

Detective Runewall
The Gambler

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B.T. Frost

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Other works by B.T. Frost

Detective Runewall Series:

Book 1: Detective Runewall: Uncut Gems

Book 2: Detective Runewall: Grave Secrets

Book 3: Detective Iceheart: Twin Crowns

Book 4: Detective Runewall: Case Files

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Chapter 1

Joseph Runewall crumpled up another sheet from his notepad and tossed it into the ever-growing pile in the corner.

He was sitting in a large square room composed entirely of stone. It was a reception area for what he presumed to be a hidden hall or estate. His ancestors had built it.

The center of the room was comprised of four pillars and a massive recall circle. By his estimates, the blindingly bright magic circle was powerful enough to draw someone — or potentially fifty someone's — back from the other side of creation. It also appeared to be the only way in or out.

Besides the single wooden desk and the chair he was sitting in, there was nothing else to the room. There were no doors or windows and every single piece of stone was cut and shaped to fit snugly against the one next to it.

He had searched the room a hundred times with a lantern light in hand and had failed to find a single shred of runeology or writing. The opposite was true when he opened himself to the greater 'verse and used his arcane vision.

If he used magic, he was literally overwhelmed with the amount of runes in the room. Normally that sort of thing wouldn't be an issue because everyone knew magic to be two-dimensional. There might be a jangled mess of runes that floated around each other on a flat surface, but they were always connected by tethers that could be followed and the jumble could be untangled.

Even if a three-dimensional object required magical imbue ment, it could only be done so two-dimensionally. Something would be drawn on or etched into the surface of the object being imbued.

That meant if he spent enough time mapping out and reading the runes, he would eventually figure out what it all said and could work out a solution to decipher it and figure out what the runes were for.

His ancestral family had laughed pitifully at two-dimensional thinking. They had found a way to work three-dimensionally. The concept alone frequently twisted his brain into a headache.

The only way he could begin to perceive it or piece any of it together was to imagine writing out the runic formula on panes of glass. From there, he had to make sure that the formula functioned in every single direction throughout the layers of glass. That meant everything had to balance, from side to side, up and down, backward and forward, and diagonally. It took far more effort to complete, but was exponentially that much more stable and powerful.

His family had been so paranoid about protecting themselves and their secrets that they had imbued the room with nine layers of magic. On top of that, the runeology was encrypted — that meant that there was a

cypher buried deep within the nine layers. He couldn't think of a wizard alive that would be even remotely qualified to begin deciphering any of it. Yet, he felt like he was supposed to.

Every plan he had made to figure out and locate the cypher was crumpled in a pile in the corner of the room. The only clues he had available to him were his mother's letter, her diary, a ring, an amulet, and a dream.

He didn't have the amulet, as he couldn't find the means by which to steal it away from the authorities. It would have been better if he did because there had recently been another attempt to steal it. Detective Stonehand had told him about it when he returned from his botched retreat at the Mountainside Inn with Grace.

For the purposes of deciphering the runes, the amulet was useless. He had the entirety of its design dropped into his brain, and nothing in its creation even so much as hinted at the room he was sitting in. It had a completely different purpose.

The ring had been given to him by his mother through his aunt, and it had been the key to instructing him on how to enter this reception area in the first place. Unfortunately, that was all it seemed to be designed for; it offered nothing else that he could discern.

The diary had given him some unrelated clues, but several thorough examinations proved that it was nothing more than a simple notebook. There was no magic in it other than some rudimentary re-enforcement spells to slow any potential weathering.

Some form of dream magic had guided him to Julian 'The Fireball' Kane. That was where his mother's letter had proven to be instrumentally helpful. Quoting it to his abusive and alcoholic former colleague resulted in memories being unlocked — Kane had apparently met Joseph's mother the night she had died and she had told him some things.

Unfortunately, before that former colleague could

divulge anything of what was told to him, Kane was whisked away by Arcanum wizards. The Fates were cruel.

Joseph doubted that they took Kane for his memories; they more than likely took him because they wanted to experiment on someone that had been recently touched by a cursed object. Regardless of the reasoning, his capture was greatly troubling. There was no telling what they would learn from Julian; intentionally or by accident. It could put Joseph and others in grave danger.

It had been several weeks since those events. Every effort had been made to get Julian released, but the Arcanum was sitting behind a wall of legal advocates and contractual promises. Arguments were made against the Arcanum for the weaselly way in which they had whisked the man away, but the defense that was argued was that “his health was of paramount concern.”

Joe had wanted to scream “Goblin shite!” but had been restrained by his training officer, Petals.

So, he sat in the silent darkness of the stone room, and stared at the walls with nothing but frustration and irritation as company.

He had read aloud the letter and his mother’s diary, hoping that certain phrases might trigger something within the room. Nothing. He had tried to use both as cypher keys. Nothing. Probing the walls with his magic in the hopes of finding a magical keyhole had even proven fruitless.

Every bit of evidence suggested that the room was nothing more than a safe gateway point. Wizards would teleport to the location to catch their breath and then teleport away to somewhere else.

The existence of the desk and the diary suggested that his mother wanted him to find that room. He had even examined every possible splinter of the desk and chair. They were unremarkable as well.

His gut told him that there was a door somewhere and more to learn from the place, but every shred of

evidence belied that. Mindfully, he had to admit that the room may be nothing more than a safe place to sit and breathe. A mother would want that for their child.

He looked at his watch and decided that enough was enough. Inspiration wasn't going to spontaneously present itself to him that morning.

As he did every other time before he quit, he turned to look to the stone ceiling and prayed to the god of magic, knowledge, and intelligence. "Runelore... I could really use a hint. Any assistance would be greatly appreciated right about now." Joe waited the appropriate number of seconds for the prayer to be sent and heard. According to his aunt, Sister Agatha, a prayer needed half a minute. He had no idea where that number came from and never bothered to ask the reasoning behind it. He simply learned to do as he was told while in the care of the Temple.

With the thirty seconds silently counted out, he looked back down at the wall, and waited for another minute to see if Runelore would answer with any sort of clue or hint. Nothing.

Joe groaned out a long sigh and pushed to his feet. The stylus and notepad went into his vest pocket, and he picked up his flat cap and fixed it on his head. Since it was his day off, he had visited in civilian attire. He also had plans to spend the day with Grace... and her father.

He turned the chair in, gave the room one last look, and then walked toward the glowing circle of runes. As soon as he slipped the beaten old silver ring onto his finger, he teleported seamlessly into the corner of the basement storage of Runelore's Toys and Treats. There was no flash of light or hum of power expended; it was as smooth as blinking.

The store used to be called Runelore's Refuse and belonged to Jacobs McMillan. His daughter, Ruby Moonberry, had claimed ownership after his passing. In truth, the transition was a little more complex but the end

result was that his daughter was revitalizing the family business.

Joseph had been friends with Jacobs since he was an Arcanum student. Jacobs ran the only store in the city that sold second-hand magical reagents. If it wasn't for him, Joseph never would have been able to afford his schooling. Ruby ran things a bit differently.

She still collected second-hand reagents, but she did a much better job of servicing them into a better condition for students looking for a discount. His daughter had inherited her mother's affinity for magic. That also meant that she was capable of crafting her own magical toys and treats for children instead of sourcing out the work.

A wafting smell of something soured and burned drifted passed his nose. Joe sniffed the air, then hurried for the stairs.

Please don't tell me the store is on fire.

He raced up the steps, threw open the door to the basement, rounded the corner, and then raced up the second set of steps that headed to the residence above the store.

The burned smell got stronger the closer he got to the top of the stairs. "Ruby!" He could hear her choking and coughing from beyond the door.

Joe threw open the door as soon as he reached the top of the stairs. "Ruby?"

She was coughing and whipping a dishtowel at a cooking sheet dotted with brown lumps. "Sorry!" She hacked and coughed again as she did her best to clear the smoke away.

Joe covered his nose and mouth with the crook of his arm and pulled his wand from his pocket. A gentle flourish was all that was needed to make the kitchen and bedside windows slide up and open, immediately creating a cross-breeze that began pulling out the hazy air.

The smoke burned his eyes a bit and made them

water. “What happened?” He coughed a bit himself as he breathed in a little bit of the smoke.

“I must have mis—” She coughed again. “Miscalculated the baking time and ingredient measurements.” Ruby routinely experimented with new treat recipes.

Joe pulled a handkerchief from his other pocket and used it to cover his mouth and nose instead of using the crook of his arm. It worked far better, especially since it was spelled to cover the smell of corpses and protect his lungs.

He leaned in for a closer look at what she had been trying to bake, his eyes still burning a bit. The dotted brown lumps looked like they had started caramelizing, then crystalizing. “What were they supposed to be?”

Ruby covered her own nose and mouth with the dishtowel. “Rock candy.”

He remembered rock candy. They usually looked like raw little crystals. Typically they were made from sugar, coloring, flavorings, and a touch of magic. The magic made the crystals grow and caused the candies to crackle and pop when you broke them or chewed on them. It made for an interesting mouthfeel.

The rock candies that Ruby had made looked like dirty clumps of crystal someone might pick up at the beach. “They definitely look like rocks.”

She punched him in the arm with her fist, then shook out her hand. “Ow!”

He barely felt it but apologized anyway. “Sorry... but you did do a pretty good job of burning them...” He’d never seen rock candies so horribly mangled before.

She deflated at that and sagged in the shoulders as she looked down upon the failed experiment.

Joe reached out and gingerly poked one a few times. It had cooled rather quickly and wasn’t hot to the touch. “I’m sure it will taste fine.”

She turned a skeptical look upon him.

“Seriously.” Joe grabbed the one he had been poking and snapped it off the cookie sheet. He could only guess that it wasn’t supposed to be that stuck because she grimaced all the more.

“I’m sure it will be fine.” Joe lowered the handkerchief and popped it into his mouth. The gag reflex was instantaneous, and he launched the vile candy from his mouth with a full tongue protrusion. “*HURLEH!*”

The crystalized mass of tastebud-heresy flew through the air and landed right back onto the cookie sheet with a rattling *thunk*. He didn’t think it was possible for something so vile to exist upon his tongue. The need to expel it from his mouth had been so violent and pure that his toes had curled in his shoes. A cold sweat broke out over his entire body just from the memory of it having touched his tongue.

Ruby shuddered and turned away from him while gagging, “Oh, gods! *Hrrrmph!* Don’t make that *Hrrrmph!*... sound!”

Joe staggered and fell to his knees as he took in deep and steady breaths. “I think,” he swallowed to keep his breakfast down, “I think you discovered a new form of torture.”

She burped slightly and covered her mouth. “Stop it!” She stomped her foot at him in frustration.

Having calmed his stomach with a quick partition, he managed to get back up to his feet. “I’m okay now.”

Ruby kept her back to him and a hand over her mouth. “You sure?”

“Yes.”

“You really sure?”

“Yes, Ruby. I’m fine.” She glanced back over her shoulder at him, saw that he was standing without issue, and turned to face him. “Was it really that bad?”

Joe nodded. “Those are the vilest things in creation. I’ve never tasted something so awful before. Not even Ms. Bellcreaux has ever served me anything as

offensive as *that*.” He pointed at it with emphasis. “And that’s saying something, because she’s possibly one of the worst cooks I’ve ever met.”

She stuck out her bottom lip a bit and pouted. “What did I do wrong?”

He made his way around her and headed to the recipe book that she had open on the kitchen counter. A quick glance suggested that there shouldn’t have been anything to foul up the recipe. At worst, the rock candy should have had too much bang, not enough, or a slightly-burned flavor. None of the ingredients utilized could have possibly resulted in their current abominable form. “I have no idea.”

A quick glance at the ingredients lined out on the counter suggested that nothing was out of date. “Lemon flavoring?” He picked up the jar, popped the lid, and sniffed. It smelled exactly like lemon, and the contents looked perfectly fine; there didn’t appear to be any souring of any sort. “I have no idea what went wrong.”

Ruby lifted the lid off of a wire-locked jar, picked out a pinch of prismatic granules and snapped her fingers. A brief spark of light went off upon the snapping. “The magic powder seems fine too.”

Joe shrugged. “Maybe some residuals from the last thing you baked mixed in with the rock candy?”

She sagged, sighed, and slumped into a kitchen chair. “Maybe.”

Feeling bad for her, he fished into his vest pocket and pulled out his coin purse. “How much?”

She waved him off. “Joseph, I don’t want your coin.”

He shook his head. “I’m buying them.”

Ruby turned a quizzical look upon him. “What would you want to buy them for? You just said that these were the vilest...” The thought trailed off her tongue as she looked up at him.

The partitioned attempt to maintain a straight face

had clearly failed. They had known each other long enough that she could tell when he was using his magic to force his facial expressions to neutrality.

She narrowed her eyes at him. “You plan to feed these things to Petals, don’t you?”

“No.”

Yes.

“Liar.”

“Maybe.”

“You know that he’ll see right through it, right? He’s not that dumb.”

Joe released the partition and grumbled. “Ugh. Damn it.” She was right. He wasn’t that gullible. However, he couldn’t pass up the opportunity that was presented. “I’m still buying them. You’ll never know when those things might come in handy.”

She scowled at him. “What could those possibly be good for?”

He took a moment to think of an answer. Nothing came to mind, but he wanted them anyway. “No idea. But I’m sure I’ll think of one.”

Her scowl deepened. It didn’t frighten him, as she was simply too young and too adorable to make much of a scary face. “You’re not feeding any to Grace’s father.”

It was Joe’s turn to give a look. “Are you insane? I want the man to like me, not curse my existence and pray I’m sent off to a hell dimension.”

“Fair enough.”

Joe checked his watch. “Speaking of... I should be leaving soon.” He lifted his coin purse again and jangled it. “So, are you going to sell them to me or not?”

“Not,” she declared with finality. He was about to protest again, when she raised a finger. “But, I will give them to you, on one condition.”

He closed his mouth and nodded. “Name it.”

“You never tell anyone where you got them from. My store has a reputation to maintain.” She pointed at him

and gave him the best stink eye that she could.

Joe raised both his hands and nodded. "I promise I won't tell any potential customers."

She narrowed her eyes again. "That's not what I asked you." She reached out and poked his stomach. "Swear to me, mister."

He shuffled back to escape her poking and shook his head. "I won't swear not to tell anyone. I want Petals to take a look at one and see if he can figure out what went wrong for you."

Ruby softened at that. "You would do that for me?"

"Of course I would." He was a little hurt by the insinuation that he wouldn't. "I was emotionally invested in this store long before you were, and I want to see you succeed."

She beamed up at him. "Thank you."

"You're welcome." Another glance at his watch told him he was running out of time. "Can we start bagging those? I need to get going."

Ruby jumped up and immediately began popping the burned rocks off the cooking sheet. "Of course!"

A nervous flip of the stomach caused him to chuckle a little. "Today is not the day for me to be late."

Ruby smiled as she methodically popped each rock off of the sheet and tossed it into a little cloth bag for Joe. "You want to make a good impression."

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"I'm late!"

The gnome cart driver yelled back again. "Unbunch your undergarments fella, I can only go so fast!"

He had hailed a gnome cart to take him back to the station, where he had dropped off a burned rock crystal and a note on Petals' desk. That hadn't cost him

anything, as he had planned on stopping at the station anyway. He had a request form that needed to be filed that he'd forgotten about the day before.

The issue was when he got into the second gnome cart and headed out to meet with Grace and her father — there was a cart crash. His cart was fine; the wheel came off the axle on a cart two carts ahead of him. It made one hell of a mess, as it caused the driver to careen into a storefront. Thankfully, nobody was seriously injured, but it made for one hell of a traffic jam, and Joe had to stop and provide a witness statement to a blue coat.

Joe continued to wring his hat out of pure frustration. He couldn't force the driver to step on it, and he had an ugly feeling that Grace's father wouldn't care about his perfectly valid excuse.

Relief finally came when they turned the final corner, and their destination came into view. They'd arrived at the Quarry River Coliseum.

Chapter 2

The Quarry River Coliseum was a brand new structure and a marvel of engineering. Exactly as the name suggested, the coliseum was constructed in a quarry that had a river and waterfall flowing into it.

The majority of Stormbay's fresh water was supplied by the Quarry River. It entered through the northeast corner of the city limits and flowed into an underground cistern via a waterfall. Overflow helped to maintain a steady stream of water through the sewers and storm drains.

Also, as the name suggested, the river cut a deep gouge through the land. That gouge gave the earliest founders of Stormbay ample access to granite and stone without having to dig for it. Naturally, those founders dug out a large quarry and used the fresh water to build the first settlements. A second quarry was later started, and it eventually became the sight of the City Central precinct

and Stormbay prison.

The importance of the quarry and the river was what caused the proposed construction of the coliseum to be a hotly-debated subject by councilors, advocates, and investors. It was especially contentious given that there was already a coliseum in the heart of downtown Stormbay.

The people weren't overly fond of the old coliseum. It was an ancient building that was stuffy, crowded, worn-down, and costly to maintain. Not to mention that the only good seating was reserved for the king.

Nobles didn't bother investing any time in visiting the Royal Arena, nor did they invest coin in it. That meant upkeep fell to taxation and ticket sales.

The Quarry River Coliseum had been designed for the working class and those with deep pockets. The seating was much roomier and many booths had been set aside for those who could afford them.

It was also more than likely that investors were given their choice of booths, and possibly even design influence. Naturally, a special booth had been set aside for the king, but there were rumors that he disapproved of the whole thing and would never use it. It explained why he had notably been absent during the opening ceremonies the moon prior.

It was the first time Joe had laid eyes upon it, and he was just as much captivated by it as he was worried about the late arrival.

The coliseum was built into the quarry with natural stone walls on three of its four sides. Gray cement and plaster made up the fourth side; it covered the entire face of the towering structure, giving it an ominous and monolithic appearance. One was required to climb a hundred steps before the entrance, then there was another two hundred paces of sheer vertical wall. A triangular peak marked the top, and it towered at least fifty or more paces

above the cliffside. Joe couldn't help but feel that it was designed to make guests look small.

White cobblestone paths, green grasses, autumn-burned shrubs, and kickball team flags gave the grounds before the steps and the wall a more inviting and friendly atmosphere.

Thankfully, whomever had designed the roadways leading up to the coliseum had left ample room for carts to pull up and drop off passengers. Dozens of carts were doing that very thing. It was a chaotically coordinated dance, as people were too busy staring at the massive construct and not paying attention to their own safety. Bells were ringing constantly as people ran across the road and darted out in front of carts.

Joe gasped and held his breath half a dozen times with a series of multiple near-hits. Eventually, it came his turn; he happily jumped out the back of the gnome cart. "Thank you, and sorry for my impatience!"

"Yeah, yeah!" The driver began to pull away, stopped to ring his bell at someone else turning in front of him, and continued on his way again.

Joe stood for a moment to watch. He debated whether he should jump in and direct the traffic.

No! I'm already late! That is a blue coat's job.

He argued with himself on whether he could actually turn his back on what he was witnessing. It was an accident waiting to happen. A loudly-blown whistle pulled his attention to a nearby blue coat fifty paces further down the road. He was doing his best to direct traffic and scold absent-minded civilians.

A great relief came over him then and he finally felt like he could turn his back. Unfortunately, the instant he turned to begin looking for Grace, he heard a loud metallic bang, crunch, and shattering of glass.

Damn it all.

Pitched shouting and cursing started a moment later as gnome drivers began blaming one another.

He shut his eyes and repeated to himself, "I'm not a witness this time."

"Joseph?" Grace called for him from a distance.

He popped his eyes open and searched in the direction that he had heard her call from. It was to the right, further onto the grounds, and closer to the coliseum steps before the doors. Going up on his toes gave him a clear height advantage on most present.

A brief moment of scanning allowed him to spot the familiar bounce of curly brown hair heading toward him. She, like always, made his day a little bit brighter. Her smile was infectious, and she always had an interest in his well-being — the fact that she was a nurse tended to make his health a default concern of hers. Nevertheless, it was greatly appreciated.

"Where have you been?" She was mad.

Fireballs.

"There was an accident. I'm really sorry."

She scowled at him; it was a much more efficient scowl than Ruby's and made him feel guilty. "That accident," she pointed to the one that Joe had just heard, "happened right now. So don't you go using it as an excuse!" She was getting heated in the face and shook her finger at him.

Joe threw up his hands. "Hold on! There was more than one accident." He pointed to the same one she pointed at. "This is the *second* accident I've been near today!"

Grace looked surprised and taken aback. "Two?" It was very uncommon for cart accidents to take place. It was even more uncommon for them to be serious enough to hinder traffic. A quick glance suggested that the accident that had unfolded right beside him was holding up a lot of traffic; there was already a line running to the end of the block.

He raised his right hand to his heart. "Swear."

She frowned. "Are you okay?" She immediately

put her hands on his chest and began patting him down.

Joe grabbed her hands before they started patting him somewhere inappropriate. "I wasn't in the accident, Grace."

"Oh, good!" She hugged him tight around the chest and mumbled into his vest, "Was anyone injured?"

He gently squeezed and hugged her tight. "Nothing serious."

"Ahem!" A silver-haired man cleared his throat while approaching the both of them.

He wasn't much taller than Grace, and a bit shorter than Joseph. His clothing was finely pressed and well-tailored. Gray slacks, a white button-up, a black vest, and a dark gray trench coat. Thin spectacles rested midway up his nose; they made his brown eyes just a little bit larger. His hair was neatly parted and freshly trimmed, as well as his well-combed mustache.

Grace immediately jumped away from Joe like he was a volatile and deadly vial of putrid diseases. The woman nervously and quickly straightened out her blouse and skirts before gesturing to the man and proclaiming what Joe had already guessed. "Joseph. This is my father, Mr. Patrick Bell."

Joe held out his hand for a shake. "Pleasure to meet you, sir."

Dr. Bell took a moment to look up at Joe over the rim of his spectacles. He didn't look to be frowning, scowling, or disapproving in any way. His eyes, however, were penetrating and discerning.

The man was clearly 'diagnosing' whether Joseph was right for his daughter. Grace had informed him when they first started courting that her father was a doctor. It was why she got into medicine and became a nurse.

Dr. Bell gave Joe a quick darting glance up and down, then followed it up with a slow offering of his hand.

This is a test... I think.

Joe remained steady, and didn't rush in to take the

man's hand. If he did, it would be a sign of over-eagerness and insecurity. Dropping his hand and taking it away was also not an option. It would show pettiness, impatience, and disrespect. He needed to remain patient, then move his hand a bit closer at the last second. It would hopefully show that he had the discipline to be patient, but also show he respected her father enough to not force the man to come all the way to him.

Am I overthinking this?

He moved closer at the last second and shook as planned. Squeezing the right amount wasn't calculated or contemplated. He never saw the point in being a barbaric idiot and trying to out-squeeze the other man. He simply gave a firm shake and a single nod.

The man didn't nod back. Instead, he lifted his left hand and made an obvious showing of eyeing his watch for a moment before looking up at Joseph. "My daughter informed me that we would be meeting at 1:30."

Joe had noted the time on his own before jumping out of the gnome cart.

Grace harshly whispered to her father, "Dad!"

"Are you late because you gave her the wrong time, or are you late due to tardiness?"

"Father!" Grace exclaimed out loud that time.

Joe pressed his lips tight together and restrained himself from barking back. "I was late due to an accident. A cart lost its wheel, ran off the street, and struck a storefront."

Dr. Bell raised an eyebrow at that.

Grace gasped when she turned back to Joe. "You said there was nothing serious!"

"Nobody was seriously injured, and the incident was fairly minimal. The driver was able to slow down before hitting the store. Only the cart was damaged."

Dr. Bell turned to look at the accident on the road to their side. "I take it you were caught behind the incident."

He nodded. “And am a witness. As a law enforcement officer, I was duty-bound to stay and provide my statement to an on-duty blue coat.”

The man raised another eyebrow at that, then turned away from them to begin walking to the front entryway. “If we dawdle any longer the game will start without us.”

Grace huffed and grabbed Joe’s hand before storming after her father and dragging him behind her.

He was just glad that it didn’t go over any worse than it did. Overall, it wasn’t a horrible first impression. At least, he hoped.

The hundred steps before the entrance were rather long, so it wasn’t as laborious of a task to climb them; it was more of an inclined stride than anything. The front entryway consisted of six pairs of glass double doors. It seemed prudent to have that many doors, as there were a great many fans. Lines had formed, and they were moving steadily.

Joe reached into his vest pocket, pulled out the embossed ticket stubs, and looked at them to determine seat numbers.

“May I?” Dr. Bell had his hand out.

He was at a loss for words — Joe felt fully capable of sorting out where they were seated. He wasn’t a child.

“I insist.” Dr. Bell wiggled his fingers.

They were nearing the front of the line. Not wanting to start an argument with Grace’s father, he reluctantly handed over the ticket stubs. A brief shuffle and a peer at the ticket numbers resulted in Grace and Joe being handed their tickets.

Knowing full well what her father might have been planning, he quickly checked his seat against Grace’s. They were seated side-by-side. It was not what he was expecting. A quick recall of their assigned seat numbers made him realize that he was seated between Grace and her father.

Ab... that's what he's doing.

Dr. Bell wanted Joseph near to him so that he could closely observe any behavior directed toward his daughter, without sitting between the two of them and potentially angering her. It also allowed ease of communication between the two of them. It was the most diplomatic seating arrangement.

As all three of them passed through the double doors, they were immediately funneled toward six manned ticket booths. As they handed over their tickets, the attendants would wave a snubbed wand over them, flip the wand over, and press the rubber end to the back of their hands. They stamped between the thumb and pointer finger.

The rubber ends of the stub wands stamped a minor touch of ink and magic powder, designed to showcase their seat number. It wasn't immediately visible, and would only show up if they sat in the wrong seat; their correct seat numbers would appear in red, if they did.

People used to cheat the system and fights would break out over quality seating at the Royal Arena. The innovation of fading ink made it harder for cheaters to get away with the same sort of bullying and thuggery.

Once clear of the ticket booths, they were free to enter the main lobby. Rough-bristle gray carpeting was placed between the doors and the lobby floor, meant for people to wipe their footwear. Many had already done so, as there were darker rows of dirt across each line of carpet.

The floor and walls beyond the carpet was polished white marble. Grand sun lantern chandeliers hung from the high-ceiling, and massive spiraling stairs were spaced at regular intervals along the outside of the great bowl that was the coliseum.

Vendor booths were stationed along the base of the bowl beside each stair. Team flags and memorabilia were sold at some, while hot meat pies, sausage rolls, and sweet buns were sold at others. Hawkers were shouting to

those that walked by, hoping to sell their wares before the match began.

The three of them didn't stop to gawk or stare at everything, as they were already cutting it close. Despite having the longer legs, Joe was lagging a little bit behind Dr. Bell in order to keep Grace company; her legs were much shorter than theirs.

Dr. Bell was in the lead, and turned to look back over his shoulder and shake his ticket stub. "How is it that you managed to procure these seats on a rookie detective's salary?"

"DAD!" Grace was getting louder with each exclamation.

He didn't seem to be put out in the slightest by his daughter's protests and simply insisted, "I'd like to know."

What you're really asking is if I obtained them legally.

It was a fair question. In a fifty-row coliseum, he had managed to procure seating in the fifteenth row. They weren't cheap. On his salary, he could never have reasonably afforded the tickets, especially since it was the quarter final of the season. Joe responded honestly, "They were a gift, as a result of some proofing I did for one of the architects."

Dr. Bell paused momentarily for Grace and Joe to catch up. They were walking their way around the outer ring to the left of the main entrance; their seating was closer to a northern set of stairs. "You proofed architectural drawings, and you're not an engineer?" One eyebrow was raised significantly higher than the other. It was clear that he was skeptical of the answer that Joe had provided.

"Daaaad!" Grace was growling it at that point.

"Yes. I proofed an early draft of some of the proposed defensive spells that would be built into the structure." He gently squeezed Grace's hand to assure her that everything was fine. "An older Arcanum classmate asked for my help when he had the plans for this entire

structure dropped in his lap. He graduated a few years ahead of me.” The classmate was named Benji, but he didn’t feel it important to the story.

That only seemed to raise more questions for Dr. Bell, but the look on his face suggested it was only slightly less interrogative and perhaps a little more out of curiosity. “If he graduated ahead of you, why did he turn to you for assistance? Why not your professor?”

He used a mild partition to keep a smug grin from spreading across his face. “He did go to our professor first.”

“Did your professor refuse to help him on the principle that he should know what to do without his help?”

Joe raised a finger in point of fact. “Professor Aurora Spellocke is a woman.” He raised a second finger. “She refused because she was busy teaching, otherwise she would have been glad to help.” He raised a third and final finger. “She suggested that he speak with me, because I graduated at the top of my class in defensive spells with the highest marks in the last ten years.”

They walked on in silence for a moment. Dr. Bell nodded in what looked to be approval.

In order to humble himself, Joe added a small side note. “I was also between graduation at the Arcanum and initiation at the Stormbay Academy for Law Enforcement, and needed the extra work.”

“Ah.” Dr. Bell seemed to take that as a much more respectable answer. “You were paid.”

Joe nodded. “One silver mark and a ticket to a game.”

“A ticket?” Dr. Bell’s suspicions returned immediately.

“I was going to offer up whatever I could to purchase the other two, but he refused.” He couldn’t help but grin with a little pride at that moment. “He said that he owed me. A few proofing sessions with me helped him to

become a first-rate wizard when it came to drawing up defensive spells. It landed him a permanent job with the firm, and there is no better architectural firm than Granitehand, Smith, and Sizzlefinger.”

Dr. Bell frowned a little and then turned his eyes fully forward.

“What?”

Grace squeezed his hand. It caused him to turn to her instead. She was also keeping her eyes forward and only glanced to him briefly.

“What?” Joe was truly confused. “What is it?”

Dr. Bell coughed and cleared his throat to get Joe’s attention.

He turned to the man. “Is there something I’m missing?”

He cleared his throat again and lowered his voice a little, “This coliseum wasn’t constructed by GS&S.”

It was Joe’s turn to frown. “What are you talking about? I saw the plans. I worked on them!”

The older doctor raised a finger to hush Joe from speaking too loudly. He then lowered his finger and kept his voice low as he pointed to their designated set of stairs. “It was originally, but there was a bit of a shake-up two years ago.”

They began to ascend the steps; the winding staircase was wide enough that five or more people could ascend it side-by-side. “What happened two years ago?”

Dr. Bell gave a subtle shrug. “Nobody knows. All that is certain is that one day GS&S was working on the project, and then Gilbert and Sons had the contract.”

Joe paused momentarily on the stairs to try and think. “I don’t think I know of any Gilbert and Sons.” It probably wasn’t a great concern, but it did make him curious.

Why didn’t Benji tell me?

Chapter 3

After climbing one rotation of the spiral steps, they came to a landing with a cement hallway that led to the inner bowl of the coliseum. Dr. Bell lead them down the hallway and out into the open air.

Just like the exterior, the interior walls of the coliseum were monstrously tall. It was leaps and bounds superior to the Royal Arena. For one thing, there were seats instead of just layers of brick. Every seat was individually upholstered with a navy blue material, and each row of seats sat that much higher than the one before it so that people could see over the heads of the row before them.

High above the stands were windowed boxes. Each window had a forward tilt to it. Joe could only presume it was intentional, likely made that way so that those standing in the box could look down without thumping their head against the glass. It wasn't hard to

guess who the private boxes were intended for.

At the very top was a narrow circle of sky. It let in an abundance of natural light, but presumably was enchanted to keep out gulls and foul weather.

The field below was covered in grass instead of dirt, and proper lines had been placed to denote the field zones. Each corner had an appropriate level of an uphill climb and four officials examined the field with a groundskeeping team to make sure it was in optimal condition before the match. Joe was thoroughly impressed.

A palpable hum of energy and conversation was in the air as nearly every seat was filled. Their seats were located in the middle of a row, and most of it was already filled. That meant that they had to do the apologetic shuffle.

Joe apologized to each individual in turn as he shuffled by them on his way to his seat. Unfortunately, he had to come to an abrupt halt when Dr. Bell did.

Looking past the slightly shorter man was fairly easy. Withholding the desire to exclaim in extreme profanity was not so easy.

A balding and portly man was slouched in the middle of their three seats. The seats on either side of him were occupied by food wrappers, dirty napkins, and food stains. The man had clearly wiped his hands on the seats.

Dr. Bell loudly cleared his throat in an attempt to get Mr. Slovenly's attention.

Mr. Slovenly waved off Dr. Bell, slouched lower in the seat, and belched grotesquely. "Move off, ye stuffy old man."

Dr. Bell spoke calmly and politely. "I believe that you—"

Mr. Slovenly turned his stubble-ridden double chins toward Grace's father, and barked in interjection, "I said move off or I'll get up and thump ye!"

Joe gently patted Dr. Bell on the shoulder. "Allow me."

Dr. Bell shuffle-turned to face Joe. "I am wholly capable of handling this situation, young man."

"With all due respect, you shouldn't have to."

"Will the lot of ye piss – *BRAAAHP* – off! You're blocking the view!" The disgusting slob of a human being grabbed some grease-soiled napkins and tossed them at the back of Dr. Bell's leg. It caused the older man to jump slightly when it hit.

Some of the neighboring fans gasped and murmured under their breath while pointing at the drama taking place. Many of them were revolted by Mr. Slovenly.

Joe leaned a little to the side and looked down to see what the damage was. Grace's father pulled his trench coat around to examine it as well. There was a splotch of grease and mustard where the napkin had struck. "I believe that will require a cleaner."

Dr. Bell waved it off. "It's nothing that can't be fixed with—"

Joe held up a hand and emphasized his point, "It will cost you a cleaner." He already had grounds to have the man removed from the seat, but adding the extra charge of property damage could possibly get him removed or banned from the coliseum.

He turned to look up at Joe with a raised eyebrow. "Are you sugge—"

"I said *move it*, you deaf old bag of bones!" That time, the portly man tossed something heavier directly into the middle of Dr. Bell's back.

The patience was expended. Grace's father shut his eyes and nodded to Joe. "Do it."

Joe opened his jacket and slapped his left chest pocket with his right hand. His wand immediately rocketed out of that pocket and up into the air. A snap of his fingers made the wand release into a staff. He shot his left hand up into the air and snatched the staff before it could fall onto the man that was seated directly beside him.

The two manacle rings that regularly circled the

head of the staff floated up off the head, down to his feet. Joe stepped onto them and levitated himself up off the ground with relative ease. He'd done it enough times that he knew how much to bend the knees and how quickly he could rise without losing his balance.

Dr. Bell shuffle-stepped to where Joe had been standing, and Joe descended to float directly in front of Mr. Slovenly. By the time he had come to a floating rest, there were a hundred people watching him. Some were shouting and cheering while others were gasping and whispering. Those that were cheering probably thought it was just a wizard showing off some magic trick to cheer on his team. The ones that were whispering knew it to be more of a serious confrontation.

Mr. Slovenly couldn't shrink any further into his seat if he tried. He just realized that he'd just punched far higher up than he was capable of handling. Mindfully, nobody ever expected someone as homely-looking as Joe to be a wizard. In truth, he was something far more dangerous — a sorcerer. However, he wasn't about to go blurting that out anytime soon. The important part was that his point was made.

"Look, pal. How about you just go sit somewhere else, all right?" The lard-abundant loud-mouth wasn't making eye contact as he said it and was nervously chewing on his thumb while trying to keep his eyes on the playing field. His leg was bouncing nervously as well.

Joe said nothing and simply glared down on the man after a quick glance at the man's hands. There were no glowing numbers.

"You made an honest mistake!" That time he had the gall to look up at Joe and yell at him. As if yelling would suddenly gain him the upper hand.

He continued to say nothing and floated further down to draw closer. The cheering had stopped. People were starting to realize what was happening. This wasn't some magic trick or opulent display of cheering for a team.

They were witnessing an angry wizard.

The slovenly man got even braver. As Joe drew closer, the large man fumbled and struggled to stand up and begin yelling. He pointed up at Joseph with a stubby and greasy finger. "You're just a two-bit loser of a showman! You're no wizard! You got nothin' on me!" He must have thought that Joe's silence and inaction equated to fear. It didn't.

Joe was simply building what some professors referred to as 'atmospheric assistance'. The theory was quite sound in principal. Utilization of any one type of magical element was often strengthened if the element was abundant in the immediate proximity. Fire wizards were stronger in hotter climates, ice wizards were stronger in colder climates, and so on. Intimidation magic worked best when you caught your target by surprise, or they were already afraid of you.

The pot-bellied slob that was barking up at him was already afraid. That fear was starting to trickle away as Joe continued to say nothing, but he wasn't banking on one man's fear. He was banking on the fear of an entire crowd.

Joe slowly turned his eyes away from Mr. Slovenly and scanned the crowd out of the corner of his eye. He didn't do it to see what they were doing; he knew full well what they were doing — which was precisely nothing. The entire coliseum had been a loud hum of conversation when they had first looked for their seats. At that moment, there wasn't as much as a whisper.

All eyes turned to the two of them, and everyone watched with bated breath. Letting his eyes briefly wander signaled to the shouting pig that he needed to look about as well.

The green little eyes of the rotund man darted to the left and right, then back to Joe. He finally noticed it. There was a deathly silence over the entire coliseum. There wasn't so much as a scuffling step on cement or a distant

cough.

A partition of the mind allowed Joe to keep his heart calm and steady over the violence-fueled gallop it desperately desired.

Petals had once said, “The dog that barks loudest often has the smallest bite, for it barks to scare you away, and is just as afraid of you coming near to it.” Petals had then grinned maniacally and said, “The dog that stays perfectly still and glares you down is the dog that will shred you to pieces if you step too close.”

Joe enacted that very metaphor. He was letting imagination fill the coliseum with terror and fear by doing absolutely nothing. He was the silent glaring dog.

A pre-set partitioned alarm went off in his mind. It told him the game would be starting in five minutes. He moved for the first time in a whole two minutes and reached up into the left side of his beaten old coat pocket. That motion set off a series of shrieks and gasps from the crowd.

Joe had no idea what they thought he might pull from his jacket, but that didn’t concern him. The fact that they were scared was all he needed.

The blob before him fell to his knees and covered his face with his hands while shouting, “Don’t melt me!”

This is almost too easy. Maybe I overdid it?

He tossed his badge out of his pocket and onto the ground beside where the man was blubbering. “By the authority of Stormbay Law Enforcement, I hereby place you under arrest for theft, fraud, and property damage.” A slight infusion of magic made it so that his words carried.

A loud collective sigh rolled out through the entire coliseum. Idle chatter broke out once again. Cheers, laughter, angered shouting, and everything in between.

The coliseum guards that had been called to the scene were finally able to push their way through the crowd that had gathered. They immediately shuffle-stepped their way over to the blubbering mess and

grabbed his wrists to begin cuffing him in manacles. Unlike blue coats, the guards only had clubs, cuffs, and slate gray trench coats.

Joe thanked the men for arriving as quickly as they did, and a roar of cheers went up as the sobbing and blubbering man was dragged out of the coliseum.

Immediately after the appearance of the coliseum guards was a pair of cleaning attendant gnomes. The little women quickly got to work sweeping the trash off the seats and the ground. Little spritz bottles were used to evaporate the stains on the seats and left them freshly cleaned with a wipe of a cleaning towel. One of the lovely ladies also took the moment to quickly examine Dr. Bell's coat, and spritzed it clean as well.

Joe summoned his badge back to him and pocketed it as he continued to float above and out of their way. By the time that was all over and they were finally able to take their seats, the game horns blew, announcing the beginning of the quarter final.

Grace was able to quickly ask of him, "I get the property damage, but theft and fraud?"

Joe tapped the back of his hand. "The red number wasn't glowing. That means he either got in with a fake ticket or snuck in. I highly doubt that his enormously-wide behind could have possibly snuck past anyone unnoticed. Therefore, I'll go with fraud and theft."

A clear and enthusiastic voice boomed throughout the entire coliseum. "**Welcome fans, to the Greencoast Kickball Quarter Finals!**"

The stands erupted in an unsettlingly loud roar that shook Joe to his core. He'd never known that a gathering of people could make that much noise. While he had gone to war, it hadn't been anywhere near the front lines. Stories were told by soldiers about how noisy it could be, but he couldn't fathom it until that very moment.

Thankfully, the reason for the roar was a positive one. It was a roar of excitement and not a roar to advance

into battle. One could argue that the roar of the crowd was a form of cheering their teams into battle, but Joe stood firmly by the idea that they were far from being the same.

Grace put a settling hand on his arm and did her best to speak over the deafening roar. “Are you okay?”

Joe nodded to her and settled back into his seat.

Dr. Bell gave him a sideways glance of skepticism as he clapped.

Fantastic. He probably thinks I suffer from war maladies.

“**Let’s hear it for today’s teams!**” A second and slightly less impressive roar went up.

“**From Deepmine, we have the Dwarven Coal Buckets!**” A few boos went through the crowd, but they were quickly drowned out by a series of loud barks from the other end of the stands. The doggish barks were meant to draw attention.

It didn’t take long to spot the large patch of what appeared to be almost a hundred dwarves. They were all dressed like their team, and they stood in unison to begin a chant and perform their ceremonial war stomp in their native tongue.

“We here dwarves hear the horns of war! Sharpen the axe and drink your ale! Tonight we add to the Crafter’s tale!”

The chant and dance ended in a triumphant fist pump and a series of doggish barks. It earned a few cheers but it mostly earned them some laughter and applause.

Dwarves tended to associate the god of craft with everything else in their lives — building, brewing, weapons, war, storytelling, history, farming, fertility. The god of craft makes everything — or at least, that was their view on things.

On cue, a team of ten dwarves ran out onto the field below. They wore silver-painted leather helmets with black balls of cotton sticking out from under the brim. Their team attire was black as well. It made them look like overturned buckets that had dumped great big piles of

coal. They took the name Coal Buckets humorously and theatrically.

“From the greater countryside, we have the Greencoast Green Men!”

There wasn't much cheering for the Green Men. It wasn't that they were hated or hadn't earned their place at the table. They were quite skilled and even had odds in their favor for winning the tournament. It was just that there were very few fans from the countryside that could afford to travel all the way to the city to cheer them on. Those that did cheer yelled that much louder.

A handful of small groups stood and twirled green scarves above their heads, hollering in support. The rest of the gathered crowd applauded courteously.

Ten tall and lean men ran out onto the field in what could only be described as green camouflage war paint covering their arms and faces. The rest of their team attire was similarly green; it made them blend in quite well with the grass.

Every single member of the Green Men had some level of fey blood within them; they all had some degree of pointed ears and blatantly attractive features. It didn't go unnoticed because some whistling followed the courteous applause.

The booming voice returned with a slight chuckle, **“All right, ladies, calm yourselves, for we haven't seen all of the teams yet.”** A chorus of laughter erupted before being drowned out by the next team announcement. **“From the northern territories, we have The Highwaymen!”**

Many boos were thrown out as the crowd awaited the team of ten to enter the field. They often dressed in what looked to be mismatched and patched fur and poorly-tanned leathers. The leather helmets looked like matted bundles of dirty hair, and their faces were usually smudged with what looked like dirt. A few of them sometimes also blacked out some teeth.

It was all a gimmick. They weren't actually highwaymen, and they weren't that scruffy-looking. They just used the appearance and the name to generate lively rivalries and ticket sales. They used to be called the Northern Gentlemen, but nobody cared to watch their matches. The name and appearance change resulted in greater ticket sales. It also allowed them to get away with a few more violent tackles without much backlash, as they were already disliked.

Strangely, nobody ran out onto the field. The boos began to quiet and murmurs started rising. People were standing up out of their seats and leaning over to try and see down the tunnel that led to the field. The other teams on the grass were also leaning around each other and out of lineup to try and look down the tunnel. Each man turned to the other and shrugged, shaking their head.

Joe frowned a little and pondered — as he was sure everyone else was pondering — what could be holding up the team.

“Ahem!” The announcer nervously chuckled a little. **“Ha ha ha! I repeat, from the northern territories, we have The Highwaymen!”**

A fresh round of boos followed. They soon died after a minute of waiting and nothing happened. That caused a very loud murmur to start rumbling through the crowd.

Grace leaned toward him and asked over the droning hum of murmurs, “What do you think is going on?”

Joe shook his head. “I don't know.” There was any number of issues that could have held them up. A teammate may have lost their league card; every player needed to provide theirs prior to a match, especially a quarter final match. The team could have forgotten to pay their entry fee. Illegal enchantments could have been discovered. The list could go on.

Someone near to them stood up and shouted a

distasteful wisecrack. “Maybe they got caught thieving on their way to town!”

It momentarily diffused some of the tension and earned the man a series of groans and a few chuckles. Someone outright roared in laughter; they clearly thought it was the funniest thing they’d ever heard.

The murmurs continued until there was a loud and booming *crackle* and *pop!* The irritating noise was followed by a new voice. “**Good evening— I mean morning— I mean. Hi, all!**”

That odd introduction caused more than a few people to turn in their seats and look up to the massive wooden noiseboxes stationed around the coliseum, designed to distribute the booming announcer’s voice so that everyone could hear it. One person even spoke out loud in confusion and asked, “What?”

“**We apologize for the delay in the game but The Highwaymen have forfeited due to unforeseen circumstances!**” The new announcer sounded almost out of breath and panicked.

The announcement was taken as well as it was given — poorly. Confusion and angry shouting broke out in the stands.

“**P-p-please remain calm! We under— No! Give me that— Stop it!**” It sounded like he was fighting with someone. Another series of loud and booming *crackles* and *pops* filled the air.

The original announcer returned with a clear and steady voice. “**Hello, kickball fans!**” The return of the original announcer immediately defused a lot of the anger. Cheers were heard and a lot of people started returning to their seats.

“**We truly apologize for the sudden toss-up but The Highwaymen have been forced to forfeit due to poor health.**” He chuckled again, but it sounded a bit disingenuous. “**Ha, ha, ha! Seems like they had a bit of a spotty meal last night.**”

Dr. Bell leaned to Joe and shook his head. “A team like that wouldn’t have to worry about spotty meals. They would have a doctor on call that could sort that out with a medicinal brew in a matter of minutes.”

Joe was thinking the exact same thing. Something else was going on. He was about to respond back in agreement when Dr. Bell suddenly pulled back and sat up straight to begin clapping. It seemed a bit rude and odd, but he couldn’t rightfully say anything about it in front of Grace.

As soon as he turned back to her he quickly understood why her father had pulled away. Grace was giving them both a tight-lipped stink-eye. “Don’t you go looking for problems to solve, misters!”

He hadn’t been thinking about it, but he could see why she would think they were thinking about it. Her father was a man of medicine and was often called away at the drop of a hat. The man she was courting was in law enforcement, and was also often called away at the drop of a hat. To see them potentially conspiring to investigate an oddity would understandably upset her.

Joe immediately shook his head with robust vigor. “Nope, not looking for problems. Not in the slightest.” He quickly picked up her hand and gently squeezed it while offering his best apologetic smile.

“As per regulation rulings, the next highest scoring team has been called in to take the place of The Highwaymen!” There was a less than enthusiastic applause that followed the announcement.

Grace seemed to accept his insistence, eased up on her scowling, and affectionately squeezed his hand back. However, the scowl immediately returned when she looked past his shoulder.

He looked back and was surprised to see a coliseum guard standing nearly on top of his feet and directly in front of Dr. Bell. “Sir? We need your assistance.” He looked about nervously. “Immediately,

sir.”

Grace angrily shouted, “This is his day off! Go find another gods-damned detective!”

Joe quickly put out a hand for Grace to calm down and offered up a quick solution. “It’s all right! It’s fine! They probably just need a quick statement concerning the arrest. I’ll go give them my report and come back with some sweet buns. Okay?”

He tried to play it off like he was going to be back in a few minutes. He kept nodding and smiling as he stood up to follow the guard.

Grace crossed her arms over her chest and threw eye daggers at him the whole way. As soon as they were out of earshot, he slapped the man on the back and growled into his ear, “Whatever this is concerning there better be a damned corpse!”

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Joe stood at the threshold to the Highwaymen’s locker room. It was trashed. There was blood, bodies, limbs, and entrails everywhere. The walls, floors, lockers, and ceiling were dripping with blood. He had no words.