wanting a normal life?”

“Nothing wrong about it. It just might be difficult.” Shias started ticking off fingers as he talked. “One: your parents are the heads of one of the most prominent magical families in Grimoire. Two: your oldest sibling is making a name for himself as a powerful Hunter, and I plan to do the same. Three: you love Altair, and he’s a magical dog. He’s not exactly compatible with a normal life. Four —”

“Okay, okay, I get it!” Shana groaned, standing up. Altair hopped to the floor and wagged his little tail as he watched Shana. “You’re always so annoying when you start listing stuff.”

Shias shrugged. “So? What do *you* want to do?”

Shana’s eyes sparkled. “You’re really asking me? Really truly?”

“The offer’s expiring soon.”

“Okay, okay!” Shana waved her hands frantically. “Umm, okay, uh... I know! We should go out!”

“Out where?”

“The mall! There are some books I’ve been eyeing, and we just got our allowance.”

“It’s nice that we have a few things in common.” Shias stood, heading up the spiral staircase at the edge of the family room. “Since we’re the last out, we’ve got to lock things up.”

“I’ll help!” Shana said excitedly, racing off in the opposite direction.

She heard Shias mutter, “You only get excited about a few uses of magic.”

*And so what if that’s true? Magic can be cool, sometimes.*

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On the second floor, Shana brandished her Talisman, a black-and-silver metal bookmark with a blue tassel. The end of the bookmark lit up with a ball of white light, and she traced a pattern with it through the air. Lights scattered like a million fireflies, seeping into the walls, floors, ceilings, doors, and windows of Greyson Manor.

For mages, this kind of “locking up” was important. Ordinary alarms, locks, and security systems only went so far if a mage wished ill on your home or family. So magic was used, and all of the Greyson children had been trained in the secrets to the Guardian Magic protecting the manor, and its specific “coding” that was used to raise or lower the wards and safeguards. When “locked up,” Greyson Manor — like many other mage homes — was a virtual fortress.

“All locked up!” Shana said happily as she met Shias at the front door, slipping her shoes on. She gazed into the eyes of her little blue dog. “Altair, I’ll be back soon, and you can come back out then, okay?” She raised her Talisman. A cobalt-blue portal appeared overhead, and Altair gave an energetic little bark before leaping up and vanishing into magical space.

“Ready?” Shias asked, slipping on his shoes. Shana nodded, and then off they went, out the front door, down the long paved entrance walk, through the iron gate, and out into the city of Grimoire.

Grimoire: also known as “The City of Knowledge.” Shana loved that nickname, loved the unique flair and flavor that Grimoire claimed all to itself. Buildings had an old feel to them, with medieval-styled stone exteriors, and the streets were narrow, only suited for walking and cycling. The few cars only drove through the main street that sliced a line north-to-south through the city, and to locations along the perimeter with parking lots, like the apartment complex where Caleb lived. A trolley ran through the center of town along the main street, but besides that, it was all about foot and bike travel. Add to that the fact that Grimoire was full of hills and valleys, and constructed with such narrow, winding, crisscrossing roads, and it meant that the “knowledge” part of “The City of Knowledge” was locally thought of as the need to have extensive knowledge of Grimoire’s geography. It wasn’t a large city in square mileage, but the sheer volume of pathways and streets made it dense and complex. It was easy to get lost, and it wasn’t

uncommon to see people who had lived there for as long as five years walk around with a map of the city in hand.

Shana and her twin brother, of course, didn't need a map to find their way.

Standing apart from the many sudden, small hills and valleys throughout Grimoire was the massive crater on the north edge of the city, formed nearly a thousand years ago by a meteor. It was, along with the rocky shelf that rimmed the northward Grimson Bay, the flattest and most open area of the city. That was Shana's chosen destination: Crater District. It was the most "modern" area of Grimoire, with a rather expansive three-story shopping mall, an arcade, several high-end shops, and a large park that connected to the campus of Grimoire University, a sprawling affair at the northernmost edge of Grimoire, coming right up against the cliffs and looking out over the Bay.

Making their way through the streets they knew so well, Shana and Shias continually ascended and descended, the many hills made easy by both ramps and stairs at nearly every slope, allowing for cyclists and pedestrians to take the same routes wherever they went.

They passed by their high school along the way. Built onto — and into — one of the larger hills in Grimoire, Grimoire Academy appeared rather small. But looks were deceiving. Because of the lack of flat real estate atop the hill, the architects had been particularly clever, creating an entire complex *inside* the hill, underground. There were entrances at the base and top of the hill, and Shana and Shias had, through the years, enjoyed getting lost in the corridors webbing through the interior of the hill itself.

"Let's hitch a ride!" Shana said, cutting down a side street.

The bells of the trolley were sounding, and they knew well enough where it would be in relation to them. Shana and Shias took the path out to the main street and hopped up on the trolley as it went past on its rails, electing to stand on the open section near its front and hold onto vertical poles for support. Shana loved to have the wind in her hair — it made her feel like she was setting off on an adventure.

"Perfect timing, too," Shias said, smiling as they crested a hill and began the long descent to their destination. Shana murmured her agreement.

The view for this portion of the trolley's journey was spectacular. Grimson Bay

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glittered in the distance far ahead. To their left and right, they had views over the hills of Grimoire to the mountainous woodland that surrounded the city to its east and west. Below them and beyond was the Crater District with the mall and arcade, and the park and campus beyond. If you were riding the trolley northward, this was the moment to stand up and look forward and, sure enough, those on the trolley behind Shana and Shias were up out of their seats, peering through the windows or joining them on the open front section.

*And so many of them have no clue.*

It was so strange to think of. With the Greyson family's proclivity for magic, Shana could almost forget that more than half of Grimoire's population had no idea magic even existed. Nearly every day, Caleb fought as a Hunter against nightmarish monsters, protecting the unwitting populace. Because, even weirder than most people not having or knowing of magic, was the fact that they couldn't even *see* Hollows. There were vicious monsters roaming the world that could kill them in an instant, and ordinary people couldn't even see them.

Thankfully, Grimoire's Hunters defended them every night.

They rode the trolley all the way down, disembarking at the edge of the Crater District, walking the path to the mall. While their favorite bookshop in town — Grimoire's Grimoires — was a great place, it was very slow at picking up new releases, and there was a particular ongoing series that both Shana and Shias were currently enamored with. So they ended up at the mall, but at the entrance there were signs that, for a moment, took Shana out of her excited search for new reading material.

"There are more and more of these every day," Shana said glumly, staring at the bulletin boards at the mall's entrance. Plastered all over them were missing persons posters. The saddest part was they were almost all for young kids. Aside from a pair of adults in their late forties, the oldest was only eight years old.

"These just went up yesterday," Shias said, looking over a trio of new additions. "I don't recognize them, but..." he stepped back, looking at the packed bulletin board, "there are just so many."

"It's kind of scary."

“More than kind of.”

“Do you... think there’s anything we can do?”

“You and me?” Shias asked, staring at his sister. “I’m sure the Hunter Guild is on it, and probably more than just them. There are professionals working on this.”

“But it’s not getting better, is it?” Shana asked.

“Which means it’s way too much for us,” Shias said. “Come on.”

Without answers, they passed the sad sight, making their way to the mall’s second floor where the bookshop Bibliograph resided. A sprawling, open concept format, it had style, but the openness was also the reason why the twins preferred Grimoire’s Grimoires. With so much space, Bibliograph lacked the nostalgic, emotional scent of books. It smelled like coffee and baked goods, which wasn’t a bad thing, but it didn’t give it the atmosphere of a *book* shop. The white floors, walls, and ceilings didn’t help either. It was intended to look clean and new, but ended up, at least to Shana, looking cold and sterile.

Still, they had a good selection. It was a small sacrifice to visit Bibliograph for the sake of good books.

“Here it is!” Shana cheered, holding up her prize. “Volume Nineteen! But...” She stared at the shelf sadly.

“They only have one copy,” Shias said.

The long-running *The Misadventures of Gadrick Gorense*ll series was one of the twins’ favorites. It followed the (mis)adventures of the fictional Gadrick Gorensell, a magician and trickster who lived his life seeking the fabled Liter of Wisdom. As the title suggested, he could never seem to find it, always getting into trouble, and just barely getting out of it each time.

Volume Nineteen — *The Water Weaver’s Web* — had just released yesterday, and while the shelf had clearly made a lot of space for it, with posters and banners celebrating its release, they were already down to the very last copy, which Shana held in her hands.

“Want to ask if they have more that they haven’t put out yet?” Shana asked. “It’s a big release, they might not have had space for all of them.”

At the desk, however, they had no such luck. The copy Shana held was indeed the

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store's final copy in stock.

"We have cards for the digital version, though," said the clerk, pushing forward a display full of large cards with Volume Nineteen's cover art on them. "Honestly, I'm surprised at how well the print copy is selling in this day and age. I thought digital would have swept the market years ago, especially for kids your age."

"Nothing like actual paper books," Shias said simply.

Shana nodded her emphatic agreement. "We could read it together," she offered. "Share it, like we used to."

Shias smiled back at her, nodding.

"Thanks, sis," he said as they wound their way through the mall.

"Sure thing!" Shana replied, humming along as she carried the bag with their book, along with three other books that had, thankfully, been in stock. "Do you want to stop anywhere else? We have plenty of time."

Shias nodded. "Anywhere you're interested in?"

Shana sighed. "I asked you *first*," she said.

Shias laughed. "Well, I want to go where you want to go. I can tell you have something in mind."

Shana grinned. "Come on!" She raced ahead, with Shias close behind. She led him to the mall's third floor, and up a wide, open-style winding staircase to the roof park. Shaped like an L, the roof park had a flower garden, hedge maze, pretzel stand, smoothie bar, and several viewing platforms with those strange, stationary, binocular-style viewing machines that cost a coin to look through.

"Looking for Fae again?" Shias asked as he paid the fee for Shana to use a viewing platform on the side facing Grimoire University. Shana swiveled and angled it carefully, leaning in closely.

"Of course," she said, her voice filled with determination. "Her room is on the side facing here. And she never comes home, or calls, so I've got to try to see her at least in some way."

"You could always call or visit *her*," Shias suggested.

"She's in college, she's supposed to be the mature adult."



“Well, if you show her up, maybe she’ll start acting like one.”

Shana pouted as she continued to peer through the binoculars. “I don’t understand what happened. I know, I know, I talk about it all the time, but it’s because it makes me so... so...” She made a wordless noise of frustration. “I miss my big sister.”

Shias sighed. “Me, too.”

“She’s on the fourth floor, right?” Shana asked, swiveling the binoculars.

“You don’t remember?”

“I might have blocked it out.”

Another sigh. “Fourth floor, east wing. She has a corner room, it’s easy to spot.”

“Oh! I see —” Shana made a very unpleasant noise. “Her curtains are *closed*! It’s such a beautiful day! Why’s she hiding in a cave? Did she become a cave-dweller since we last saw her? An antisocial hermit? A nocturnal animal?”

“You and I are the ones who actually go to school in a cave,” Shias replied dryly. “And I doubt she’s become an animal. Well? Wanna visit her?”

Shana pulled away from the binoculars and started walking briskly towards the pretzel stand across the roof. “No,” she said firmly. “If she doesn’t want to see *us*, then I don’t want to see *her*.”

“You’re such a child.”

“We’re the same age, which means so are you!”

Shias chuckled. “I’m twenty-three minutes older than you.”

“That doesn’t even count! You were just pushy as a newborn. I, on the other hand, was the picture of patience.”

“I can see you’ve maintained that ever since.”

Shias bought two pretzels, and Shana ate all of hers and half of his before she leaned back on the bench and sighed in contentment. “Man, those always hit the spot,” she said. “Thanks, by the way.”

“Want a smoothie, too?” Shias asked. “It might be too cold for it —”

“It’s never too cold for smoothies!” Shana exclaimed, eyes sparkling.

And so Shias bought them smoothies — hers a mango, peach, kiwi, pineapple, and blueberry combo, and his a simple strawberry and banana. They sipped as they wandered

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through the hedge maze, Shana finishing her smoothie in mere minutes and frantically complaining about brain freeze. Even so, she was quickly eyeing Shias' smoothie lustfully. He handed it over, and she drank the two-thirds that remained.

"You don't eat enough, Shias," Shana said, gesturing at him with the empty cup of his (former) smoothie. "You know what dad always said about Caleb and growing boys. When he was in high school, mom and dad had to buy double the groceries."

"He also played volleyball *and* was on the swim club," Shias said. "I'm just surprised that *you* eat nearly as much as he used to without gaining any weight."

"Because I use a lot of energy, obviously," Shana said.

"Doing what?"

Shana spread her arms out and twirled in a circle. "Being *me*!"

Shias chuckled.

"You could stand to be more energetic," Shana continued. "You want to be a Hunter like Caleb, after all."

"You don't have to be athletic to be a Hunter," Shias countered.

"But Caleb's always talking about how fit you have to be, and how he's running all over the place on patrols and hunts."

"He's just one type of Hunter. They're not all the same."

Shana eyed him teasingly. "I get it. You want to be a *boring* Hunter."

"Thanks, sis."

"Any time!"

After reaching the center of the hedge maze and then coming out the other side, the twins headed out of the mall and walked the way back home, ignoring the trolley and strolling the narrow streets on foot.

"Maybe we *should* visit Fae," Shana said as she walked, swinging her bag with the books back and forth. "We haven't seen her since Christmas."

"We're on break until Monday," Shias said. "Want to go tomorrow?"

"Yeah! And —" Shana pivoted, pointing a finger in Shias' face, "don't you dare call her in advance! I want to surprise her."

"I wasn't going to, don't worry. It's not like she answers our calls, anyway. I just

hope she's there."

"If she's not, we'll track her down!"

"If it wasn't our sister you were talking about, that would come off as potentially criminal."

"You overthink things."

"I'm fine with that."

"Do you think Delilah would want to come with us?" Shana asked. "She never talks about Fae... I wonder what she thinks about her?"

Shias blinked in surprise. "Huh. I never noticed that."

"I thought you noticed *everything*," Shana teased.

Shias grumbled wordlessly, then stopped as he noticed something ahead. "Hey, isn't that Rae?"

Shana looked with him at the girl at the crossroads ahead and nodded. "Looks like it." She waved. "Hey —!"

Shias put a hand over her mouth and pulled her around the corner.

"What the heck, Shias?" Shana asked in a whisper. "You don't want to say hi?"

"She looks like she doesn't want to be seen," Shias said just as softly.

Shana pursed her lips as she peeked around the corner. "Yeah, I guess. So?"

"So don't you want to know what she's up to?"

That lit up Shana's face. "Ooooh, can we follow her all stealthily and stuff?"

"As long as you take 'stealthily and stuff' seriously."

Shana nodded emphatically. Shias led the way out, watching carefully and motioning to Shana when it was safe to follow. They tread quickly but quietly to the intersection, both peering around to the left.

"She looks so obvious," Shana said softly.

Rae was a slight, mousy girl who the twins knew best for her almost crippling shyness and horribly low self-confidence. Watching the girl try to sneak around in broad daylight was almost comical, with her stopping frequently and always slightly crouched, looking around with wide, worried eyes.

Seven intersections later and Rae was still continuing on her strange trek, with no sign

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of her destination. In her hands was an odd package – a slim box maybe a foot-and-a-half long, with a black surface and silver lining. Shana had never seen a box like it, and the way that Rae was hugging it tightly and trying (and failing) to keep it hidden made her that much more curious.

“Where’s she going?” Shana asked softly.

“Seems like she’s ambling aimlessly,” Shias said.

Shana nodded, going over her mental map of Grimoire. Rae had gone in a spiral outward around the spot where the twins had found her, doubling back towards the center. It was almost as if...

She was trying not to be followed.

But she was doing a terrible job of it.

Caught up as she was in following Rae, Shana was completely oblivious to her surroundings. Shias must have been, too. Because Shana had no idea there was someone behind them. Not until a strong hand smothered her mouth, and she and her brother were pulled back into the alley and out of sight.

## CHAPTER 3: THE FLUTE



Struggling for a moment, Shias was assuaged by the voice that spoke in his ear.

“It’s me, you guys.”

“Caleb!” Shana said excitedly when the hand came off of her and Shias’ mouths.

Sure enough, their assailant had been their older brother. Tall and of slim build, with plenty of laugh lines even at just twenty-two years old, Caleb was looking at the twins with a mixture of amusement and puzzlement.

“What are you two sneaking around for?” he asked.

“We’re detectives!” Shana replied before Shias could even open his mouth.

“We’re following Rae,” Shias added.

Caleb leaned around the corner. “She *does* look suspicious, doesn’t she?” he asked.

“You’re not gonna stop us, are you?” Shana asked, pouting.

Caleb flashed a crooked grin. “Heck no. I’m gonna help you. Come on. I know a better way to stay out of her sight.”

The twins followed Caleb down the street after Rae, checked on her location, and then went down an alley that ran parallel to the street Rae had turned onto. “Here we go,” Caleb said, climbing a stone staircase that ran up two stories to a walkway along the roofs of the buildings to their right — the ones in between them and their target.

“Stay low,” Caleb said softly. He stepped up from the walkway, along the slanted rooftop, so that he could see over to the other side, and Shias and Shana followed suit, staying low, moving slowly so as not to lose their footing on the ceramic roof tiles.

Thankfully, Rae wasn’t moving quickly. Just like she had been for nearly an hour now, she stopped frequently. Casting a wary, wide-eyed gaze around in all directions, she looked jittery, her hands often shaking. Twice she nearly dropped the box she was holding so tightly, and three times she tripped and very nearly face-planted before managing to either pivot to fall on her butt, or stumble and get her feet under her to avoid

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falling entirely.

“She’s not very good at this,” Shias said.

“But she’s jumpy,” Caleb said, moving and watching with careful seriousness. “If you stayed on the street at her level, she’d be more likely to see you. And if she did, there’s a chance we’d never find out where she’s going.”

“So she’d give up?” Shana asked.

Caleb nodded. “At least for a while. Wherever she’s going and whatever she’s carrying, it likely wasn’t her idea.”

“So someone put her up to it?” Shias asked. He took a close look at his mousey friend. She certainly didn’t look confident or focused, but that was also in her nature.

“What do you think she’s carrying?” Shana asked.

Caleb chuckled. “You’re so excited,” he replied.

“That’s because being a detective and learning from you *is* exciting!”

Grinning as he watched over the roofs, Caleb stopped for a moment, as Rae had below. “I’m not sure what that is,” he said. “The box is a strange shape and size. I can’t...” Caleb suddenly went silent, and watching him, Shias thought his older brother looked like he’d landed on an idea.

“What is it?” he asked.

Caleb shook his head, composing himself. “I can’t be sure. I hope I’m wrong.”

“This is so *cool*,” Shana said, completely unable to read the mood, a giant grin on her face.

“Shias, you didn’t try Divining what’s in it?” Caleb asked.

Shias blinked, stunned. He let out a slow sigh. “No,” he said glumly.

A strong hand on his shoulder, Shias looked up to see Caleb smiling at him. “Don’t sweat it. Just give it a shot now.”

Shias nodded, pulling out his pen Talisman. It glowed softly in his hand. Focusing his gaze on the box in Rae’s trembling arms, Shias made use of Divination Magic.

Divination wasn’t, as many thought at a glance, about reading or seeing the future. That was impossible. Divination was a class of magic that focused on “divining,” or discerning, the unknown in the present. It was about analysis, observation, about seeing

the truth of a matter.

It was right up Shias' alley.

Color drained from the world, leaving everything in stark black and white. The box in Rae's hands radiated a dark shroud from it. Shias focused, his vision zooming in closer, aiming to penetrate the shroud of darkness. Commonly associated with Illusion Magic, such a shroud could only effectively be pierced with Divination Magic.

Except... Shias couldn't. The closer his vision grew to the shrouded box, the more of a struggle it was for him to continue zooming his vision in closer. Repelled, Shias was stunned.

*What kind of magic is this?*

"Anything?" Caleb asked softly.

Shias let out a breath, returned his vision to normal. "No," he said. "There's this dark shroud around the box, and... I can't see past it."

"It's crazy strong, then," Caleb said. He smiled at Shias. "You gave it your best. Even masters of Divination can't see through everything."

"She's moving again," Shana whispered.

"And so will we," Caleb replied. They continued on along the roofs, curving around to the right, until Rae stopped again. Shana and Shias both sucked in a quick breath as they realized where they were.

"Grimoire's Grimoires?" Shana asked. "She... she looks like that's where she wants to go."

Rae stood outside the bookshop, package in hand, staring uncertainly at the entrance. She shifted from side to side on her feet, glancing around and then back at the entrance.

"What would she want there?" Shias asked.

"Wanna get a closer look?" Caleb asked. He pulled his silver pocket watch out, spinning it by its chain and grinning.

"But you can't use magic if regular people will see you," Shias said, puzzling over Caleb's idea.

Caleb smirked. "We won't be seen."

"How?" Shana asked, eyes full of wonderment.

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“C’mere, you two,” Caleb said, wrapping an arm around each of their waists. “We’re gonna take a short trip.”

“Wha—” Shias started to ask, but then the world changed. Everything slowed to a near standstill. Colors faded, losing their vibrant sheen. Shias could hear his own heartbeat, slower than he could imagine.

Shias knew Caleb could use Time Magic, but being able to pass on the effects of that magic — to share the sensation of time’s flow altering — with others? Shias never imagined he could do something like that.

And then they were weightless. Caleb had leapt from the roof, clearly using Enhancement Magic to give himself a superhuman leap. With Shias in one arm and Shana in the other, Caleb ferried them through the air, leaping across the gap to the roof of Grimoire’s Grimoires.

The time in the air felt like hours. Or was it days? Time was... Shias shuddered. His head felt fuzzy. Down below, Rae looked like a doll, not blinking, not shaking, not moving the slightest bit. Their time in the air took them past a cardinal in flight — the bird looked like it was hanging from an invisible wire, both wings in the middle of a downbeat, feathers in a strange pattern from the wind ruffling them.

How often did Caleb see the world like this? Did he always slow time down this far? It was like time was stopped entirely, and yet Shias still had his awareness, could move his eyes, even if everything else was happening so slowly. Slowing, or even stopping, time itself — it seemed like it would be simple. Things stop moving, but you don’t. But this... it was paradoxical. Light itself had bent and shifted and lost some of its hue. Shias didn’t... his mind was beginning to blur. Keeping his thoughts together was becoming an exercise in futility. The world felt... compressed. Heavy. Dark. Distorted.

And then, all of a sudden, as if it had lasted for only an eye blink, the world was back to normal, and the three Greyson siblings were crouched down on top of Grimoire’s Grimoires’ roof.

“Caleb,” Shana said softly, swaying on her feet. “Maybe... don’t do that again?”

Caleb rubbed the back of his neck sheepishly. “I’ve never tried that with passengers before,” he admitted. “Guess I’m too used to the effects of time distortion. How weird



was it?”

“On a scale of one to ten?” Shana held up seven fingers. “Seven billion.”

Caleb chuckled, though he looked perturbed. “Okay. I’ll try to avoid doing that in the future. Shias? You okay?”

Shias was staring at the tiles beneath his feet, and for several moments after the question was asked, words still wouldn’t come.

“That... was fascinating,” he finally said in a hushed voice. “And you see that all the time?”

Caleb smiled. “Yep. Every night.”

“Fascinating.”

“So what do we do now?” Shana asked.

“We watch,” Caleb replied, crouching even lower and leaning up over a strange indent in the roof.

That’s right — the shop had a skylight. Shias always found it a charming piece of architecture, especially when it rained. A perfect square, three feet to a side, it was easy to peer over and get a wide view of the shop’s interior.

Rae entered the store, stepping up to the main counter. She showed the box to Kemma Frei, one half of the married pair that owned Grimoire’s Grimoires. She looked shocked, and covered over the box as she looked around the store.

“Making sure there’s no one else,” Caleb said softly. “Definitely something fishy going on here.”

Now confident that they weren’t being watched (or so they thought), Kemma uncovered the box and eyed it closely. She nodded thoughtfully as she ran a finger along it, then pulled a tape measure that was far too stylish for a tape measure from her pocket. With a burnished bronze casing covered in silver filigree, it stood out from the tape measure crowd in a big way. She pressed the measure to the box, and the silver lining on the box turned to vapor, which Kemma blew away gently. Returning the tape measure to her pocket, she lifted the lid of the box, and...

Caleb let out an audible gasp of shock as the contents of the box were revealed.

“Some kind of flute?” Shias asked, trying to see as well as he could.

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“A Piper’s Flute,” Caleb said softly.

“You mean, like... Pipers, as in, the Hollows?” Shias asked, starting to gather what Caleb was so shocked about.

Caleb nodded. “Exactly that.”

“But don’t they use those flutes to lure away children?” Shana asked, and then she gasped. “Wait... is that what all the missing kid’s posters are about lately? They’ve all been taken by Pipers?”

“That’s right,” Caleb said, a puzzled look in his eyes. “I can’t imagine what Kemma wants with an intact Flute. They’re supposed to be destroyed as soon as they’re found.”

“So... what now?” Shias asked, fearing the answer. What was Rae caught up in?

“Nothing yet,” Caleb said. “We need to tell mom and dad. I... I don’t know what else yet. The Freis are part of the Archivist Guild. Maybe they have a good reason for having it, but...”

“You said they’re supposed to be destroyed,” Shias said.

Caleb nodded. “Just like all other Hollow remains and accessories, once retrieved, they’re supposed to be turned in to an Appraiser. Most Hollow Drops get modified for various purposes, but Piper’s Flutes are destroyed. Get back!” Caleb quickly grabbed the twins and pulled them back away from the skylight.

“Do you think they saw us?” Shana asked, her voice tinged with fear.

Caleb smirked. “I can find out.” His form seemed to blur, for just a moment, and then he was normal. “Doesn’t look like it. Kemma was just handing Rae some money. Looks like a hefty sum.”

“Like a —” Shana began, but Caleb started walking to the other side of the roof.

“We should talk somewhere less conspicuous,” he said, chuckling. “Come on, there’s a path down to the street.”

“You don’t want to tell the rest of the Hunters?” Shias asked. They made their way back to the ground, and started off in the general direction of Greyson Manor.

“Dunno,” Caleb said, buttoning his jacket as a chill breeze swept over them. “I would, except that Kemma and Reltas might get in trouble — not to mention Rae. Mister Crowley isn’t known for leniency, especially when mages break laws that he personally

wrote and voted for.”

Jacob Crowley was the head of the Hunter Guild — and Caleb’s boss. But Caleb wouldn’t be worried about upsetting his superiors. It was specifically because it was Jacob Crowley that Caleb worried.

Shias couldn’t blame him. He’d only met the man twice, but both times he’d been unnerved by the Hunter Guild’s leader. It didn’t help that Jacob Crowley had it out for the Greysons’ parents, the former Hunter Guild heads who had since moved on to higher positions — positions that Crowley desired for himself. He had an aura about him, a stern and angry demeanor that made Shias always tread lightly.

“So we just tell mom and dad,” Shana said. “They’ll know what to do.”

Caleb grinned. “That’s right.”

“Why are you still walking with us, anyway?” Shana asked. “Don’t you have work to do or something?”

Caleb feigned looking hurt. “Can’t a big brother check in on his younger siblings now and then?” he asked.

“I *guess* so,” Shana said, playing at aloofness for a moment, before grinning. “Are you coming to visit? Are you staying long? Can you stay for dinner?”

“Yes, maybe, and yes,” Caleb said with a laugh. “And I don’t have work. I’m not an Investigator, just an ordinary Hunter, so I only work at midnight.”

“What about Chelsea?” Shana asked excitedly, eyes bright. “Can she come over for dinner, too?”

“Well, the thing is... I had a bit of plan. It’s limited only to Greysons, though — specifically you two, Delilah, and me.”

“A plan? What kind of plan?” Shana asked, bouncing on her feet.

“You guys visited Fae any time recently?”

“We were just talking about that earlier,” Shias said. “No. We were thinking about it, though.”

“Wait, you want the full power of the Greyson siblings to go after our wayward sister?” Shana asked, her excitement building by the millisecond. “Really? Truly? That’s a great idea!”

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Caleb burst out laughing. “I like how you put that,” he said. “That’s the plan.”

“Because you don’t have enough confidence to go visit her alone,” Shias said, rolling his eyes.

“She can be scary, you know,” Caleb shot back. “Dunno why she’s so distant, but I was hoping you guys could help me.”

“Specifically Shana, right?” Shias asked, chuckling.

“Why me?” Shana asked, eyes wide with curiosity.

“Because Fae loves you,” Caleb and Shias said, nearly in unison.

“I *wish!*” Shana said. “She never calls or texts or anything! I just... I want to know what’s wrong. The last time I saw her, she seemed so sad. And angry.”

Shias let out a long sigh. “I wish I knew, too,” he said softly, staring up at clouds rolling through fields of blue high above.

“Make that three,” Caleb said, sighing like Shias. “I probably should have stepped up sooner, planned something months ago. I kept calling and texting and trying to get a hold of her, but —”

“You’ve been calling and texting her?” Shana asked suddenly. “But... but...” She huffed, stared down at her feet. “I should have, too. I’ve been waiting for her to make the first move.”

“Well, we have a plan, now,” Shias said. “No sense mulling over the past. Let’s just make sure we do this right.” He cast a look at Caleb. “When were you planning on going over?”

“Are mom and dad home?” Caleb asked.

“They weren’t when we left,” Shana said. “They were out with Delilah, but...” She pulled out her phone, checking the time. “They might be back by now.”

“If they are, maybe we should put off talking about the Flute,” Caleb said. “Just pick up Delilah and head over to the University. If we can catch Fae, maybe we could even get her to come to dinner.”

Shias laughed, a soft, bitter sound. “We can try,” he said.

“Hey, why do you think Rae had the Flute?” Shana asked.

Caleb pursed his lips in thought, then offered a shrug. “Someone probably put her up

to it. The Freis may not even be the ones who actually want the Flute. It could be passing from Rae to Kemma, and then from Kemma to two or three or four other people, before it gets where it's supposed to go. And whoever started it likely doesn't want to be known if the Flute is discovered. So they put Rae up to it, thinking she'd be the best able to feign innocence and ignorance."

"She'd be good at that," Shias said, nodding.

"But... it's like a huge conspiracy!" Shana cried.

"Yes, so let's just shout it to the whole city, shall we?" Caleb asked, a finger to his lips. "Whatever's going on, I doubt Rae is actually part of it. She's just the delivery girl. I only hope whoever set this plan in motion has good intentions for the Flute."

"Can people use a Piper's Flute?" Shias asked. "I've seen pictures of Pipers, and their mouths are really oddly shaped."

"They are, but..." Caleb scowled. "I don't know. I don't know that anyone's ever tried. If humans can, well..."

"Then they could lure kids away and kidnap them," Shana said, wide-eyed with horror.

"Not just that," Caleb said. "The Piper's Flute can also summon Hollows to the Piper's aid. That's what makes them so tricky to catch and destroy. If they see trouble, they can bring dozens of Hollows to their side in seconds."

"So, hypothetically, if a human could use it —" Shias started.

"Let's not get carried away just yet," Caleb said, glancing around furtively. "At least, not while we're out on the streets."

The conversation died down from there to casual back-and-forth, chatting about this and that, what each of the siblings had missed in the other's lives. Shias smiled. It had been a few days since he'd last seen Caleb, and it was reassuring having his older brother nearby. It was a good thing he'd shown up in the midst of this — what would Shias and Shana have done, or even been *able* to do, if they'd followed Rae the entire way alone? Shias held out hope that whatever this conspiracy was, it wouldn't spiral into something dangerous and cataclysmic.

And yet, he couldn't deny that the idea made him just a little bit excited.

## CHAPTER 4: FAMILY MEETING



“Come on out, Altair!”

Shana held up her bookmark and a portal appeared overhead. Out came her glowing blue dog, wagging his stubby tail as he ran circles around Shana’s feet.

“I should visit more often,” Caleb said as he kicked off his shoes and hung his jacket. “I keep forgetting how big the Manor is.”

Shana laughed, flopping onto a couch. “It hasn’t been long enough for you to forget, Caleb,” she said. “You were just here on Tuesday.” Altair leapt up to join her. He licked her face twice and then curled up in her lap contentedly.

“Looks like mom and dad aren’t home yet,” Shias said. His pen was in hand, and it flashed twice — a telltale sign that they were the only ones in the building.

“Well, how long should we wait?” Shana asked. “If we’re going to see Fae, I wanna go before dark.”

“If we have to wait, I have more questions,” Shias said. He and Caleb sat down in chairs next to the couch. Shana grinned, pulling out her bookmark and flicking it towards the fireplace. A burst of orange flame shot from her Talisman into the hearth, and the wood within — altered through Augmentation Magic — came alive with warm, crackling fire. It was the perfect atmosphere for curling up with her dog while listening to her brothers.

“How are so many kids disappearing?” Shias asked.

Caleb frowned. “The Pipers are just that good,” he said glumly. “From what the veterans say, there didn’t use to be this many this often. They’d only see a Piper every few weeks — now there are two or three every night.”

“How do they escape?” Shias asked. “Where do they go? How do they keep getting away with this?”

Caleb sighed. “They’re crafty monsters. Pipers can do more with those Flutes than lull kids into following them. They can summon Hollows to their aid. When a Piper’s spotted, that’s their first defense. They can call as many as thirteen Hollows at once. Even for the best Hunters, it takes time to fight through them, and by the time they do, the Piper is usually either long-gone or close to it. They have an uncanny ability to disappear and reappear at will, without warning. And even if a Piper’s directly engaged...” His face looked grim. “They look fragile, and the way they call on others to fight for them makes them seem even weaker. But they aren’t.” He rolled back his sleeve, showing off a knotted scar along his right forearm. About four inches long, its slightly pinkish hue stood out as it bulged from Caleb’s pale skin.

Shana gasped, leaning forward at the grotesque sight. “When did you get that?”

“Tuesday,” Caleb said, a grim smile on his lips. “Patrol just a few hours after leaving from having dinner here with all of you. Chelsea and I came up against a Piper, and it let its guard down — or so we thought. We’d never fought a Piper up-close before. Always spent our time taking out its reinforcements, but this one didn’t call for any. We thought it would be simple, but...” Caleb gestured to the scar. “They have some kind of toxin in their claws. The longer a wound goes untreated, the worse it gets. And once the toxin is removed, it always leaves a mark. I’m lucky I got away with this little.”

“Did you defeat it?” Shias asked.

Caleb nodded. “We managed it. Well, I shouldn’t say ‘we’ — Chelsea did the hard work.”

“So where do they escape to?” Shana asked. “Where are they taking the children?”

Caleb rolled his sleeve back down. “That’s the weirdest part. Once they reach the boundaries of town, they vanish, along with the kids they’ve hypnotized. Valka Frei has been researching it. A magical barrier was put in place over the entire city generations ago, but that scale of Guardian magic was impractical and nearly impossible to maintain, so the barrier isn’t there anymore. But the traces and boundaries still remain, and it’s when the Pipers cross those boundaries that they vanish.”

“Valka... that’s Reltas’ mother, right?” Shias asked.

Caleb nodded. “And head of the Archivist Guild. She’s a genius. But even she hasn’t

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been able to figure out where they go.”

“But what’s gonna happen to Rae?” Shana asked. “Will she wind up in the Cove?”

Caleb chuckled. “I doubt it’ll be that drastic. And we don’t need to worry about her unless she gets caught.”

The Cove — just the name sent shudders through most of the magical community. It was a prison specifically designed for criminal mages deemed too dangerous to be locked up anywhere else. Only rumors and hearsay made it to most mage’s ears, with very little factual information known about it — except that it exists.

“What’s this about the Cove?” came a voice from the entrance hall.

“Dad!” Shana called out excitedly.

“And the rest of us,” came a female voice from the hall.

“Caleb’s here,” Shias announced, before their parents and youngest sister walked into the common room.

“Well, that’s a welcome surprise,” said Deirdre Greyson. The matriarch of the Greyson family, she was the first into the room. With hair as black as raven feathers, dark eyes glinting from behind narrow-framed glasses, angular facial features, and a slim body that was always impeccably well-dressed, she cut an impressive figure and made an instant impression wherever she went. While she could very easily appear harsh and unapproachable, she smiled easily and projected a warmth that belied her appearance.

“You should visit more often!” said Callum, the Greyson patriarch, as he followed his wife into the room. Bright blue eyes and a messy shock of golden hair framed a smiling face with perfect teeth. Dressed in black slacks and socks, a blue shirt, and darker blue waistcoat, it was his hands that seemed peculiar. His right hand was bare save for a golden wristwatch, but on his left hand he wore a black leather glove. To ordinary bystanders it would look strange, but the Greysons all knew — that glove was his Talisman.

“I was just here Tuesday,” Caleb shot back. Standing to greet his parents, he hugged each in turn. “Where’s Delilah?”

“Putting some things away in her room,” Deirdre said. “We went shopping.”

“She just hit a growth spurt,” Callum said with a chuckle. “Going through clothes by



the week.”

“She’ll be as tall as me by the end of the year if it keeps up!” Shana said. “Wait until you see her.”

“But that aside, what’s this about the Cove?” Callum asked.

“Don’t send Rae there!” Shana called out desperately, staring at her parents with pleading eyes. Altair gave them the same look from under Shana’s chin.

“Rae?” Deirdre asked. “You mean Mina’s daughter?”

Caleb nodded. “We need to talk,” he said. “There’s an intact Piper’s Flute at Grimoire’s Grimoires.”

The Greyson parents were silent for three whole seconds.

“Intact?” Callum asked. “And at the bookshop? Why wasn’t it taken to Mina and the Appraiser Guild?”

“That’s what we’re trying to find out,” Caleb said. Just then, footsteps on the stairs heralded the coming of the youngest Greyson.

“Caleb!” Delilah shouted out, tackling her big brother in a hug.

Delilah was the outlier of the Greyson siblings in terms of appearance. Four of the five took on most of the physical traits of their mother: straight black hair, dark eyes, angular features, and overall slender proportions. Delilah, on the other hand, had a mass of long, unruly blonde curls and bright blue eyes like her father, and an overall softer appearance. So when she grinned up at Caleb, she still had the cuteness of a child, even though she had just begun high school.

“What the — you *are* getting tall!” Caleb said, staring in surprise. There was no avoiding that Delilah was still very small for her age, but she’d grown at least two inches since Caleb had last seen her.

Delilah giggled. “I was hoping you’d notice!”

“All right, let’s gather around,” Deirdre said, taking a seat on the couch opposite Shana, Callum and Delilah joining her. Altair hopped down from Shana’s lap and leapt up to greet Delilah, and the young girl giggled as the magical dog licked her nose.

“So, then — Mina’s daughter, an intact Piper’s Flute, Grimoire’s Grimoires... what’s going on?” Deirdre asked.

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“You two started it,” Caleb said, nodding to the twins. “What did you see before I showed up?”

“Rae looked suspicious,” Shias said. “She was carrying a strange box, and looked like she didn’t want to be seen.”

“So we followed her!” Shana added.

“And then you joined us,” Shias said, nodding to Caleb. “She was wandering in a sort of outward spiral along the streets, like she was trying to shake off any potential pursuers.”

“So we followed her to the Freis’ shop,” Caleb said. “She turned over the box to Kemma, and inside was an intact Piper’s Flute.”

Callum pursed his lips in thought, staring at the fireplace. Deirdre nodded. “So Rae was the delivery girl,” she said.

“But it isn’t her fault!” Shana blurted out, desperately hoping her friend wouldn’t get in trouble. “You know how she is — if someone told her to do something important, she probably couldn’t refuse.”

“If she’s just the delivery girl, it’s likely she was put up to it,” Callum said, nodding.

“Any idea who gave her the Flute?” Deirdre asked.

Caleb shook his head. “I wish,” he said. “We just saw her hand it over to Kemma.”

“The box was black, with silver lines around it,” Shias said. “I couldn’t see into it with Divination. But when Kemma opened it, she did something that turned the silver lines into mist.”

“A black-box,” Callum said, his tone dark.

“Yeah, we said that,” Shana said, puzzled.

“No, it’s a term,” Caleb said, clearly trying not to laugh. Shana glared at him. “Sorry, just... you know how planes have a ‘black box’ that records everything, and is designed to be nearly indestructible? That’s where the term comes from.”

“But this is a magical black-box,” Deirdre added. “They’re each individually crafted, designed so that the contents can only be discerned by those who can actually open the box. The magic to open each box is also completely unique. Like a complex locking mechanism, they’re supposedly impossible to crack if you’re trying to break into them.”

Shana leaned back, thinking about that. Magic wasn't her forte, and there were a lot of things she didn't know thanks to not paying attention or studying magic very often. But now that her friend might be in trouble, she was all ears — and realizing how much she didn't know.

“And knowing that much helps us narrow down who's involved,” Callum said. “There are only three mages in Grimoire who can craft black-boxes, and only two who are both reliable *and* discreet.”

“So we need to find out which of them crafted this specific box,” Caleb said. “And we also need to figure out who it was that acquired the Piper's Flute. Definitely a Hunter, so —”

“The Hunter might not be involved,” Shias said. His eyes had that intense gleam to them that Shana knew as his “strategy face.” It always meant that he was putting his sharp mind to work on a problem, analyzing and considering all of the facts available to him. “You always have to turn in Hollow remains to an Appraiser, right?”

“Yeah,” Caleb said. “And there are almost two dozen we can go to. Most go to Mina since she's the best, but all of the Appraisers see plenty of traffic.”

“What's the deal with going to Appraisers?” Shana asked.

“When a Hunter defeats a Hollow, it dissolves to dust,” Caleb said. “But there are always a few things — sometimes only one, but usually two or three — left behind.”

“Pipers are different though, right?” Shias asked.

“Yeah,” Caleb said. “They don't dissolve, they just sort of... fade away. And they only leave behind their Flutes, not claws or fangs or the sort of stuff other Hollows do. We call the remains left behind when Hollows are destroyed Hollow Drops. We turn those in to an Appraiser, as they have specific tools and skills necessary for breaking down Drops into raw materials useful for Augments and crafting magical artifacts and Talismans. That's also how Hunters get paid — the rarer and more difficult to obtain a Drop is, the more an Appraiser will pay a Hunter for acquiring it.”

“Wait, so...” Shana pulled out her bookmark, holding it up by the blue tassel, “this is made from the remains of Hollows?”

“Not necessarily,” Shias said. “There are plenty of ways to Augment items into

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Talismans.”

“You had that Augmented by the Rooks, right?” Deirdre asked. Shana nodded, and Deirdre smiled knowingly. “Then your Talisman doesn’t contain any Drop materials.”

Shana placed the bookmark back in her pocket, considering that. She hadn’t realized how complex and varied Talisman creation could be. It was something all the mages she knew seemed to take for granted, so she had as well.

“Caleb, you should keep this information to yourself for now,” Callum said.

Caleb blinked, puzzlement all over his face. “What do you mean?” he asked. “I can’t tell Chelsea?”

Callum shook his head. “Or any of the other Hunters,” he said. “Just for now, at least.” He cast a glance at his wife, and she nodded back at him. “We’ll look into things on our own for a bit, see what we can dig up without making things public. With Rae and Kemma involved, I don’t think whatever’s going on with that Piper’s Flute is for ill, but we need to make sure.”

“But why not get the authorities involved?” Caleb asked. “At least some Investigators. Surely they could gather information without alerting the people behind this. And their reputation hinges on being discreet.”

“For now, just trust us,” Deirdre said, offering a warm smile to coat over her tone. Shana recognized that combination: the Ultimate Mom Combo™. When she flashed a smile that sweet while using a tone of voice that subtly suggested “don’t you dare argue with me,” none of the Greyson children could object.

Sometimes a smile was the sharpest sword.

“We should get dinner ready,” Callum said, mirroring his wife’s smile, which further drove home the “don’t you dare argue” aura that surrounded the parents. Together, Callum and Deirdre left, leaving the four Greyson kids with their thoughts.

Shana found herself staring at Delilah. Her younger sister hadn’t spoken a word, and had looked like she was just petting Altair, but Shana saw more. She’d caught it a few times in the past, when Delilah had sat in on serious family conversations. She almost never spoke a word, and pretended she was busily distracting herself, but there were little hints that Shana had picked up over time.

Delilah was a very good listener, and she had absorbed every single word spoken. Probably all of the subtext and inference behind them, too.

“How long ‘til dinner?” Caleb asked his retreating parents.

“About an hour,” Deirdre called back.

Caleb checked his pocket watch, tapping his foot. “Well, I guess we should wait to go see Fae until after dinner, then.”

“You’re going to see Fae?” Delilah asked. There was a blankness to her tone.

“That was the plan,” Caleb said. “Wanna come with us?”

Delilah shook her head, blonde curls bouncing. “Nope,” she said. “I have to study.”

Caleb leaned back with a smug smile. “Ah, I remember studying,” he said with an over-played nostalgic tone. “And school. It was so long ago...”

“Don’t brag,” Shana said. “And it wasn’t long ago — you graduated last winter.”

Caleb grinned, chuckling as he stood up. “Shias, wanna get some training in?”

Shias leapt up from his chair, showing more enthusiasm in one action than he normally did in an entire day. “Yeah,” he said, his gold and black pen already in hand. “Let’s do it.”

Laughing, Caleb left with Shias in tow, leaving the sisters in the common room.

“Hey, Shana?” Delilah asked, crossing the room to sit next to her on the couch. Altair wormed his way between them, happy that they were sitting *just* close enough together for him to have a warm and cozy spot to squeeze into.

“What’s up?” Shana asked.

Delilah sighed. “Why do you guys want to try and see Fae?”

Shana stared for several seconds, shocked. “What... because she’s our sister, of course,” she said, playing for nonchalance.

Delilah rolled her eyes. “So? She clearly doesn’t want anything to do with us. Why should we want to have anything to do with her? She’s kind of a jerk.”

Shana thought about that, petting Altair to calm her emotions. “Well... everyone’s kind of a jerk sometimes, right?”

“Fae’s one all the time,” Delilah shot back. “When she was here for Christmas, she barely said anything. And you know how many times she thanked the people who gave

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her presents? Zero.”

Shana sighed. “Yeah, I noticed that. She’s really reserved and holds back a lot —”

“That’s not holding back,” Delilah interrupted. “That’s being rude and disrespectful. Why do we have to try and reach out to her when she doesn’t want to do anything for us?”

“Because she’s family,” Shana said simply.

“What does that have to do with anything?” Delilah asked. “Just because we share the same blood, we should forgive and forget and try to be closer to her? If she doesn’t want to have anything to do with us, then how can she even count as family?”

Shana took a few deep breaths, but those, and petting Altair, weren’t helping.

It wasn’t like she hadn’t thought those same things before. Fae made her really angry sometimes. And she didn’t get where, or when, or *why* Fae had changed. They used to be so close, and then, seemingly overnight, Fae had turned into a total jerk who pulled farther and farther away from her parents and siblings.

It had broken Shana’s heart more than once. She’d thought plenty of awful things about Fae, and not calling or texting her for months wasn’t, like she’d said to Shias, because Fae was supposed to be the adult.

She was scared. Scared that Fae wouldn’t come back. Scared that Fae wouldn’t be her big sister anymore.

But...

“Sorry,” Delilah said suddenly, just as Shana was collecting her thoughts to respond. “I got carried away.” She stood up quickly. “Look, I... if you still think Fae can change, and that it’s worth it to try, good for you. But I just can’t. I think she’s too far gone. And I’m finding it harder to care about it every day.” Shifting on her feet, Delilah reached into her pocket and pulled out a keychain, handing it to Shana nervously. “I got this for you while I was out. I’m gonna go help with dinner.”

Delilah left, and Shana was alone, staring at the keychain in her hand.

As she cried softly for her sisters, she also smiled at the gift from Delilah. The keychain had a little plush doll on it of a humanoid cat wearing a butler’s uniform, holding a serving tray in one hand and a black cane in the other. Part of the “Fancy

Feline” set of plushies — based on the TV show *Great Feline Adventures* that Shana and Delilah used to watch every Saturday when they were younger — both sisters were still avid collectors of memorabilia.

And the butler cat — Reginald Feline Meowmont the Third — had always been Shana’s favorite.

She clutched the butler cat tight, her heart aching for her wayward older sister, hoping desperately that Fae would be a part of the family again.

## CHAPTER 5: “NO BOYS ALLOWED”



“So... who’s gonna knock?”

“You’re the oldest.”

“Fae likes you the most.”

Shana sighed. “I keep thinking my older siblings are adults, and I keep getting disappointed,” she said.

“So... are you gonna knock?” Caleb asked.

Shana, Shias, and Caleb stood at the door to Fae’s dorm room at Grimoire University. There was a small dry-erase board on the door, which had written on it “Fae’s Room,” “Knock: It’s Polite,” “No Boys Allowed,” and “will you out w/me?” That last grammatically incomplete phrase was written in a hastily scrawled, messy style that was clearly different from the neat and stylish handwriting for the other three messages.

“It says ‘no boys allowed’,” Shias said. “I’m guessing that will include us.”

“But you’re her brothers,” Shana said. “There are always exceptions.”

“Is anyone gonna knock?” Caleb asked.

Shana sighed, shaking her head. “I will,” she said. She knocked three times, and the door opened instantly, followed by an annoyed voice.

“I could hear you three arguing outside the whole time.”

Standing in the doorway was their sister, Fae Greyson. The twins and Caleb took after their mother in appearance, but Fae was the spitting image of her. That was only in appearance, though. She had the looks of the Greyson matriarch, but none of the warmth. Couple that with her choice of glasses — wide frames that seemed to make her dark, glaring eyes seem larger than they were — and Shana found her rather intimidating.

“Hey, Fae,” Caleb offered meekly with a wave. “Long time.”

Rather than reply, Fae pointed to the “No Boys Allowed” message on her dry-erase



board. As she did, she noticed the “will you out w/me?” message and glared at it. Unclipping the eraser, she hastily eliminated the messy scrawl.

“Yeah, but, you know, we just thought, since we’re your family...” Caleb was clearly struggling to form ordinary sentences, and his voice had risen in pitch. Shana would have found it comical if Fae wasn’t glowering at the trio.

“What do you want?” Fae asked. Her tone was low and empty of emotion, the main thing that Shana always found made her older sister unapproachable. No matter what, she always seemed like she didn’t want to have anything to do with other people.

One arm was on the open door, the other on the silver belt around her black dress. She was slender like her siblings, but her posture clearly blocked her room from entry.

“We thought we’d visit,” Shias said. Like Caleb, he was also breaking from his usual demeanor, showing how nervous he was. “It’s been a long time.”

“Whose idea was this?” Fae asked. She glared at Caleb.

“You don’t have to look at me like that,” Caleb said, waving his hands innocently. “I just... you never answer my calls or texts. I was worried about you.”

Fae chuckled, but with her mouth in a thin, unsmiling line, it was hard to find any mirth in it. “Worried,” she said dryly. “Right.”

“Can we... I just...” Shana fumbled for words. “I missed you.”

There was a long silence, with Fae watching Shana with a strange look in her eyes. Her expression seemed to have softened, for just a moment, before she looked to Caleb and Shias, glaring again.

“You two leave,” she said simply. “Shana can stay.”

“Wha...” Caleb started, unable to even finish his first word.

“It *is* on the sign,” Shias muttered with a shrug.

“Are you sure?” Shana asked, trying not to sound too hopeful.

Fae nodded, stepping aside. “Come on in,” she said.

Shana looked back at her brothers, who both nodded, so she stepped into the dorm room. Fae quickly closed and locked the door, separating the girls from their brothers.

“So... this is your room,” Shana said nervously, taking in the sights.

She hadn’t known Fae had a single room. There was only one bed, with black and

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grey sheets and pillows. Two windows that should have let in the silver moonlight were shaded with dark curtains. Rather than using the bright overhead light, Fae lit the room with strings of LED lights along the perimeter of the ceiling, tinting the room a cool blue. Her desk was neat, with sketchbooks, erasers, and drawing implements stacked next to her closed laptop, a tablet on the attached shelf, several styluses and tablet pens, and only a few pieces of memorabilia and decorations. Shana recognized the figurines — quite expensive, collector’s edition variants — that Fae decorated her desk and shelves with. They were characters from a variety of fantasy and sci-fi shows that Fae had enjoyed through high school, and two dozen Blu-ray discs of some of those shows were bookended by figurines — one of an armored female knight with sword and shield, the other of a starship captain in uniform, with a blaster holstered at her hip.

“You don’t have any roommates?” Shana asked.

“Nope,” Fae said, sitting in her desk chair and gesturing to her bed. Shana took a seat. “I did last year, but we both wanted singles, and luckily two opened up.”

“Are you still friends?” Shana asked.

Fae finally cracked a small smile, laughing softly. “Come on, don’t look so scared,” she said. “Yeah, we’re still friends. I have a bunch of friends, actually. I’m part of the animation club.”

Shana smiled. “Just like in high school,” she said. “I’m glad you’re still doing that. I always loved your drawings.”

Fae looked like she was blushing as she glanced away, but it was hard to tell in the light. “Thanks,” she said softly. “So... it has been a long time, huh?”

Shana nodded, taking a deep breath and then letting it out. “I’m... sorry I haven’t called you or texted or anything,” she said. “I missed you, but I kept waiting for you to make the first move, but that was stupid, so I —”

“It’s fine,” Fae said quickly. “I’m... sorry. I have been distant from my family, but... I shouldn’t have ignored my sisters.”

“What about Caleb and Shias?” Shana asked hopefully.

Fae shook her head. “Caleb’s annoying,” she said. “So happy-go-lucky, always smiling for no reason. And Shias... he weirds me out. I can never tell what he’s

thinking.”

Shana giggled softly. “I get that. But... why do you want to distance yourself from us?”

Fae sighed. “Being a Greyson isn’t all it’s cracked up to be. Being part of any of the prominent families isn’t, really.”

“What do you mean?” Shana asked, concern tightening in her chest.

Fae’s face regained that harsh, blank expression that was hard to read but always put Shana ill at ease. “You wanted a normal life, right?” Fae asked. “That’s smart. Being part of the magical community here in Grimoire, it’s...” She looked away, her eyes unreadable.

“It’s what?” Shana asked.

“Our parents... they’re rich, and they’re part of the Council of Mages, and they have friends and seem well-regarded and liked by other mages. But that’s not as true as we thought.”

“What do you mean?”

“Some of the most prominent mage families... well, I won’t sugarcoat it. They hate the Greysons.”

Shana’s breath caught in her throat. “H... hate?” she asked softly.

Fae nodded. “Not a word I’d use lightly, just so you know. Most of my friends are mages, and from pretty prominent families, so I hear a lot. It was hard for me to make friends, at first. But when my classmates and roommate learned that I wasn’t really much like my parents, we were able to hit it off.”

“But... why?” Shana asked.

“That was my question, too. Well, you know how the world changes. Cultures change. Attitudes change. Grimoire changes. The magical community’s changed, but our parents are still stuck in the previous era. They aren’t changing with the times. That makes enemies.”

Shana pursed her lips. “I don’t get it.”

Fae shrugged. “I didn’t think you would.”

“No, I mean... just because things change, they have to change with them? What if

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the world is changing for the worse? Then it would be wrong to change with it, right?”

Fae sighed. “And what if the world is changing for the better, but our dear parents refuse to change with it? How should people see them?”

“As people,” Shana replied instantly. “We’re all different, right? Just looking at the world through changes and people changing with it... that doesn’t make sense. That’s acting like the world itself is just a single idea, a single attitude, a single sort of mentality. And when that changes, every single person should just follow suit? That’s not being human, that’s being a robot.”

Fae raised a hand. “Okay, I see you’re upset. Let’s just drop it, then.”

Shana huffed. “I don’t want to drop it. I want to *understand*. And even if your friends hate our parents, why does that mean you have to cut off your entire family? What kind of friends would project their hate for someone else onto their children?”

Fae leaned back, staring at the ceiling. “Shana, I don’t know what to tell you. People are stupid.”

“Can you...” Shana started, scared for what Fae’s response would be, “can you just... can you promise me something?”

“What is it?”

“Can you promise that you won’t keep this distance between us anymore? Can we... can you call me sometimes, and I’ll call you sometimes? Can we hang out, go places and do things? Can we... be sisters again?”

Fae looked shocked, and then she stared at the floor. There was a long, empty silence, and Shana fought against the desire to fill that silence. If Fae needed to think, she’d let her. But in her mind, she kept repeating, over and over: *Please say yes. Please say yes. Please say yes. Please say —*

“Yeah,” Fae finally said, offering a small smile. “I did miss you. Sorry I... well. I’m not very good at this.”

Shana felt like her heart was going to leap out of her chest. She smiled hugely. “Thank you,” she said softly, emotions threatening to completely overwhelm her if she said more.

“Don’t get all weepy on me,” Fae said, waving her hands. “I can’t handle that.”

Shana sniffed, fighting back tears, and nodded. “I won’t,” she said.

Fae sighed in relief. “Okay. So... anyway. How’s Delilah?”

Well, that put a spotlight on Shana. *What do I say?* she wondered frantically, recalling how angry Delilah had been just about the thought of going to see Fae. “She’s...” Shana grasped about for words. “She’s fine. Still collecting, you know.”

Fae chuckled. “I’m surprised she doesn’t have a cat of her own by now,” she said. “She always was a bit obsessed.”

Shana laughed, while she mentally breathed a massive sigh of relief.

“So what about you?” Fae asked. “How’s normal life going?”

Shana pursed her lips. “I dunno,” she said. “About half of my friends are mages. I use magic every day. And with the way things are, I’m not sure a normal life is something I can look forward to anytime soon.”

“The way things are?” Fae asked.

“Have you noticed that kids are disappearing?” Shana asked.

Fae nodded. “What’s that have to do with your life?”

“It’s the Pipers,” Shana said. “There are more and more of them lately, at least that’s what Caleb said, and the Hunters and everyone else can’t figure out where they go, or where they take the kids. So —”

“So you think you should do something,” Fae said flatly. Shana nodded emphatically. “Let the Hunters handle it. They haven’t figured it out yet, but they will eventually. And if they can’t, what could you do? You know the Hunters are some of the best and most well-trained mages in the city, right?”

Shana nodded. “But maybe they’re stuck in their ways. Maybe their methods aren’t the right way to solve this. Maybe I can do something.”

Fae shook her head. “Like what? Do you have a plan?”

“No. But I’m working on one. I only just found out from Caleb about the Pipers earlier today.”

“Shana, don’t,” Fae said firmly. “You’ll get yourself hurt, and you could even get yourself killed. Let professionals do their job.”

“So what am I supposed to do?” Shana asked desperately.

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“Live your life,” Fae replied. “Don’t worry about it. It isn’t your job, and it isn’t your place. If you try to do something about it, you could even get in the Hunters’ way and make their job harder. You’re not very strong with magic, and you don’t know much about it, either, and that was by choice. You didn’t want this life. And that’s fine. You’re free to make your own choices about your life.”

Shana found herself staring at her feet. Fae was right. Shana had, on many occasions, given impassioned speeches to her siblings and parents about how she wasn’t going to live their life, how she wasn’t going to be a mage or join a guild...

And yet, how long ago had the last one been? And how could she say things like that and still call on Altair? Heck, she had her own magical library, having run out of space for books in her bedroom, spilled over into Shias’ room, and finally been told off when she started taking over the family library. She used magic every single day. And she didn’t hate it. She couldn’t imagine life without Altair, and she would never try to replace him with a regular dog.

Even as she thought about living a normal life now, she didn’t feel the passion she used to feel. It was strange, but...

“Things change, right?” she asked softly. “I... I don’t know what I want to do.” She laughed. “It’s kind of weird.”

“Been there,” Fae said. “Around your age, actually.”

“Hey... if there *was* a way for me, or for us, to help the missing kids, something no one else could do... would you help me?”

Fae sighed. “A literally impossible hypothetical scenario?” she asked. “Yeah. If something like that actually happened, and you and I were the only ones who could do something, I’d help you. But don’t get your hopes up for that happening. I don’t want to be a Hunter, either, so that’s kind of out of my area of expertise.”

“What do you want to do?” Shana asked, leaning forward excitedly.

Fae chuckled. “You’re such a kid,” she said. “I... well, what I want to do doesn’t have a lot to do with magic. I want to be an animator.”

“You’ll be awesome!” Shana exclaimed happily. “You’re so good at drawing. And I haven’t even seen any of your artwork in, like, two years, so I’m sure you’re even more

amazing now!”

Fae blushed, looking away. “Yeah, okay. Well... thanks.”

They chatted after that for a while longer, just talking about this and that. Shana did most of the talking, she was so happy to be reconnecting with Fae. And in the back of her mind, despite her older sister’s protests, she began to formulate a plan...

## CHAPTER 6: MELODY OF REGRET



“Man, the streets are thick tonight,” Caleb said, making the most of his momentary reprieve. Clouds obscured the moon and stars above, making tonight’s patrol a murky one. Lights flashed here and there throughout Grimoire, and the sounds of Hollows of all types filled the distant air.

“Which means a big payday for us,” Chelsea said, grinning in the green firelight of the burning Howler between her and Caleb. Her phone chirped, and she took a look at it. “Pair of Weavers heading south between Brookwater and Threadbare.”

“Near the library,” Caleb said. “No word on Pipers?”

Chelsea scrolled a bit. “Well, Chase’s team forced one to escape before it caught any kids, but otherwise nothing.”

“Better keep our eyes open, then,” Caleb said. He flashed his pocket watch, forming a staircase of glowing discs leading up to the roof of the toy shop next to them. “Let’s go.”

“You’re surprisingly subdued tonight,” Chelsea said as she followed Caleb up his staircase. “Deep thoughts?”

“I was hoping we could track a Piper,” Caleb replied as they alighted atop the roof and began heading south along the tiles. “But with this many Hollows, I may just have to wait.”

“Track a Piper?” Chelsea asked. “What are you thinking?”

“I’m thinking there are little kids going missing,” Caleb replied. “And I’m thinking we know exactly what’s taking them, but we don’t know where they’re going. So I thought we’d follow one and find out.”

“They vanish when they reach the boundary line. If it were that easy, someone else would have already done it.”

Caleb smirked. “I didn’t say I thought it would be easy,” he said.



“Well, at least your cockiness is back,” Chelsea said, rolling her eyes. “I spotted the Weavers. How do you want to take them?”

Caleb looked where Chelsea indicated, spying a pair of truly grotesque spiders.

As large as a grown man, Weavers were the worst types of spiders, the kinds with bulbous, oversized abdomens, spindly legs, and tiny heads with beady eyes. That giant rear section always freaked Caleb out, even in ordinary-sized spiders — it looked like the arachnid was hiding some horrible secret weapon. In these massive, monstrous Weavers, it was made more freakish, as their large abdomens weren’t smooth, but mottled and bumpy, and seemed to ripple and squirm depending on the Weaver’s movements.

“I’ll keep my distance and watch you light them up,” Caleb offered, earning a sharp glare from Chelsea. He laughed sheepishly. “I know, I know, Hunters face their fears.”

“It’s not like you haven’t fought Weavers before,” Chelsea said. “So? What’s the play?”

“I’ll trip up the one in front,” Caleb said. “Wait until I say go, then blast the rear one with everything you’ve got.”

“I love it when you play to my strengths,” Chelsea said sweetly.

Racing ahead, Caleb slowed time to a crawl, leaping from one rooftop to the next.

Enhancement Magic. It was the key class of magic that all Hunters had to gain a certain level of proficiency in before being allowed on patrol. Used purely as a way to, as the name suggested, “enhance” the wielder’s own physical capabilities, it was responsible for Caleb, Chelsea, and all other Hunters being able to leap gaps that Olympic long jumpers couldn’t dream of jumping, and jump higher than even top-class pole vaulters could reach. Not just that — Hunters could safely land from a four story drop, could run for hours without exhausting themselves, and could lift even the heaviest of their companions with just one arm if the need arose and carry them at a near sprint.

And that was all without mentioning what those who specialized in Enhancement Magic were capable of. Caleb only knew one Hunter like that, but her physical capabilities were absolutely jaw-dropping.

Caleb crossed three large gaps between rooftops, closing on the Weavers. The tightness building in his chest let him know that he really shouldn’t have started slowing

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time so early — the more he exerted himself physically while using Time Magic, the less time he could keep it active.

And the more he hurt himself.

Returning time to its normal flow for a few seconds, Caleb ran across rooftops, now ahead of the Weavers. Making sure he wasn't spotted yet, he slowed time once more and leapt down to the street. Just one block more. Caleb flashed his pocket watch open, using one of his magical discs as a springboard to launch himself one hundred yards in an instant.

That was the other component behind Caleb's superhuman capacity for maneuvering around the city streets and rooftops so quickly — Mobility Magic. Like many classes of magic, Mobility was manifested differently by different mages, and Caleb manifested it as glowing white discs. Used mostly for creating pathways he couldn't easily jump or climb, he had other tricks up his sleeve, like the springboard bounce he'd just used to get ahead.

The key to most magic was creativity. Two different mages could use the same type of magic, and it would look and act completely differently. Chelsea's Elemental Magic was all about fire, and yet she used it like she was a dancing painter, creating beautifully artistic shapes and movements of green flame. Other Fire Mages — if there were any — would have different color flames and use it completely differently. While Caleb manifested Mobility Magic as discs, one of his friends created a sort of magical jetpack, zipping around with short-range flight.

That was what had drawn Caleb to being a Hunter: he was encouraged to creatively tackle high-pressure, fast-paced, intense scenarios. Thinking up solutions on the fly, training specific techniques again and again until they were muscle memory — these were the things that made Caleb's heart soar, his blood rush, and his whole being feel most alive.

So even when facing his fears and rushing down grotesque spiders with absurdly large and hideous abdominal sections, Caleb was grinning.

His pocket watch flashed with light, and shining white chains formed from thin air. Surging forward, they wrapped up the lead Weaver's legs, and Caleb returned time to its

normal flow.

That was Caleb's true specialty after Time Magic. Containment was all about containing, constricting, and restricting a target. Caleb manifested his Containment Magic as shining chains, which he could spawn directly from his Talisman or from midair anywhere around his target.

Chains were remarkably versatile.

With the lead Weaver tripped up, Caleb shouted out "Go!"

Chelsea was on the rear Weaver in a flash, emerald green fire roaring over the arachnid's body more like ocean waves than blasts of flame. Caleb was impressed — he hadn't been sure Chelsea would be able to keep up with him over that distance with him slowing time so much.

Then again, she *was* the best Hunter he knew.

Both Weavers were crying out in their trademark piercing, inhuman screech that Caleb hated, but appreciated. It felt like knives stabbing his eardrums, but it meant the Weavers were in pain, and that meant this would be over soon.

"Oh, no you don't!" Chelsea shouted, forming roiling walls of flame to block her Weaver as it moved to escape. Caleb wrapped another set of chains around his Weaver's legs for good measure, watching as it fell victim to Chelsea's fire. This was why he worked so well with Chelsea. He could easily present her with a stationary, weakened target, making her own attacks that much more impactful.

It took a scant few seconds for Chelsea to finish off hers, and then she was quickly on the second. Together, they destroyed the Weaver with ease.

"I'll check for webbing," Caleb said, using one of his discs as a springboard, launching him up to the roof of a four-story building in a single bound.

"I'll collect our spoils," Chelsea called back to him in a singsong voice.

Weavers could be very difficult combatants if they got the jump on a Hunter, but in open combat, they weren't particularly deadly. The problem lay in the aftermath. It wasn't just about destroying the Weavers themselves — everywhere they went, they had a tendency to produce a thick, magical webbing over surfaces. If it wasn't cleared away, it could trip up other Hunters on their patrols, and even impact regular citizens the next

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day. The webbing didn't just restrict movement if someone was caught in it — it was filled with malice and anger, and to those who couldn't see the webbing, it was particularly potent. Ordinary, non-magical folks would be moved to fits of rage. The webbing couldn't be left hanging around.

"Anything?" Chelsea asked, leaping up to join Caleb on the roof.

"Nothing," Caleb said. He kept his eyes peeled for the telltale blackened aura of the webbing, but didn't see a thing.

"Well, they were moving a lot faster than usual," Chelsea offered. "Guess they weren't interested in webbing the place up."

"Seems that way."

"So?"

Caleb turned to Chelsea. "What?"

Chelsea put her hands on her hips. "Come on. You were talking about following Pipers earlier. You have a plan?"

Caleb shrugged. "Not really. Just find a Piper, don't let it see us, and follow it to the boundary line."

"They *disappear* at the boundary line," Chelsea said. "Is that the best you can do? We've seen them hit the boundary. We know what happens."

"How well have we ever examined the area right after they vanish?" Caleb asked. "When have we tried following them further? It's always 'oh no, it got away,' and then back to patrols and fighting."

"Because that's our *job*," Chelsea said. She let out a weary sigh. "We need a better plan than that. And we should probably work with a larger team."

"Why's that?" Caleb asked.

Chelsea groaned, tilting her head back as she did so. It was her trademark sign of complete and utter exasperation.

Caleb found it adorable.

"How good is your Divination Magic?" Chelsea asked. "I know mine is flat garbage. How well can the two of us handle thirteen Hollows alone if the Piper sees us and calls for reinforcements? How well can we handle a Piper, for that matter? We've been in both

those situations before, and it wasn't pretty either time. Are you a tracker? Am I? What if the Piper gets one of us with its toxin? I'm not a Healer. Are you? No. Are you keeping up with me? Are you seeing what I'm getting at?"

Caleb stared into the distance. "Yeah. You're right. I know that. I just..."

"You're acting on emotions, not taking the time to think." Chelsea placed a gentle hand on his arm. "My heart aches for the kids who are disappearing, too. But if we get ourselves killed trying to look for them, what good does that do? And if we follow a Piper who has kids with it to the boundary line, and it vanishes *with* those kids, and we failed to stop it and can't find a way to follow it, whose fault is it those kids were stolen away? *And* if the Pipers are taking the kids to their deaths, which I think is a strong possibility, then if we allow a Piper to escape and can't follow it, the blood of those kids is on *our* hands."

Caleb sighed. "Yeah. I hear you. So... what now?"

"We can talk over strategies for finding the missing kids during the day, and take our time putting together the right plan. Right now, we have work to do."

Caleb let his shoulders sag. "Yeah. I figured that's where you were going. Okay. So, where to next?"

"Seemed like the Weavers were rushing to reach the library," Chelsea said, eyes downcast as she thought. "But why? Weavers are all about stealth — when do they ever rush around like that?"

"Wanna head to the library and find out?" Caleb asked.

Chelsea nodded. "Let's do it."

On they went, making their swift way across rooftops to the library.

"Here we go," Chelsea said, dropping to a crouch and Caleb following suit. From their perch on the peak of a steeply sloped roof, they looked out across the courtyard in front of Grimoire's public library.

Styled like a small castle, the library had been around for nearly a thousand years, only receiving slight renovations here and there. Four rounded towers marked each corner, and the main entrance was a massive wooden gate. Faded stonework and architecture from a bygone era worked together to make Grimoire's public library feel

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truly old.

Caleb loved that. He didn't spend much time there nowadays — if he wanted to read a book he was more likely to borrow from Shana and Shias, since they had such huge collections — but he had many fond memories. Most of all, he loved the style. The library's interior was like a labyrinth of bookshelves, with multiple floors separated by spiraling staircases. There was even a basement garden, which always struck Caleb as the weirdest and coolest thing ever when he was a kid.

"No sign of Hollows," Chelsea said, frowning. Sounds of battle raged through the night, but they were all distant. The library was the picture of peace.

"Should we go inside?" Caleb asked.

"Can you pick locks?"

Caleb chuckled. "I know a secret entrance."

Chelsea raised an eyebrow. "Really?"

Caleb grinned at her, then leapt down from the roof, landing in a crouch on the street below. Chelsea followed suit with catlike grace, her short hair falling perfectly back into place when she landed.

Caleb found himself staring. He often did — Chelsea's grace and style awed him at every moment. She had admitted to him that she was self-conscious about her short hair, but she had good reason to cut it that way. Using Fire Magic like she did, she'd had an incident in her Hunter internship where her long hair had caught fire from her own magic. Since then, though she'd learned how to keep her flames from harming herself, she'd kept it cut a few inches shorter than shoulder length — the shortest she was willing to go.

Caleb loved it. Cut short as it was, it emphasized her shoulders and arms, displaying that Chelsea was strong and active.

She looked like the fierce fighter that she was.

"Now's not the time for staring," Chelsea said in a singsong voice. She smirked at him as she walked past.

"When is?" Caleb asked.

Chelsea poked him in the ribs, eliciting a brief, childish giggle. "When we're not in a potential combat zone."

Caleb faked a dramatic sigh. “I suppose I’ll have to cope.”

“You can manage it.” Chelsea stopped in the courtyard, about ten yards from the library’s main gate. “So where’s this ‘secret’ entrance?”

“Around the back,” Caleb said. He led the way across the courtyard to the right, circling around the library’s side. It was dimly lit here, and in the gloomy, cloudy night, shadows were strangely ethereal. The darkness seemed to have a life of its own.

Sometimes Caleb thought the darkness actually *did* have a life of its own. With the kind of magical world he lived in, he wouldn’t be surprised.

Through the darkness and around the library’s rear, Caleb walked over to a railing overlooking an outdoor section of the basement garden. He nodded to the drop, and then leapt over. A simple two story drop was nothing — as long as your aim was good. There were stone statues and rose bushes all about, so Caleb couldn’t leap carelessly. Landing between two lion statues, he stepped aside to make room as Chelsea followed him down.

“Kind of a creepy place in the dark,” she said, looking around. There were a few lights active at night, but they cast a dim glow, serving mostly to lengthen the shadows of the condensed layout. Rose bushes appeared taller, statues appeared fiercer.

“There’s a hidden key,” Caleb said, striding confidently through the pathways, stopping at a squat frog statue. During the summer, its oddly-shaped mouth would spit out a steady stream of water into the basin below it, but now that they were deep into autumn, that function was deactivated. Taking hold of the frog’s head, Caleb twisted it gently to the left a few inches, then the right a few more inches. There was a *click*, and Caleb lifted the frog’s head, revealing a hollow interior. Beneath the pipes that transported the water through the statue’s body was an old-fashioned silver key.

“Should I ask how you know this?” Chelsea asked.

“I was a precocious kid,” Caleb said defensively.

“You’re *still* a precocious kid.”

Caleb laughed. “You got me there.” Taking the key to the nearby door, Caleb inserted and turned it. There was another *click*, and the door easily swung open.

Chelsea frowned. “This doesn’t look like a legitimate entrance.”

Stepping into the darkness, Caleb pulled out his watch and formed a globe of white

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light that floated in the air over his head. Behind him, Chelsea did the same with an orb of emerald fire.

“It’s a service tunnel,” Caleb said. “It was built before this area was turned into a garden. I’m not sure exactly how things used to be set up, but they still maintain it. They open it up around Halloween when they turn the whole library into a haunted house.”

“It’s like a maze,” Chelsea said, peering left and right at a four-way intersection. “Why so many paths?”

“Dunno,” Caleb said with a shrug, taking the path to the right. “They all lead somewhere, but aside from the main path between the garden and the library itself, everywhere else just leads to closets and storerooms that aren’t in use anymore.”

“You think maybe what the Hollows were attracted to about this place might be in this tunnel?” Chelsea asked. She ran her hand along the stone wall, then pulled it away, staring at her fingers. “The walls are wet.”

“The plumbing isn’t great,” Caleb said with a chuckle. He paused, listening. “Hear that? Water’s dripping somewhere.”

“This feels like a completely different building. More like a centuries-old ruin than part of a modern library.”

“Well, the library isn’t all that modern.”

“You know what I mean. It’s been renovated. It looks like a modern building designed to have an older feel to it, but it isn’t... like this.”

“Good point.” Caleb stopped at the next intersection.

“What is it?” Chelsea asked.

“Hear that?” Caleb asked back.

“Is that... music?”

Caleb strained to hear. Was it coming from above, or from within the tunnels? And the music...

“It sounds like a Piper’s Flute,” Chelsea said ominously.

“Can you tell where it’s coming from?” Caleb asked.

Chelsea shook her head. “If I had to guess, I’d say up above.”

“All right. Let’s hurry.”



Caleb took the left path at a jog. Even with his familiarity with this secret entrance to the library, it was still dangerous to try charging through at top speed. He'd gotten lost down here more than enough times to know that much.

But while he took a measured pace on foot, his mind was racing as fast as it could. The music was growing louder, and the sound of it was the haunting, hollow tone of a Piper's Flute.

But that song... it was going on for too long. He'd never heard a Piper play that. They seemed to have two very short songs — one for luring children to follow them, and one for summoning Hollows to their aid. Those two songs never changed as far as Caleb knew. Hunter training involved listening to recordings of both songs until new Hunters memorized them.

As far as he knew, there *were* no other songs.

So what was this strange music?

The song for luring children from their homes had a sort of upbeat melancholy to it. It was something that made you want to tap your foot and cry at the same time — joy juxtaposed with a heavy heart.

For summoning Hollows, the song was tremendously brief. Just a quick series of high, frantic notes, and reinforcements arrived. It made sense. If you were going to call for backup, you couldn't afford to take your time on a long, complex melody.

But this new song that drifted through the stone hallways was completely different. It didn't repeat itself like the luring song did. It continued into new phrases, emotions changing and shifting, like it was telling a story. What had started out haunting and lonely was now tinged with a sadness that pierced Caleb's heart. That sadness rolled itself forward into a bitter regret, a guilt of time wasted and things left unsaid.

"Caleb?" Chelsea asked. Looking up, only now did Caleb realize that Chelsea was ahead of him, looking back with concern.

"I..." Caleb started, but what could he say? His heart felt so tremendously heavy.

"Are we close?" Chelsea asked. Caleb nodded, moving forward once more to lead the way. He thought he saw, for a brief moment, tears shining in Chelsea's eyes, but she turned away.

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There. The stairs up to the library's main floor. Like Chelsea had guessed, it was clear now that the song filled with emotions too deep and powerful for words was coming from above.

"Stay cautious," Chelsea said. She spoke in a restrained voice, like it was hard to get words out. Caleb nodded, feeling the same way, uncertain if he could speak. Pocket watch in hand, he led the way up the spiral staircase.

At the top was a door, and he pushed it open carefully.

The song washed over them, and Caleb almost fell back at the sudden surge. With a force of effort, he stepped forward. They were in one of the open lounge areas in the library, with tables and chairs and couches spread out for leisurely reading.

On the far side of the open area, seated on a couch, someone was playing a flute.

It was clearly a Piper's Flute. Caleb would recognize that strange design anywhere. But the person playing it wasn't a Piper.

It was a little girl.

## CHAPTER 7: THE GIRL IN THE LIBRARY



The source of the strange, powerfully emotional melody that filled the library was the small child sitting on the couch in front of Caleb and Chelsea. She couldn't have been more than six years old, and as she played, her eyes were closed. Sitting back on the couch, her feet didn't even reach the floor, kicking in time with the song she played. She wore nothing more than a simple white dress — even her feet were bare. Apple-red hair spilled from her head in masses of curls, long and flowing. If the girl stood up, Caleb was convinced her hair would reach all the way down to her feet.

“What...” Chelsea said softly from next to Caleb. She was staring, wide-eyed, as confused and shocked as Caleb was.

“I...” Caleb took a breath. “Who are you?” he asked, as loud as he could without sounding like he was shouting or angry.

The music died away, and the girl opened her eyes, taking in Caleb and Chelsea.

“I’m Isabelle,” she said simply. Her voice was cute and energetic. Combined with the way she kicked her legs, it was hard to believe she was the one behind the sad and lonely music.

“That doesn’t really answer our question,” Chelsea muttered.

“Hi, Isabelle,” Caleb said, smiling as he took a few steps forward. “I’m Caleb.”

Isabelle hopped up to stand on the couch, bouncing on the cushion. She twirled the Piper’s Flute in one hand, then pointed at Caleb with it. “Hi, Caleb!” she said, a broad smile on her face. “I think you’re the first visitor I’ve ever had.”

“Visitor?” Caleb asked.

Isabelle nodded, her mass of red curls bouncing adorably. “That’s you!” she said. “And her!” She pointed to Chelsea. “Do you have a name, too?”

“What kind of question is that?” Chelsea muttered. She stepped forward. “I’m

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Chelsea. Why do you have a Piper's Flute?"

Isabelle waved. "Hi, Chelsea!" She then took a long look at the Flute in her hand. "Piper's Flute?"

"Yes," Chelsea said. "Why do you have it?"

"It's not a *Piper's* Flute," Isabelle said, staring at Chelsea with her big blue eyes. "It's *my* flute. I made it."

"You..." Chelsea let out a long sigh. "Caleb, what the heck?"

"Relax," Caleb whispered back at Chelsea. "She seems like she'd scare easily." He raised his voice to address the girl. "What did you mean by that, Isabelle? How did you make it?"

Isabelle cocked her head to the side, staring quizzically at him. She hadn't stopped bouncing on the couch cushion. "Like this," she said as she held up her free hand. Trails of light started swirling above her open palm, forming a sphere, and a moment later, the lights dissipated, and another Piper's Flute was in her hand. She grinned and held it out to Caleb. "Do you want it?"

"How did you do that?" Chelsea demanded. The harshness in her voice came across strongly, and Isabelle leapt up, now standing on the back of the couch. Wide-eyed, she watched Chelsea nervously.

"She's a kid," Caleb said softly, placing a hand on Chelsea's arm. "We're not going to get anywhere if we scare her."

"Something isn't right," Chelsea said, staring at him. "You can see it as plain as I can. She isn't ordinary. Why does she have a Piper's Flute? How was she able to make a second one out of thin air?"

"Let's find out," Caleb said. "If we get worked up, we'll scare her off." He nodded to the frightened Isabelle. "Right?"

Chelsea sighed. "I'm going to watch your back," she said. A lighter in each hand, she walked away. She left the green orb of fire with Caleb, floating a few feet over his head, and summoned up another one to follow her as she left.

"She's scary," Isabelle said, watching her go.

Caleb chuckled. "She's just concerned, is all," he said. "You can do things that we've

never seen before. And those flutes... well, there are monsters that use them to do terrible things.”

“Monsters?” Isabelle asked. She looked more curious than anything. Apparently Chelsea was more frightening than monsters.

Caleb nodded, walking closer. He pulled out a chair across from Isabelle and sat on it backwards, draping his arms over the chair’s back. “Kids have been disappearing from the city. They’re being lured out of their homes by monsters called Pipers who play those flutes.”

Isabelle frowned, plopping down to sit on the couch. “Pipers...” she said slowly. “Aren’t pipes different from flutes?”

Caleb chuckled. “Yeah, the name comes from an old folk tale,” he said. “They’re similar enough. But anyway... how are you able to make those flutes? I mean, I saw what you did, but I don’t understand it.”

“It’s magic,” Isabelle said brightly, smiling proudly.

“Yeah, I guessed that,” Caleb said with a laugh.

Isabelle leaned forward, wide-eyed. “You can use magic, too?”

“Sure can.” Caleb held up his pocket watch, flipping it open. The face of the watch glowed with bright light, and out came two spheres of white light. They flew forward, dancing a halo above Isabelle’s head, and she laughed as she watched. Returning the lights to his watch, Caleb closed it and grinned at Isabelle. “Pretty cool, right?”

Isabelle kicked her legs faster. “Right!”

“But, see...” Caleb twirled the watch by its chain, “I can only use magic through an object like this, called a Talisman. But it looked like you used magic freely. Am I right?”

Isabelle nodded. “That’s right!”

“Do you know how you do it?”

Isabelle frowned, swaying side to side. “I dunno. I know *how* I do it, but only as a feeling. I just... know what to do. And then I do it.”

“And you can make these magical flutes,” Caleb said, pointing to the flutes in Isabelle’s hands.

The little girl nodded. “That’s right!”

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“Why those flutes? Can you make other kinds of instruments?”

Another nod. “I can make all kinds of instruments! But... these are special.”

“Special? Why’s that?”

“Because...” Isabelle looked deep in concentration. She twirled the flute she’d made before Caleb and Chelsea’s eyes, and it vanished into thin air. She then held up the first flute, the one she’d been playing the song with. “This is the only way I can get home.”

The way Isabelle said that made Caleb pause. She’d seemed so energetic and friendly, but when she talked about going home, her voice was filled with the same loneliness and regret as her song.

“Where’s home?” Caleb asked.

“The Library of Solitude,” Isabelle said, enunciating each syllable carefully, like she’d practiced the name over and over. “For some reason, I keep ending up in *this* library. It’s not the right one.”

“Do you know where the Library of Solitude is?” Caleb asked. He had about a million other questions about a place called “The Library of Solitude,” but he didn’t think throwing all of those into the face of a little girl who just wanted to go home would help him much.

Isabelle shook her head. “I know what it looks like. But... I don’t remember how to get there. Or what else is around it. I just know that there’s a song that will guide me back. But I don’t know *which* song.”

“And you have to play it on that flute?”

Isabelle nodded. “Right.”

“Do you know how others might get flutes that are like that one?”

“Like the monsters?”

“Right.”

Isabelle rocked back and forth, staring at the flute in her hand. “There’s a man who used to ask me for them. He’s not a monster, though. He’s a person, like you.”

Caleb frowned at that. “I thought I was your first visitor.”

“You are. He was a solicitor, not a visitor. He hasn’t found me since I came here, and I don’t know how to find him. But he would always come to me, when I was in the other

place, the nothing place, and ask for this specific flute. But I can't give him this one. So I made him one that's just like it, and he said that was good enough. Though he was still kind of pushy about this one." She pursed her lips. "I kinda didn't want to give him *anything* since he was so rude."

"There's something special about that one?" Caleb asked, pointing to the flute in Isabelle's hand.

She nodded emphatically. "This is the first one. My mommy gave it to me and told me to make sure I never lose it, because it was the only way to get home if I got lost."

"What was the man like?" Caleb asked. "And how many flutes did you give him?"

Isabelle swayed from side to side again, her eyes tilted upward as she thought. "He was taller than you," she said, pulling details from her memory one at a time. "He had white hair. And a big scar. It went from the top of his face on one side, across his nose, and down to his neck on the other side."

Well. That didn't sound like anyone Caleb knew. He'd remember features like that.

"I didn't give him all of the flutes at once," Isabelle continued. "He asked for one. Then he showed up again, asking for two. The next time it was for five. And... he kept wanting more. I think I gave him about one hundred before I started ending up here, and then I didn't see him anymore."

Caleb gaped. One hundred? How many Pipers had the Hunters destroyed? Less than twenty in the past five hundred years, if Caleb knew his history as well as he thought he did.

"Do you know how long ago you first met him?" Caleb asked.

Isabelle sighed, staring at the floor. "Time's difficult," she said softly. "My mommy always said so. At least it is for people like us."

"What do you mean by that?" Caleb asked. "What kind of person are you?"

Isabelle opened her mouth, but then the old clock in the library started to chime. "No!" she cried in dismay. "My time's up!"

"Your time's up?" Caleb asked.

Isabelle nodded sadly. "Sorry. It was fun meeting you, Caleb. Hey! Can we talk more tomorrow? We just got started, but you're really interesting, and you ask a lot of

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questions, and it's fun!"

Caleb stared, not sure how exactly to take all of that. Finally, he just smiled. "Yeah, sure. I'll be back tomorrow."

Isabelle hopped to the floor. Even standing up straight, she only barely came up to the top of the chair. She held out her free hand, pinky extended. "Promise?"

Caleb nodded, entwining his pinky with hers. "Promise."

With the last chime of the clock, Isabelle vanished.

"Caleb, time's up!" Chelsea called out, coming back around to the lounge area. "Hey, where'd the kid go?"

"She said her time was up," Caleb said, standing. "She just disappeared."

"Time..." Chelsea stared at the couch where Isabelle had been, confusion and fear clouding her expression.

"What is it?" Caleb asked.

"I'm not sure what it means," Chelsea said, holding up her phone so Caleb could see the time, "but it's one o' clock."

It took Caleb a few seconds to process what Chelsea was getting at. But once it clicked, he felt a cold pit at the bottom of his stomach.

"One o' clock's when the Hollows disappear," Caleb said softly. "And Isabelle... disappeared at the exact same time."

Chelsea nodded.

Caleb stared at the spot where he'd made the pinky promise with the little girl. Creating Piper's Flutes, talking about the Library of Solitude... and disappearing at the same time as the Hollows.

Who was this girl?



Thank you so much for reading!

Continue the story in the full novel, *Greysons of Grimoire: A World of Magic*, available in paperback, hardcover, and Kindle ebook October 29<sup>th</sup>!