



**BEN AND JANE,  
A PRELUDE**

A TREEHOUSE CASTAWAYS SHORT STORY



**BY KG WILES**

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It wasn't until their second to last year at the academy that Ben and Jane moved to the manor where Ben's aunt lived. They'd been attending remotely from his parents' home in Elia, scaping in with the swarms of other magicians on days when it was advisable to do so. During the summers they went back to Elia to stay with his parents, but at all other times of the year they either lived in breathed in the manor, where they also worked, or they lived and breathed at the academy, where they studied.

It brought a lot of comfort and relief to be able to fully attend the classes, even if their schedules were never-ending. To have that sort of instant feedback from the professors and mentors in a time where professors and mentors were starting to disappear made the work all the more substantial. It gave them a certain sort of focus, even when the balance of their time and efforts were being tested and pushed beyond limits.

During the weeks they studied and practiced and dueled and took exams and performed various experiments before rooms of judging onlookers, sometimes failing, but most often pushing through failures to find successes on the other end. At night and on their weekends, they helped Aunt Meg, running the apothecary and stocking the warehouse, which was really just a tiny room in a watermill in the backyard behind the great manor in which they all lived.

Often Ben complained about the work—there was either too much training, which meant exams and duels were coming up, or there was too much stocking, which meant the weather was changing. Jane didn't mind because it meant that they boarded with Ben's aunt instead of at the school. And she felt much safer in Mole than she did at the academy, now that magicians were leaving by the bucketful.

In their fourth year, in December, they took their holiday from the academy, wrapping up their final classes with back claps and good-byes to friends, some of which would be staying for additional

training over the Winter Solstice. Ben and Jane were a semester out from graduating, from mastering their magic. They'd get their sorcerer's marks, their diplomas, and then they'd be free to pursue anything their hearts desired.

Two days into the holiday and they were swamped with orders for Aunt Meg's Potion Number Sixteen, which cured ailing pumpkins. Jane had been searching for allspice in the broom cupboards for over an hour. The recent thunderstorm had knocked all of her carefully organized ingredients into a hodge-podge; the pewter coils were strewn in a heap beside the accordion tape, and the bee's balm, woodsbane, and oregano had congealed into a pile that clung to the floorboards. Aside from that, there was a lot of broken glass and water.

Just where the water had come from, she didn't know. The building was sublimated with half a dozen barrier spells and charms. She supposed that if Ben had been fooling around and had stored the caraway with the red salts, then the incantations could have come undone.

She reorganized what she could and then noticed that her bottles and jars of rare ingredients had gotten soggy. It had taken her four hours to label all of them with lunar script, which she'd done to get around the weather problem, and now the writing was wearing off.

"Knew I should have sealed the writing," she said to herself, dividing up the bottles into semi-permanent and permanently damaged piles.

An enormous crash sounded behind her. Without looking she knew that two shelves of books and the table with the crates of rotting asparagus and kohlrabi had been knocked down.

"Blast," Ben said, wrestling something in through the door. "I'll clean that up. Promise."

He shoved his way into the room and then his shadow leapt over her crouched frame onto the ingredients.

She faced him.

Ben held up two long yew branches, thunderstruck. His grin was wider than his face. "Fancy a duel?"

"Tempting, but there's a lot of work to do. *One* of us has to finish those orders." She eyed him, but his lopsided smile didn't fade.

"Can't you just bewitch it all back into shape?" he said, twirling his fingers beside his head as though it were so easy.

"No, I can't just—" She stared at the thunderstruck branches. "Let me see one of those."

"Channeling, Ms. Jane Holly. I never thought I'd see the day." Ben held out one of the branches and gave her a cheeky smile as she grabbed it.

"Oh hush," she said, grinning back at him. "These branches make for perfect Egos. But this is the one and only time I do it."

"You mean aside from dueling me right afterward."

She ignored him. Channeling was oh-so-easy. Too easy; if she overdid it, she could set the building on fire. She took a breath and swept the branch around the room, twice clockwise, thrice counterclockwise. The shelves picked themselves back up. A crack in the glass which had already been there from the time Ben had thought playing magical golf with an enchanted walnut would be a good idea sealed itself anew. The water in the broom cupboard cleared away and the jars were pieced back together. What was even better, her labels were replaced with new ones, and these were dated. Now in chronological order, arranged also according to necessity, the warehouse was in perfect order.

"Elegant as always, Ms. Holly."

"Would you stop calling me that."

"Oh, would you rather... *Mrs.* Hawthorne?"

She shoved him aside. She'd snatched up eight pounds of allspice, and the jar of dill and candlewax. They'd need every bit of it. "Get to work and maybe I'll consider dueling you with those ridiculous branches, as a thank you for undoing your own mess."

In another hour they finished up the orders, packaging them in accordion tape and brown paper, and sending them off on enchanted wing, which Ben had cleverly crafted from a set of old newspapers. He could be clever sometimes, even if it often came out of his own disasters.

Before they could have their duel, thankfully, his parents arrived. They scaped in through the hallway closet in the manor at approximately half past six, which meant they'd left late.

Jane heard Aunt Meg greeting them. She heard their rustling packages of food—real, unbewitched produce. She heard Ben's mother speaking soft and low, almost cautiously, "We would have been here sooner, but there was a heavy patrol outside the house. They were marching the backfields again."

"Were they searching for children this time?" said Jane, approaching the travel duo and Aunt Meg.

"Jane, didn't hear you come in," said Ben's mother. "How are you dear? How's Ben—causing you less trouble, I hope."

"Yes, Mrs. Hawthorne. And we're both doing fine." She looked behind her. "He was just here with me."

"I'm right here," said Ben, causing his parents to both jump as he leapt out from behind the sofa. "And you didn't answer Jane's question."

"Ben, you startled me, son," his father said. "Come here, give your old pop a hug."

Ben hugged him but gave them a serious look. "Were they searching for children?"

"They were searching for runaways," his mother said. "From the Courts, apparently. A massive escape last Tuesday. Something to do with the Sky Harvest."

"Runaways?" said Ben. "They would have to be Scurriers then, the men patrolling. Don't you think? They don't send ordinary soldiers out that far."

"Ben," said Aunt Meg, with caution in her voice, "they've only just gotten here. It may be the winter solstice, but can't we have a bit lighter conversation?"

"Yes, sorry. How's the farm doing?"

"It's going well enough, as could be expected under the circumstances," his father said. "Not too much interest around vegetables and livestock these days, I'm afraid. But at the very least, we can bring things your way. I must say, Meg, it is quite a bit stuffier beneath the barrier since our last visit. How do you all fare?"

"You get used to it, Pete," Aunt Meg said. "Once you realize what it's up there doing, you come to appreciate it."

"It serves your business well at the very least," Ben's mother said with a soft, albeit forced laugh.

"Indeed, it does," said Aunt Meg. "Half our revenue comes from re-ripening these days. The weather turns nearly every day from the magic, so you can imagine the demand. Let's take everything to the kitchen, so we don't have to un-spoil it ourselves."

Ben's parents had brought more than produce: outside of the usual baked goods his mother made, and half a quart of honey from his father's bees, there were quilts and hand-stitched sweaters, new voleskin notebooks, timepieces synchronized with the solstices—"From Zeke, of course. You know how he finds the oddest things up north"—and there were two letters (these from Zeke), which had come straight from the Northern Wastes.

There were also gifts alongside the letters. Ben got a pocket sundial and a box of his own personal store of ingredients to share with Jane. And Jane got an atlas—the newest addition they could find.

"We needed Zeke's help with that one—you know how hard it is to find maps these days, with the king's new law," Ben's father said.

Jane took the book into her hands and felt her heart flutter—had it found its desire, she wondered. She had thought about it, but he was right, maps were hard to find—hard to come by. And she needed a map before she could start her own.

But now she had one—a book of them, to be precise.

"All these gifts," she said. "You didn't have to do this."

Ben's mother hugged her tight, wrapping her arms around her as she used to do when she was just a young girl, a recent addition to the family. "You've both been working so hard—both of you graduating half a year early. We had to celebrate." She looked Jane up and down. "You've grown so much since our last visit—you're becoming quite a young lady, and quite the accomplished magician too, I hear. Your parents would have been very proud."

For hours, they caught up. Jane's favorite thing about the winter holiday was how Ben's family always shared tales about their family; they had family history as far back as King Cornelius and could tell tales for days. Aunt Meg made kettle corn as the stories spilled forth, and for the first time, Ben's parents let them try the slim bottle of sistrine they'd brought for Aunt Meg. They said that since they were almost sorcerers, they were old enough to try it.

"But just a little," Ben's mother warned, making Ben and Jane, who had already drunk their fair share, giggle well into the night.

And it was well into the night that they finally made off for bed. Despite the things Jane had been hearing of late—the rumors of the rogue magicians using sacrificial magic to fuel their airship fleet, and the scares about the king finding out about the protective barrier which covered Mole and many other cities from his mad reign—Jane felt happier than she ever had. With the atlas still in her hands, her heart fluttering from the exciting new thoughts about her future, she fell asleep.

She was shaken awake the next morning. "Jane," said Ben. "Jane, wake up." She sat up.

"What's going—"

"It's the Sky Harvest. Jane, they've blown up our school."

**A** melee of confused thoughts tumbled through her mind as she quickly got dressed. They seemed to

meet at a single point: why?

Everyone was already awake when she made it downstairs. Ben's parents were busy speaking to different people far away through fluency lines. Aunt Meg was talking in person with Men-of-Magic; they'd scaped in earlier that hour, just minutes after the explosion. Jane picked up pieces of information as she searched the house for Ben.

"They don't know why they did it."

"—they said no one made it out alive."

"—twenty-four of them—"

"—spotted the Red Scythe. The Baron himself dropped the spell."

"It wasn't the king."

Jane's head twirled.

Then she saw Ben. There was someone else beside him. They were both by the kitchen sink, leaning on the counters. She ran forward.

"Zeke!"

Zeke took her into his arms like she were his kid sister. "Jane. How are you kid? I'm so glad neither of you decided to stay on for that program."

"Our friends," Ben said, his voice quiet. Jane could tell by his tone that he'd been saying it a lot. She said, "How are you here? When did you get back from the Northern Wastes?"

"Would you believe it, I was at the school when it happened? I got in last night. Decided to stay on overnight. Was planning on heading right over here to surprise everyone first thing."

"Are you hurt?"

"No. No, I'm fine. But I wanted to talk to you about something. Both of you. Away from mom and dad and Aunt Meg. Follow me."

He led them out the back door to the yard. They crossed a frosted patch of grass—it had snowed sometime in the night, although it didn't look like it now. The temperature had risen, twice over, and the snow was already melting. Zeke held the watermill door open and waited for them to go inside before following. He peered back out, closed the door, and faced them.

"What's this about?" Jane said.

"Mom and dad are going to want to know why you're here. We haven't seen you in over a year," said Ben.

Zeke held up a hand. "I know, I know. That's why I've got to hurry. It will only take a second." He slid his hands across Aunt Meg's alchemy cookbooks. "I was wondering if you two could help me with something. It has to do with your school."

"Do you know what happened?" Jane said.

"I told you," said Ben, "the Sky Harvest blew it up. For no reason. Probably just mad our professors and the board hasn't aided them in their noble mission against the Crown."

"There is a reason," said Zeke. "But that's not it. They were looking for something. They needed heavy magic to get at it, hence the explosion."

Jane could feel her hands shaking. She shoved them into her pockets. "What were they looking for?"

"Knowledge—books. Something me and the other scholars have been protecting for a long time."

"Not the Green People again," said Ben. "Zeke, we don't have time for this. Our friends just died. Our school was destroyed. That was—that was the last magician's academy in the west."

"I know, which is exactly why I need your help. I know mom and dad won't want anything to do with it—they'll probably try to take you home as soon as they can. And Aunt Meg—she'll be against it as well... but for her own reasons—"

"What are you going on about?"

"They didn't find them—the books," Zeke said. "I hid them well before I left for the Northern Wastes. And I couldn't get them out when I returned last night, because I was blasted clear from my room. Now I'm afraid that if I go back, I won't be able to find anything quick enough in the wreckage... unless I have your help."

Jane felt her heart slide down her chest just the slightest at the thought. She'd never seen the Sky Harvest before—not even their ships. They'd be swarming the area. And their fire magic... "Wh-what can we even do? We're not even sorcerers yet."

"But you know your school, you know it well. And you're both good at the exact skills we'll need to get by the Firebrands."

"We *knew* our school well. It's in smithereens now," said Ben.

Jane put a hand on his shoulder and squeezed it. "What would Firebrands need with a book about the Green People, anyway?"

Zeke said, "I'm not sure. But we can't let them get it, can we? This will be your chance to stop them, to help the real magicians. This war isn't going to end anytime soon, we can all see that. You may not be sorcerers yet, but you're smart, and you're strong. Better yet, you're not dead."

Jane swallowed. Her hand had slid into Ben's. He was trembling, and their heartbeats had joined together in unison, beating to the same incessant high notes from the squealing wood frames of their school that was said could be heard from as far off as Pharaohs' Flight. Jane already knew her answer. "I want to help," she said.

Ben swallowed a sob. "Me too. For Jamie, and Franklin, and Marley, and all our professors who stayed behind. For the school." He squeezed her hand.

"Excellent," said Zeke. "Our first obstacle is Aunt Meg."

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**H**e hadn't said their parents, Jane noted. Their parents would be difficult, and in fact it was difficult getting around them to plan (Zeke had to give them a long explanation as to why he was back, and what he knew about the school, which had taken two hours of their precious time). But they weren't nearly as cunning as Aunt Meg, who had already noticed their private conversation in the watermill and asked Jane about it.

"A year apart," she was saying. "The three of you must have a lot to catch up on."

Jane nodded her head. Ben had managed to get upstairs unseen, and was packing for their trip (Jane had had to take Aunt Meg into the hall to find something to ask her about while he'd snuck in from her storehouses with ingredients for later enchantments). They'd leave at midnight through the hall closet. They would be in and out of the school in under an hour, Zeke had said, and back in bed by two. Jane just needed to keep Aunt Meg by her side and talking. "He was just telling us how sorry he was for our friends. He knew Marley's mom from his own school days. She graduated the same year he started."

"Is that right? He told you this... in the watermill? Odd place to exchange condolences."

"Ben didn't want his parents to see him crying. He's trying to stay strong for them. He... he doesn't want them to take us home."

"You certainly won't be going home after this."

"We won't?"

Aunt Meg shook her head. A softness had touched her features. "No. Too dangerous. You'd be safest here beneath the Belt, with me to finish up your training."

"You're going to teach us?"

"Indeed. That is, if you can stay out of trouble." She gave Jane a wide grin. "Well I know you can, Jane dear. It's Ben I'm worried about. Ben under his brother's influence. And with emotions high, I'm counting on you to be sure he doesn't do anything stupid."

Jane swallowed a knot. "Sure, Aunt Meg. Of course."

"For if you did... well, best to cross that bridge only when necessary."

She stalked off, back toward the Men-of-Magic, and their silly red and mauve hats.

**J**ane lay awake in her own bed later that night, staring at a dark ceiling, feeling her pulse quicken with every second that passed by. Soon, it would be midnight. The Witching Hour, Zeke called it. Witching Hour, indeed. They'd have to get by a great old witch who she was sure knew what they were planning, and then they'd have to get by three or four dozen mad sorcerers with magic that defied logic. All in king's realm. The blast from the Firebrands' spells had likely taken apart the remaining barriers over the school grounds. So anything—anyone—could be waiting out there for them.

She leapt out of bed at Zeke's voice. It wasn't midnight yet, what was he doing?

She stuck her head out the window. His figure, and another shadow off to his side, beckoned her down.

"Out the window?" she said, in the loudest whisper she could muster. "What about scaping?"

"Too risky. She'd know. Just come on."

She enchanted her bedclothes into a stair that zigzagged out her window after grabbing the satchel of ingredients from Ben's parents. When she stepped down beside Zeke and Ben, she said, "It's not midnight yet."

"Exactly. It will throw her off."

"You've thought of everything."

"Had to. These books are of the utmost importance."

"You still haven't told me how we're getting all the way to the school," Ben said. "It's outside the barrier. On top of it, it's a hundred miles off from here. We can't just walk."

"We're still scaping," Zeke said. "Come on, I'll show you."

They passed the watermill. Jane took one last, long look at it, wondering whether she'd see it again. Then she looked back at the manor. Aunt Meg's study lamp flicked on. "She's awake!"

"Come on. It's just beyond the fields, in the wood."

They ran through the soggy backfields, climbing between the fallen fence posts, and made for the wood. Jane could hear a sound behind them. A wind was stirring, picking up the leaves and moisture which scattered around them. Tendrils of fog were hissing and winding up the hill toward them.

"Zeke..."

"I know. Just keep going. I'm right behind you."

He spun around and muttered out an old incantation that sounded like a school riddle. Then he ducked with a laugh and followed them. "That'll keep her busy," he said.

"She's not going to be happy with us," Ben said.

"I know little brother, but sometimes we must make sacrifices in times such as these."

Finally, he skidded to a halt and showed them his master plan. Seventeen old loafers were strung together by the laces in one long line; none of them matched.

"Portables?" said Ben. "That's your great idea."

"No, it's brilliant," said Jane. "Linked portables. Like a train, and we don't lose much time."

"Well how are we supposed to get back?"

"We can scape in the way we had planned to scape out. It won't matter if she catches us coming in, she already knows what we're up to."

Jane felt the knot in her stomach tighten. "Perhaps we should just get this over with."

"Right. Everyone hang on."

Jane held Zeke's and Ben's hands on either side of her, as Zeke took the first loafer and shoved it out in front of him. Her body was thrown forward. She could feel air whipping at her face, and the heat turning to frigid cold as they left the Belt behind. She was pulled to a stop which sucked the air right out of her. Then she was tugged forward again. And stopped. This happened twelve times, stop, go, stop, go. On the final stop, the string of loafers turned to ash and danced away on the night air.

Ben leaned over his knees, taking deep breaths. Jane waited for her vision to clear. Zeke was already walking ahead. Smoke clogged their breathing. They'd landed near the school, for Jane could smell the smoking piles of debris, but they hadn't landed in it, as she would have thought.

Zeke seemed to read her thoughts. "The Firebrands would know if we entered the grounds magically. Best to go by foot from here."

"How do you know they won't know when we enter, even if it's by foot?" she said.

"Oh, they will," said Zeke. "It will just take them longer to locate our exact whereabouts. Enough time for us to sneak back out, at the very least."

Jane blew out a breath. Ben took her hand in both of his. "You sure you want to keep going?" he said. "We can still turn back."

"I'm sure. Are you sure?"

He gave her that lopsided smile. "I think so."

Zeke beckoned them to a crouch and pointed ahead. They were maybe forty yards off from the smoldering pile of their once-magnificent academy. More of it was standing than Jane had expected, given the descriptions she'd received from the Men-of-Magic—but they were often drama queens.

That's when she saw them—there must have been thirty or forty Scarecrows—airships so large, the sight of them alone took her breath away. She had never seen them in real life before. And the newspaper clippings with their photos hardly did them justice.

"Sky Harvest," said Ben, eyes following the same trajectory as Jane's. "Look at those ships, they're enormous—bigger than a Sky Galleon."

"That's because they're mostly Gunhawkes... a couple of Jack Nimbles," said Zeke. "Come on, we need to get in before they notice us, so we can get back out."

They started forward. The swirling purple flame appeared on the waywins and balloons, glittering like starlight in the dark. The ships seemed mystical bobbing above the mass, twirling tendrils of the embers into eerie shapes and coils which plucked apart the night sky.

"I'm going to need you two to use every magical precaution in your arsenal. I'm talking lightweight charms, voice-hushers, everything. Ben, have you got your timepiece?"

"Got it."

"Give us a fifteen-minute countdown."

Ben began twirling a nob on his new timepiece. Jane said, "Is that going to be enough time?"

"It will have to be," said Zeke. "That's exactly when they'll be able to locate us. Now you, Jane, I need you to work your magic as soon as we get into the school remains. With the fire, I won't be able to find the storeroom where I hid the books without your special spell."

She nodded, patting both the satchel Ben had plundered from out of the watermill and the new pack of ingredients; four bottles of saffron and gold flakes, a bottle of white sand, a jar of clear water, a cork, a needle tipped in yarrow, and a vial of cinnamon, just in case. Although, with the Firebrands' fire magic, she was sure the cinnamon served only as a comfort against her more-than-childish fears. "Ben, I need you to help me make a big spell—huge."

"Which one?"

"A mirror of the surroundings, including the ships and smoke, down to every last cinder. But leave the three of us out of it. We'll sneak in beneath the spell. When we reach the school, it's your job to locate our exit."

He nodded, busying himself with his own magic. Jane could see it zooming about his body like bees around a hive. She felt fuzzy. Her own magic came back mixed with veins from the smoke and runoff. The Firebrands had leached everything but the most tainted and disposable sections, leaving a muddy clot in the air—in her magic.

"We're going to make a run for it," said Zeke, and took off before Ben had finished his spells. Jane could see him falling behind. "Ben!"

"Keep going—find those books!"

Jane faltered between the two brothers and decided to follow Zeke, grabbing her ingredients in hand while she ran so she'd be able to craft the enchantment the second she reached school grounds. She could hear voices coming from her left, but she didn't see anyone. Her heartbeat had shifted, banging behind her eyes. Her mouth had gone dry.

She reached a section of the school that had once served as an indoor courtyard, filled with exotic green plants, some man-eating; down the stone steps was the arena where the duels had taken place. It was all but unrecognizable. Jane only knew it because of the black cauldrons that lined the dilapidated walls—they'd once held the plants.

She heard a soft noise, like a lid snapping open.

Zeke reached around her and tugged her down beside him. Ash gave way beneath her hands, staining them black. They were crouched behind one of the cauldrons. Jane peeked her head around the basin, following Zeke's gaze.

Three Firebrands moving through the grounds. One of them, a female, kicked at a pile of brown stones, smudging the grass with her boots afterward as she continued to walk.

"Fourteen quadrants, and none of them have found a single hint—not a whiff, not a sign," one of them was saying, as they skirted the courtyard.

The female paused, sweeping her gaze round the arena, sniffing, hands on hips. "She's not going to be happy about this taking so long—why is it taking so long?"

"One of the entrapments came loose and a Crow got to them before we could—or so I've been told by some of the Portal Knights."

"You think he got away?"

"Couldn't have, the blast engulfed the whole building like a sea wave sucking down a ship."

Two sets of boots set down by Jane's elbow. Zeke put a finger to his lips, and set his other hand on her shoulder, to be sure she got the message.

She had never struggled so much with magic in her life—any gust of air, a breath, a movement of one of their boots slightly to the left—and she'd lose her hold on the spells; eleven of them were a lot to juggle when one wasn't yet a sorcerer.

"I don't see why we're down here when it's not until the Fourth Order that any of us can use from the stores. How are we supposed to find them when they've been sealed, entrapped, bottled—hell, they might even have set djinns to guard over them?"

Jane could barely breathe. The magic, the ash, her nerves... She kept thinking, *Ben, where's Ben*, and holding her breath and hoping to high heavens that they hadn't spotted him—that they wouldn't spot them right then.

The boots moved on.

Zeke whispered in her ear, "Come on, it's clear this way."

She followed him at a crouch, smudging her knees and forearms. She had begun breathing beneath her shirt.

"Right here should do. Hurry, so we can find the storeroom."

She scattered a handful of the white sand and began to shakily draw an image with the saffron and gold flakes until she'd run out. Four points, six lines—she carefully counted out the spaces as her hand moved over the diagram. She set the jar of water as centered as she could manage, plopped in the cork, and set the needle over the top of the cork, waiting for it to settle.

"Who's there?"

"Shit," said Zeke, hauling Jane to standing.

She'd just managed to read the direction when Zeke shoved her forward.

"Find the storeroom, get the books, and meet with Ben at the exit. I'm right behind you!"

"What about the spells?"

"You'll have to undo them yourself—go!"

An avalanche of boots were coming from another section of the school, too close for her comfort. A silver mist leapt up from around Zeke's frame, but in seconds, he doused it. The Firebrands appeared around the corner.

"What in the seven sisters is this mess?" one of them said, plowing his boot into Jane's enchantment. But the dust had already settled. She knew where the storeroom was.

"Crows?" said another.

"Most definitely the work of crows. Spread out."

She waited to be sure Zeke was alright—four Firebrands were circling him, looking right through him. Beyond, she stood. Zeke threw his arm her way. Run, his expression said.

She ran, following the lines from her spell. The rest of the school's ruins spread out in her mind. There was the mess hall, messier than it had ever been; there was the stone vault where the equipment was locked up over the break, all burned up; there were the dorms, where her friends had once been, sleeping in peace. She could smell another fire, this one red and angry. There were yells behind her, loud pops.

She skidded to a halt, listening for Zeke's voice, or Ben's.

Fluency lines, more than she'd ever seen at once, trafficked the air above her head—the Firebrands were communicating. And Jane and the others had been found out.

She skirted a fallen pillar. The storeroom was upstairs, where part of the building had remained intact from the spells circling the books. She inched her way up a stairwell that was threatening to give at any moment. She was halfway up, when the stone steps collapsed to the ground, and a woman's voice—the one from before—laughed.

Jane froze. She'd dropped her other spells in her rush to the storeroom. Or maybe their time had run out.

"I'll let you live if you take me to the book," the Firebrand said.

Jane spun around. Her eyes widened. The woman had blue fire dancing along her arms, over her face. She laughed again and licked her lips.

"Am I everything you'd been hoping for?"

Jane dodged a blast from the palm of the Firebrand's hand.

She was just fast enough to etch a wall in front of her own prone body, which was quickly consumed by the dancing green fire leaking forth from the Firebrand's trill movement. Something else shot by her head, taking a few strands of her hair. She felt the stone sink beneath her feet, shift apart, and move, entangling her legs.

She gave a cry.

The Firebrand crept toward her, shivering with laughter. Then her voice hardened and darkened, "Where. Is. It?"

Jane did the only thing she could think of. She plunged a hand into her pocket and wrenched out a handful of cinnamon. Before the Firebrand could bat an eye, she'd blown the stuff into her face. She was not expecting the reaction that followed: the Firebrand screamed, piercing her eardrums; the stone stairs gave way beneath her a third time, and she crashed to the floor below, just as the cinnamon ignited in the dancing fire, turning everything white and hot, popping like the light in a flashbulb explosion.

Jane went blind for half a minute and stumbled off toward a hall, searching for another way up. As she turned the corner, Ben crashed into her.

"Where's Zeke?" he said.

"I lost him back there. But the storeroom—it's just this way."

Her hand in his, they fled for the back hallway, following the burgundy lines of her spell. For a fleeting beat of her heart, she worried what she'd done to the Firebrand. Had she been killed? But then a hall full of them appeared ahead.

Ben swung around, slamming her into a nearby wall.

They ducked.

The boots went sprinting off in different directions.

Ben said quietly, "They're scared to let their superiors know we're here. I heard them speaking about it. Some hierarchy—we might have a better chance of getting out of here than we thought."

Jane didn't want to celebrate yet. They still had to find the storeroom, Zeke was missing, and wasn't Ben supposed to be searching for their exit? But she didn't have time to say any of this. He was already dragging her along the wall. The burgundy lines were growing fatter, more certain. The storeroom was around the corner.

"The spells," said Ben, when he saw it ahead. "How are we supposed to—"

Jane went to work. There were over four dozen, no time to dally and wonder and worry. She picked out the first eleven she knew on sight alone and dispelled them; outside of these she recognized fifteen more, only six of which she knew anything remotely formulaic about. Everything else was advanced or beyond—unrecognizable—magic she'd never done or heard of having been done.

She swallowed a knot and picked apart the next six. Two more and her confidence went up. Maybe she didn't need to recognize them to undo them.

Beside her Ben grabbed her arm and squeezed so tight she turned around. Half a squadron or a troop—or whatever they were—of Firebrands heading their way, down the spindly hall, magic cracking and sizzling in their hands, too cocky to even conceal themselves. But Jane knew it wasn't just cockiness. They didn't need to conceal themselves because it didn't matter if they saw them. What could they do?

She turned back to the spells. She had to keep trying. Her fingers flew over the hatching, as though she could massage and squeeze the spells and enchantments and whatever else there was apart.

"You could help me," she said to Ben, who had turned back to his timepiece and was fiddling with a dial.

Footsteps and voice echoed behind them.

"Shit, shit, shit," said Ben. "Oh wait—"

Jane felt his hand clasp her wrist and was jolted so hard, she almost lost her footing. When her balance had returned, she stared up at the door only to find that all of the spells had returned in full.

She spun around. "What did you—"

The Firebrands were back down the hall. They'd reversed, but they were still heading in their direction.

Ben grinned, holding up the timepiece. "Time spell," he said.

Jane nodded and went back to the spells, flying through the first nineteen and adding another three.

"You'll need to go faster. We don't have enough time. Have to start over," Ben said, and Jane felt the pulse once more.

Sighing, she started over. "How much time do we have this time?"

"Same. I can only take us back two minutes. Need to work fast."

Jane made it through twenty-two spells this time, she was beginning to memorize her movements. When the Firebrands reached the corner of wall adjacent to the door, she said, "Again." She couldn't risk them crossing past that corner.

Again, she started undoing the spells. Twenty-nine.

"Getting better," said Ben, activating the time spell a fourth time.

Two minutes later, thirty-seven spells in, Jane said, "Again."

After five more tries, Jane could only manage to get as far as the thirty-ninth spell. "I'm nine spells short each time. I need your help."

"I can't manage the time spell and those other ones—those look the hardest of the bunch."

Jane thought. They'd used the eleventh try to have this back and forth, but Jane was getting worried he wouldn't be able to keep this up—what did it even cost? She said, "Okay, okay," and put her hand to her temples, squinting into the spells. "I'll tell you the first nine spells—those ones are the easiest. After that, I can take care of the rest. Just nine spells, Ben. Nine. Easy."

"Ten," he corrected her, dangling the timepiece in front of her face. But he nodded following this, turned the dial, and sent them back two minutes once more.

Jane used the full two minutes to describe the first eight spells.

"Let's hope this works. I can probably only do a few more," Ben said, confirming Jane's fears.

After two more tries, Jane got through all of her spells, but Ben was still struggling holding up the time spell as he juggled the other nine. He only unfastened six.

"I don't know if I can do this," he said, scrunching his brows together.

He waited until the last possible second before jumping them back. "This is the last time. If we can't—"

Jane put her hand on his shoulder. "We can," she said. "Focus. Picture the other side of the door."

In two minutes and eighteen seconds, they undid the last spell. The door sprang open like an eager host welcoming in its guests, and they scrambled inside and shut it. The Firebrands had been at the corner, eyes forward toward their prone figures, yet the door remained unmolested. At least until another five minutes into their search within.

Jane flew back toward the door, just as the handle was turning.

"Lock it!" said Ben.

"It is locked!"

"Put a—"

Jane was thrown back. She fired off three spells before she'd hit the ground.

They were knocked aside. "Whoa, whoa," said a familiar voice. "Easy, it's just me. Was that a Compression Curse? Nice work there, Jane."

Zeke pushed his way into the room, shut the door, and barred it with half a dozen spells. He was completely covered in ash from head to toe. He saw them looking. "Don't ask."

"I thought you were a Firebrand," said Jane, picking herself up. "Coming in like that."

"Sorry, but I didn't have a lot of time and you locked me out."

"So where is this damn book?" said Ben. "Let's find it and get the hell out of here."

"Yes, let's," said Zeke, peering around. "It's over there, in that safe. Behind all the spells."

"There are *more* spells?" said Jane, throwing up her arms.

"Of course there are. But don't worry, you have me now to dispell them. Nice work with the ones on the door by the way—how'd you do it?"

"It took a million tries," said Ben. "But can we catch up later? Book first."

Zeke nodded and crouched before the safe, hands going to the empty space around it. Just as he was piecing together a spell to unhook the first six on the safe, there was an explosion just outside the door. "Looks like they've found us. Have to make this quick. Jane, find something to carry the other books in."

"Other books?"

Zeke continued as though he had not heard her. "And Ben, I'm sorry, but you'll need to find a new exit."

"Great, we're already in a closet and he wants me to find another—" He swiveled his head around.

"Why can't we just do it from right here?"

"We're in a storage room," said Jane, as she was winding an aisle of books and scrolls, searching for the something Zeke had asked her to find. "It's too large."

There was a pop, as well as two louder explosions outside, and Zeke stood up. The safe opened a crack and he slid his hand inside it and came away with a small, dusty, green book looking nothing like the artifact Jane had pictured.

"It will have to do," he said. "We're out of time."

He swept forward and tore a curtain from the window, tossed it up, and spun it into a wide, billowing sack. Books and scrolls—maps too, Jane noted—began to fill it. He tucked the green book into his jacket. He sprang forward and gathered Ben and Jane at his sides. And he said, "Hold tight, this one's going to be a bit windy."

Jane was expelled from the ground with such force, the air was knocked clean out of her. She gasped as the world spun in circles before her eyes, plummeting her through a vortex of maddening colors, shapes, sounds, and magic.

Firebrand magic pierced their traveling veil. Mad green and red fires shot toward them. Shadows and smoke clung at her feet and tugged, threatening to pull her in half. Sounds and voices materialized before her—before them—like a ventriloquist giving life to his dummies.

Zeke catapulted them sideways, then up. He pelted the air with his magic, his skin growing hot, then cold, then frigid and scalding all at once.

They scaped across time and space, dodging fire magic, and stepped out into a dark, empty store. They came down hard and crashed out of the store the next minute. Ben and Zeke were laughing so hard, they had to pause and crouch down onto their knees. Like them, Jane could hardly breathe, but for very different reasons.

Zeke said, "Well, that was a lot easier than expected."

"Some sorcerers they are," said Ben. "They didn't even see us when we were outside the room."

"That's right," Jane said. "They didn't. We were standing right in front of them."

Zeke clapped his little brother on the back. "That would be from our stellar collaboration with that Mirror Spell."

Ben laughed, coughed on smoke, and spun around to face Jane. "How are you?"

Jane looked up at him and nodded. "Fine," she said, still wondering about that female Firebrand. "But where are we? I thought we were going right back home."

Zeke shook his head and slapped his brother on the back again. "You two did excellently. I wouldn't be surprised if you are already mastered and that school just didn't want to see you go yet."

Ben's laughter died away. "What does it matter now—no one to help us finish up our training?"

"Aunt Meg said she'd train us," said Jane.

"After this?"

"You'll have a whole store of books to bribe her with," said Zeke, handing the sack over to Ben. "I only needed this one." He pulled the green book from his jacket and held it up.

"You're not coming back with us," Jane said. It wasn't a question.

His next words were no surprise. "I have to get this book back under proper protection. It's extremely valuable. I know it doesn't make sense now, but one day, when I know more, I'll come back and explain everything."

"How long will that be?" said Ben, frowning.

"I'm not sure."

"But we'll see you before then, right?" said Jane.

"Oh, most definitely. For more hijinks and fun."

Ben looked down at the sack in his hands. "I'd say we've yet to face the scariest thing of the night."

"I'm sorry I won't be there to face her with you. You can blame everything on me. Say I forced you to do it—say I threatened you."

"She'll never believe that," said Jane.

"I know." Zeke gave a laugh that seemed to take the load right off Jane's shoulders. They had survived the night after all. And they'd gotten something in return—Jane peered at the maps sticking from the sack and wondered again about her heart's desire. Now that she'd taken on a Firebrand and lived to tell the tale, think what she could do against kingsmen and Scurriers, and with Ben at her side.

Once again, Zeke seemed to read her mind. "You two can do a lot for this war—you can turn it in the right direction. Give our people a voice again. The next time I see you, I bet you'll have already begun."

As usual, Ben had started crying as his brother said his farewells. Jane didn't blame him, sometimes they didn't know if they'd ever see him again. When he left, they decided to walk home. Zeke had scaped them back into Mole. They were a twenty-minute walk from the manor. Jane helped Ben carry the sack by putting her hand on his, and feeling their magic unite.

When they reached the manor, the fear had melted out of her. And it stayed away, even as Aunt Meg met them at the front door, smelling of old, angry magic.