

Detective Runewall

Grave Secrets

Detective Runewall
Grave Secrets

B.T. Frost

COPYRIGHT

First Edition, September 2021

Copyright © 2021 by B.T. Frost

ISBN: 978-1-7776870-3-8

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the production of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

Cover Art Inspiration – Marissa Puff

Editing – McKenzie Spies

Website: www.author-btfrost.com

Acknowledgements

As it was with *Uncut Gems*, I must first thank my family and friends for all their enthusiastic support and encouragement.

To McKenzie Spies, I thank you again for turning my mess of a manuscript into something publishable, and for helping me to better edit my own writing.

To Marissa Puff, I must thank you wholeheartedly for your artistic talent in providing the inspiration for the cover art.

Last, but not least, I must again thank Ansgar for taking the time to read every single chapter after I wrote it.

Chapter 1

Detective Joseph Runewall rose from the bed, threw back the sheets, swung his legs over the side, and sat in the silence of the early morning. He hadn't slept. The dread of the upcoming ceremony simply weighed too heavily upon his mind. Having tossed and turned the entire night away, he figured it was better to just get ready for the day and face it as he had every other adversity.

A gentle breeze made its way through the open window. He breathed it in, hoping it would raise his spirits. It didn't; it just smelled like wet cat. There had been a drizzle overnight, and someone's pet must have been left out in the rain. He scoffed at the smell, got up, shut the window, and went about getting ready for the day.

Joe washed up and dressed for the occasion. The loans that loomed over his coin purse didn't exactly

give him the luxury of finer clothes, so he simply threw on his detective's vest and trench coat.

As much as he didn't want to be disrespectful, it would have been more so to show up in something that didn't fit properly or was patched like a traveler's sack.

Thanks to the arcane lettering and runes of power that had been stitched into his vest and trench coat, he would never have to get either of them cleaned or pressed. Nothing stuck to them. Dirt, muck, rain, even ink and oil couldn't soak into the fibers. Similarly, the material was infused with the strength to stop bullets. There would never be a moment in which he'd have to worry about wear and tear.

Joe fastened the last buttons of his vest only to hear his stomach roar in hunger. The familiar pang would have turned him to the dining room where The Crow was undoubtedly preparing to kill them with her attempts at cooking. It was no wonder she'd never married after all these years.

Sadly, he wasn't feeling too hungry. His stomach could argue all it wanted, he just didn't feel like eating. The thought of food actually caused a slight bout of nausea to roll over him. A fragmented partitioning of his mind helped him push it aside.

He'd been fretting so much about the day that not even his magic was functioning properly.

Don't fret. It will be over soon, and then everything will be fine.

He kept repeating the thought, over and over, but didn't know if any of it was true.

After a final adjustment, Joe reached out to the corner by the door and called his staff. It didn't budge. He could somewhat feel the power residing within it and felt a hint of the barriers he had placed around it, but it didn't respond.

Breathing deep, he released a heavy sigh out his nose. Joe stepped to the corner, picked up the staff and

struggled to compress it to the size of a wand. He hadn't had any trouble with it since he had embedded the shield pin in it a moon prior. It was only just recently turning into an issue due to his state of mind.

Magic functioned on one of three, if not all three, wills: will of the body, will of the mind, and will of the emotions. His emotions were turbulent, and for valid reasons.

Wadnar "Petals" Pettlebottom – his training officer and superior – had assured him that everything would right itself once the ceremony was over and he had some closure. Joe didn't know how much of that was true, but he hoped that it was, and counted on it being so.

He stuffed the wand into one of the mystically deep pockets of his vest. He could feel it trying to escape its constriction. The hope was that the pocket would help contain it. Joe shrugged on the trench coat and adjusted it as he examined himself in the square mirror hung on the back of the door.

Despite his well-groomed appearance, there were dark circles around his eyes, and he looked sickly pale.

Sunlight; I just need to get some sunlight.

Joe turned the latch that locked his door and opened it to be greeted by The Crow.

Not even close to sunlight.

Edith Bellcreaux was as much a kind woman as a gargoyle was a pretty fairy. She wasn't in any way hideous or unsightly. Quite the contrary, the woman was rather attractive and always presented as well-groomed in well-kept attire, if perhaps outdated.

Ms. Bellcreaux was the tome definition of propriety and dignity. He hadn't once ever seen any more of her skin than her hands and face. The woman didn't believe in shorter sleeves or allowing the neck to be exposed. Her cotton dresses were always buttoned to

the chin and entirely black or a deep shade of gray.

The lines around her mouth were subtle, as were the ones around her eyes. The only true indication that she was an aging woman was the wisps of silver in her ebony hair and eyebrows.

She cocked an eyebrow and measured him, glancing up and down with her dark brown eyes. After her examination was completed, she lifted a hand to hold a piece of cloth against his chest.

Joe flinched slightly, as he'd never seen her take any attempts to touch him, let alone any man. It wasn't until he looked down at the cloth that he understood. She was holding out a tie against his chest, checking it for color.

"Good morning, Ms. Bellcreaux."

She switched out ties. "You look dreadful."

Yeah— well— you— ... fireballs.

He didn't feel like battling her. "I didn't sleep well."

"I can tell." She switched out for another tie. She had a handful hanging from her other hand.

Joe glanced down at the next tie she held up to him; it looked identical to the last one. "Why are you doing this?"

She looked him in the eye for half a moment while examining the next tie. "You're going to a funeral. It would be improper to not at least *try* to look dignified."

He lifted a hand and gently pushed hers down. Despite all the vexatious stinging words she had thrown at him through the short time he had lived under her roof, the simple statement of going to a funeral had hit him hardest. Anger didn't fill him as he thought it would. Instead, sorrow welled up inside.

Prior to becoming a detective, Joe had spent two years on the cobblestone streets as a blue coat, an officer of the law. He had seen many bodies, and he'd

attended the funeral of a fallen officer before. It was always difficult to deal with. No matter how many murders he dealt, with death was never easy. Today was different; he'd never attended the funeral of a friend. Even worse, he had to organize it all.

After a moment to gather himself, Joe cleared his throat and politely requested that he be excused.

Ms. Bellcreaux looked to him with one cocked eyebrow for what felt to be far too long of an awkward silence. Eventually, and surprisingly, she stepped back and said nothing. She could silently judge him all she wanted; he didn't feel like being held up by a single tie.

Joe placed his hat on his head, nodded his gentlemanly respects, and headed for the stairs.

~~

Petals had been kind enough to order Joe a long-haul model of cart from the gnome cart dispatch. The arcane mechanical contraption ran on a mixture of the energies of the 'verse and a flammable combustion. The gnome driver sat inside of a cramped little cabin near the front left of the chassis and Joe and Petals stuffed themselves into a roomier bench seat in the rear. All four of the wheels were of a broader and more rugged design than that of the city model carts. It also had a more robust suspension for handling the unpaved roads.

"How are you, my boy?" Petals always had a jovial demeanor but had toned down his usual giddiness in light of their destination.

"I'm all right." It was a blatant lie, and the cart ride had only just started. He didn't exactly feel like having a conversation about anything.

After a few moments of silence, Joe glanced at his training officer out of the corner of his eye. The half-pint sat quietly and calmly upon the bench seat and

twiddled his stubby little thumbs while gently swaying with the motion of the cart. It was unnerving. The man was almost never that quiet without having some sort of lesson, game, or trick in play. He was a trickster gnome, after all.

“What are you playing at?”

“Hm?” The little man turned his well-trimmed, curly mustache and pointed beard toward Joe. He wore a blissfully innocent grin.

Joe narrowed his eyes at the gnome, then desperately tried to spot the trick the little man was playing on him. Unfortunately, he couldn’t form a functional Partition in his mind in order to sharpen and hone his senses.

After a few moments of looking about the cabin, he gave up and sighed. “I can’t keep up with you today.”

The elder gnome reached up and placed a comforting hand on Joe’s arm. “My dear boy, when you’re in such a state, I can’t hear your thoughts. I don’t know what it is you’re asking of me.”

Joe furrowed his brow, glanced at his superior, then frowned even more. “You’re not playing any tricks to keep me on my toes?”

His superior shook his head. “No... not today.”

First, he nodded in understanding, then he nodded even more in thanks. “You didn’t have to come with me today, but I’m glad you did.”

The little old man smiled broadly. “As your training officer, your well-being is within my realm of concern. As someone that has lost friends throughout the long years of my life, I wanted to be here with you.”

Joe couldn’t bring words to bear. If he had tried, he was certain that blubbling, snot-accompanied tears would have followed. Never before had he felt so vulnerable and weak. Magic failed to answer his call and every waking minute felt like some horrible dream.

Instead, he nodded and turned his attention back to the window, where he focused on nothing other than his breathing.

The trip lasted the better part of an hour as they wound their way through the south end of the city toward the outskirts and the bay cliffs. If he had walked, it would have taken him the better part of the day.

Eventually the cobblestones gave way to dirt roads as they wound their way back and forth up the hillside to the site of the ceremony. A glance at his watch informed Joe that they still had an hour yet before it began.

Cresting the hill, their destination came into view. A large stone pedestal sat among the long, wavering grass. It was wonderfully framed by four weather-beaten pillars and by the ocean and horizon. Standing by the pedestal was a man in hooded black robes. He had a tome tucked under one arm and a violet-swirled wooden staff in the other.

The gnome driver brought them to a gentle stop on the side of the dirt road, informed them that he would return in an hour and a half, and bid them farewell.

Joe piled out first, followed closely by Petals. Joe went about shaking out and stretching his legs. While the long-haul model of cart had been less cramped, it was still difficult to sit in one for an extended period of time.

The wind whipped their trench coats, pulled at their hats, and drowned out all noise but the sounds of the ocean crashing upon the rocks far below. The winds also turned the grassy field into a green ocean wave. It was pleasant, on an unpleasant day.

Joe didn't want to do it – as though ignoring it would somehow make it not happen – but he stepped toward the stone pillar and the awaiting man in robes.

Jacobs McMillan had set out specific requests

within his will. The first was that Joe would inherit everything he owned. The second was that he wanted a wizard's pyre for a funeral. It was an old and ancient custom that some still honored. Some. Joe had to do a lot of digging to find a man that practiced the old art.

For a small fee, Professor Thaddeus Elderlore was more than happy to preside over the ritual. The man was a scholar at the Arcanum. His focus was Wizarding History. He seemed to have great passion for his job, as he wore the traditional garb and even went as far as having a full-grown brown and silver-streaked beard. It was long enough that it nearly reached his chest.

Upon closer examination, Joe noted that the robes and staff were marked with endless era-specific iterations of the all-seeing eye. It was the symbol of Runelore, god of magic and knowledge.

Once Petals and Joe reached the pedestal, the man happily reached out and shook both their hands. "Pleasure to meet you! Pleasure to meet you!"

You don't have to be so damn jovial about it... It's a funeral!

The man seemed to pick up on Joe's lack of enthusiasm and quickly apologized. "My sincerest apologies, I don't get to do this often and it's always a delight when I get the chance to perform it for those that have passed." He seemed to take a moment to process his choice of words as he took in the unimpressed glare Joe leveled at him.

"Perhaps delight isn't quite the term you intended," Petals offered.

Thaddeus took his time peeling his eyes away from Joe's, then nodded while nervously smiling at the smaller man. "Yes." He pointed over his shoulder, "I'll go stand over there." The man quickly turned and hurried back to the head of the pedestal.

Joe sagged with the effort of having to scowl. He never thought being upset would be so draining. Not

sleeping hadn't helped, but it was more than that. He had felt drained for the past few days leading up to the ceremony.

Petals reached up and patted Joe on the arm. "Calm yourself, and enjoy the view."

He couldn't deny the view. For the reasonably low coinage required to give his friend the send-off he wanted, the view was spectacular. Ships in the bay looked like little more than colored dots on the waters far below. Thankfully, there were no pesky gulls skulking about, and the winds kept him cool as the early summer sun rose to warm the land.

Following the advice of his superior, Joe headed to the other side of the pedestal and soaked in the view. He eventually opted to sit on the grass and reminisce. Sadly, the last time he had sat upon the grass outside the city, he had been in the army. People were dying then too.

A furious stubbornness rose in him in that moment. He swore to himself that he would find time to make a day of it, travel to the city limits and thoroughly enjoy a death-less day on the grass.

Something in the back of his mind pricked, and he realized for a brief moment that his magic was working again – but only briefly. Joe turned and looked to the road, just as a very large private cart crested the hill.

He had been expecting a cart to arrive with Jacobs – rather, Jacobs' remains. The large private cart looked far too large and extravagant to simply carry a body.

Joe stood and flinched as his wand tried to burst from his pocket again. A violent shove of his finger put it back into place. He proceeded to head toward the cart that was pulling up to the side of the dirt road.

Petals looked just as curious, as he too approached the private cart while up on his tiptoes in an

attempt to peer in through the glass. Unfortunately, the glass perfectly reflected the orange sky above – until it started to roll down.

Hub. Didn't know private carts had that feature.

Joe was stunned to find Gino 'The Grizzly' Marcano sitting in the back seat. It was at that moment that his wand decided to punctuate his surprise by bursting from his vest pocket and launching into the air like a firework. It erupted into a full-sized staff while air born.

The graying werebear witnessed the odd display, even going so far as to tilt his head to watch the staff arc through the air and land with a thud upon the grass. He slowly nodded his head and gestured with his hand, "Detective... may I join you?"

Joe failed to notice his staff's sudden departure, as he had been too busy trying to figure out why the alleged crime boss was paying respects to Jacobs.

"I– uh– this– it's... yes?"

The rotund, monstrous man made a gesture with his head and his hand again. Joe was standing in the way. "The door?"

His brain fumbled for words and thoughts but he eventually caught on and jumped to open the door. "Of course."

Once open, the beastly man groaned and pivoted on the cushioned seat, making a ruckus of crumpling and protesting leather. With a great heaving grunt, he pushed himself up and out of the cart and to his feet. Upon doing so, the cart suspension suddenly sprang up a good step and a half, causing Joe to jump slightly.

Good gods!

He knew the graying werebear was large, but he suddenly gained a greater sense for how large. The beastly man had to have tipped over five or six stone, possibly more.

A prodding at his shoulder prompted him to turn his attention to Petals; the man was poking him with Joe's own staff. "How did—" Joe grabbed the staff and tried to right his mind.

Get it together, he probably wants something.

"I— uh— Sir?"

Mr. Marcano turned and used one paw to lightly push the door shut behind him. It nearly took Joe along with it; he had forgotten to let go. "Detective Runewall?"

Joe straightened himself and shook his head free of confusion. "How did you know Jacobs McMillan?"

The great beastly werebear began to shake in the shoulders until a wheezing laugh emanated from his massive form. Joe couldn't help but smile a little and chuckle slightly at the absurdity and strangeness of it all.

Eventually, the werebear settled, and the old man slowly shook his head while placing a massive paw on Joe's shoulder. He spoke in his wheezing way, "You didn't know your friend as well as you thought you did, Detective."

What?

Chapter 2

Joe stood with his hands clasped before him as the attendants moved Jacobs' body to the stone pedestal. It was easily large enough to fit any sized man or beast. Upon such a thought, he couldn't help but glance to his right to the towering werebear.

Jacobs... what were you doing with a crime boss?

The thought had plagued him for the last twenty minutes as they awaited Jacobs' arrival – the arrival of his body.

It still hadn't sunk into him. Joe continued to think of Jacobs as simply being there instead of not. With his magic suffering, it became increasingly difficult to partition his mind and force himself to refer to his passed friend as a past friend.

The attendants were lanky, pale, and gaunt fellows in gray jumpsuits. They wore tweed flat caps. Their names were stitched into white patches on the left

side of their chest, and they each wore gray work gloves as they handled the wrapped body. They moved it along via an old gray tarp stretcher.

One of them was short while the other was tall, yet they seemed to have no trouble coordinating the transportation of the body. The shorter of the two simply held his end up higher by lifting his elbows, while the other relaxed his shoulders a bit and bent at the knee more as he walked.

Upon reaching the pedestal, they both took a knee and lowered the stretcher. They turned, got a good hold, and counted in soft whispers before grunting and heaving. They lifted the body by the shoulders and feet. They were careful and respectful as they moved old Jacobs onto the stone pedestal.

The two men turned to the lot of them, tipped their tweed flat caps and left as quickly as they had arrived. Their cart was long and fitted with similar suspension and wheel bases as the long-haul model gnome cart that Joe and Petals had arrived in. The primary difference was that they drove the cart and sat in the front, while Jacobs – the body – rode in the back carriage.

Joe felt a small twinge of jealousy, as he had always been fascinated by carts and desperately wanted to try driving one.

He turned his attention back to the pedestal as the ceremony began. Professor Thaddeus started by calling to the sky above with his hands stretched wide. “Great Runelore, we send to you a brother of the arcane, a child of your teachings. His mortal form was named Jacobs of McMillan, though you may know him differently in your ever-knowing wisdom.”

The sound of sniffing caught Joe’s attention, and it caused him to glance to the giant werebear to his right. The massive brute of a hybrid was dabbing his eyes with a great big white handkerchief.

Are you serious? We just started!

Joe suddenly turned inward and examined his own mindset. Why wasn't he crying? Why wasn't he upset anymore? No – he was definitely still upset. The loss of Jacobs still weighed heavily upon him. As he thought of it, a wave of weakness overtook him, and it felt as though he would fall apart at that exact moment.

Strength!

A deep shaking breath seemed to help steady him. It also caused him to tear up a bit.

Okay... I'm not a monster.

Joe covered his mouth with his fist and cleared his throat. He didn't want to interrupt but he needed to maintain his composure.

A massive bear paw rested upon Joe's right shoulder and gently patted him. As big as he was, Gino could be quite tender. Petals reached up and patted Joe's left elbow. The support that they showed him was both confusing and heartwarming.

Professor Thaddeus had continued, uninterrupted by the sniffles. Joe presumed the man was used to it, given the nature of the ceremony. "From the great infinite expanse, we are forged and created, and to it we shall return."

The man then turned to the lot of them as he lowered his hands. "It is now time to join together in casting off our dearly departed. Please raise your staffs, presuming you have one."

Joe cleared his throat again and sniffled as he pulled his wand from his vest pocket and released it to full staff size. He touched the butt end to the soft grass at his feet and looked to the enchanted pin he had imbued into the knot of wood around the head of it.

His staff was made from marbled iron maple. It looked like pale and finely-grained wood that had been swirled with silver. The end that he had chosen to be the head of the staff was rounded a bit with some knots.

The cloak pin in question was used by ancient adventurers to harden their clothing with magic. It acted much like his detective's vest and coat, but not quite as powerful.

The only reason he had managed to turn the hunk of wood into an actual magical staff was all in thanks to Jacobs and his little stash of wondrous things. The pin was amongst those wonders and Jacobs had granted it to Joe before succumbing to his ailments.

Petals removed his wand and followed suit. His staff was much different from Joe's. It looked to be made from pine or walnut and was wonderfully stained. The entire length was carved with swirling designs that doubled back on themselves and twisted in odd ways that made it look like the entire staff was made from coiled knots and loops of rope.

Gino Marcano pulled a stubbed and black-painted wand from his pocket. It was probably only two thirds of a step in length and looked no more special than a kitchen utensil. The old and graying werewolf flicked the wand and the tip ignited, creating a soft glow.

Of course, lamplight wand.

The device could easily be purchased by anyone. It had a singular and simple purpose – provide light. It didn't have any other mystical properties and wouldn't aid them in the slightest in what they had to do, but the gesture was noted and appreciated.

The professor nodded, then closed his eyes and took in a big lungful through his nose before exhaling. "Now, all take a deep breath as I just have, and open yourselves to the 'verse."

Joe didn't know how much help he would be but tried anyway. He shut his eyes and took a deep and calming breath. Unfortunately, he felt twisted inside. Sorrow still filled him, and his energies felt out of sorts.

The man continued to instruct, "Breathe in the 'verse, accept mortality and the passing of those we love,

and allow the grief to flow out and into the pyre.”

He didn't know exactly how he was to do such a thing. Joe opened his eyes and looked to the small wisps of flames that were beginning to light upon the wraps covering the body of his old friend.

You really are gone, aren't you?

There wouldn't be any more jokes, quips, puzzles, or long stories into the night. Joe gathered all of his misery and anxiety over the ceremony, let out a shuddering breath, and pushed everything he could muster toward the flames. The sudden loss of energy caused him to crumple and fall to his knees.

Petals began to reach out for Joe, only to jump back along with the others, as a great red pillar of fire burst skyward from the pedestal.

“AH!” Petals barked out a startled scream and Gino let out a growling roar of surprise.

The professor swore like a drunken sailor, “Blasted thunderstorms and fireballs!”

Joe didn't have the strength to jump away. He simply looked up at the flames in awe and relief as he held to his staff. He knelt in the cool grass, while the fire heated his front and face.

The sunlight rising behind them paled in comparison to the sudden explosion before them. Their shadows were cast behind them in opposite of the early morning sun, as they faced the enraged inferno of power.

Thankfully, the roaring fire was momentary, and it quickly died down to the size of an elongated campfire. The flames, as the ceremony suggested they would, changed to a beautiful violet. The form of a body that had been present before had vanished. All that remained was a glittering pile of white sparkling ash. It was wizard's ash, commonly referred to as magic dust. Not all magic dust came from dead wizards, but all magic dust was once something magical that was burned

down.

Joe felt weak. He was drained emotionally and physically. A good nap sounded like an amazing idea, but he needed to finish the ceremony, and so he pulled himself up with the aid of his staff.

“What? Why is—?” He turned to see Professor Thaddeus standing stunned with a furrowed brow. He was looking directly at the flames.

Petals eyed Joe with a cocked eyebrow. “Feeling better? Got out everything you bottled up?” The elder gnome didn’t exactly look impressed.

“Sorry... I haven’t exactly been dealing with this all too well.”

Petals scowled, “Brilliant understatement.”

The Professor continued to stammer, “No— I— It’s— Why is—” He was pointing to the dying flames. They truly were a wonderful shade of purple. Said to be the color of Runelore and the purest of magic.

Joe breathed deeply and scolded himself for being so moody. “Professor, I really am sorry. I didn’t mean to bottle it all up and throw it into the fire like that. I should have been handling my grief better than this... I’m also sorry for treating you so poorly earlier.”

The man threw his staff to the ground and waved off Joe with both his hands. “No!” He gestured quite adamantly at the pedestal, “Why are the flames purple?”

“What?” Joe turned to watch as the last remnants of purple flame died out, leaving a mound of rapidly cooling magic dust. “But they’re supposed to be purple.”

The man threw his arms up into the air and then gripped his hair. “Only if they’re skilled wizards! You told me he was just a regular guy!”

What?

A gentle breeze buffeted their backs and sent a third of the pile billowing into the wind. In hindsight,

hosting the pyre on a clifftop overlooking the bay and the ocean probably wasn't the smartest idea. It wouldn't have been so bad if Joe had put up some wind barriers, but he hadn't thought of that.

The lot of them panicked and Petals turned and immediately waved his hand and staff about. It created a loud audible snap and killed the gentle breeze in an instant. "Quick! Get the jars!"

~~

Joe sat on the bench seat of the cart, gently swaying back and forth with a large glass jar resting on his lap. The lid was made from wood and was strapped down tight with a wire cage-hinge.

Despite having completed the ceremony and placing his friend to rest, Joe felt more confused than ever.

The professor had specifically and quite energetically explained how a wizard's pyre left behind wizard's ash in a quality that matched the strength of the caster in life. Joe wasn't familiar with the process. Apparently, any regular person, untrained and unskilled, would have left behind little better than white fine-grain sand. It would have had some traces of magic, but not much. Jacobs had left behind high-quality empowered magic dust.

The only obvious answer was that the attendants had simply brought the wrong body from the funeral storage. Thankfully, the professor had experienced such mishaps before, and had a parchment of spell-work ready to prove the identity of the remnants.

Joe had never seen such magic before, but it was apparently a common-enough problem to warrant an actual spell for it. The man placed the parchment face down upon the pedestal and then spoke a series of

incantations in Old Arcane while sprinkling some of the wizard's ash – magic dust – upon the parchment.

Within a few moments, the parchment began filling with rune words. Professor Thaddeus had managed to create an identification spell that linked the remnants of a body to the 'identity' of the individual as provided by the city archives.

Joe and Petals had taken far more than a passing interest in the magic, and had asked for a copy so that they might submit it as a standard toolset for detectives.

The rune words that appeared on the parchment were little more than copies of licenses, titles, and birth and death certificates. With the information provided, they were able to figure out who they had burned. It *was* Jacobs.

Joe looked down at the glass jar full of magic dust and frowned in concentration.

Were you a powerful wizard in disguise?

He puzzled over why hadn't he sensed it? The possibilities were far too numerous, and the questions were eating at him. He needed answers, and fast.

The long-haul gnome cart had arrived on time and took them back into town. Gino had offered to take them, but Petals and Joe had politely refused. He informed the massive werebear that he needed time to think things through on the cliff-side.

In typical fashion, the alleged crime-boss respectfully accepted the decline. For an alleged criminal, he was awfully polite. Joe had remarked upon it, and Petals had responded by telling him, "It just means that he'll politely smile at you while giving the order to have you 'eliminated' if you get in his way."

Joe didn't like that.

"It also means he's really good at hiding his criminal activities. I've had more than a few hints that he's been behind some high-stakes crimes over the years, but nothing that we could ever stick to him or any

of his family.”

Joe liked that even less.

The gnome cart eventually came to a stop at the precinct and Petals hopped out. He thanked the driver, and then turned to Joe, “Take the day, get some rest. You are in need of sleep, and food.”

Almost as if it had ears, his stomach loudly roared its agreement. That caused Petals to throw his head back and bark out in laughter. Despite himself, Joe grinned. The little man had an infectious and delightful laugh.

Petals was the epitome of joviality. Once his laughter subsided, he nodded to Joe, and then shut the door.

A brief silence followed as Joe sat and looked to the jar on his lap. Many thoughts swirled about inside and all of them surrounded his old friend.

“Where to, pal?” The gnome cart driver was waiting.

Joe snapped free of the mind-fog and declared with absolute certainty, “Runelore’s Refuse.”

~~

For many summers of his youth, and for many of the projects he was assigned to complete during his studies, Joe would run over to “Runelore’s Refuse”. He would show Jacobs the latest trick he had learned or he would purchase the supplies he needed in order to finish one thing or another.

The front of the store was much like any of the other stores down the road. It had a brick facing with two shop windows on either side of the glass door. The right window was full of buckets and shelving to display all the colorful candies and toys the store had in stock. They were empty and full of dust and cobwebs. The left window was left un-obstructed for a passerby to peer

inside. It also had white lettering painted along the top on the inside.

It read:

Runelore's Refuse.
We salvage what Wizard's toss away
Ask about our Arcanum Student
Discount!

For a moment, Joe felt sad seeing the store in such a state, but that sadness was quickly replaced with anger.

Why did you hide your powers?

Thankfully, his agonizing sorrows and anxiety had shifted, allowing his energies to re-align. His staff responded to him and no longer objected to being shrunk to wand-size in order to fit into his pocket; but he was still exhausted.

Despite the exhaustion, Joe lifted the head of his staff and pointed it at the front door. The arcane lock that Jacobs had installed all those years ago easily gave way to a simple infused push, and the door swung open. The intended design called for party streamers and a grand trumpet to fire off and play whenever a customer entered the store. Joe disabled it. It had grown annoying, especially since the trumpet was broken.

He had left the store untouched since his old friend's departure. He hadn't visited since that day, and the only other thing he'd done besides deactivating the trumpet was post a notice of the funeral on the storefront door.

He shut the door behind him and locked it. Turning to face the store, Joe took a breath and began examining the room with a keen eye. He knew the man – or at least thought he did, until recently – and knew that he wasn't foolish enough to leave anything dangerously magical out in the front of the store where

children or thieves were about.

Settling on that conclusion, he proceeded to head to the back room and the stairs to the basement. It had a more substantial lock on it. Joe tapped the lock and watched as it popped open. He had gotten used to the thick dwarven-iron padlock and had memorized the key necessary to unlock it.

Not wanting any of the arcane supplies to go missing, Joe had added extra barriers of protection to keep any would-be thieves out. A simple knock of the head of his staff upon the door, lowered the barriers and the attached alarms.

He continued on down the stairs with the massive jar of magic dust under one arm and his staff held out before him to lead the way. The room was as Petals and Joe had left it over a moon ago. The center of the floor was marked by the dusted remnants of the chalk-lines that Joe had drawn in order to fuse his staff with the enchanted pin. The shelving was also all pushed against the walls.

Joe had never felt like cleaning up or spending any great amount of time in the store, it just brought too much hurt. At that moment, it caused him a great deal of frustrated anger.

There were plenty of empty jars, but he didn't feel like separating the magic dust into smaller containers at that moment, and so he simply placed the jar on the countertop by the transaction station. The padlock and barriers to the basement door would be sufficient for the time being, so he felt it safe enough to leave it.

What are you hiding, and where are you hiding it?

Was it all some last puzzle for Joe to figure out? Or had Jacobs really pulled the wool over his eyes in order to keep the secret to himself? He had to know.

Closing his eyes, Joe lifted his arms to the sides and then thumped the butt of his staff on the cement floor. A tidal wave of air rippled outward from the

strike. It covered every surface and climbed every shelf and countertop, lifting the dust from the floor and creating a cloud of dinginess.

Eventually the rippling wave met its end on the ceiling just above where Joe stood. Dust rained down around him as it had been shaken loose. He managed to keep the dust off by erecting a bubbled barrier above his head. It was identical to the ones he used when it rained.

Throughout the entire length of the rippling probe, he had kept his senses attuned to any sudden fluctuations where there shouldn't have been any. Many of the objects in the room had their own auras and gave off their own ripples or objections to being tested or probed. He had anticipated that. Nothing in the room had stood out to him as un-ordinary.

So you didn't hide it here... upstairs it is

He shook his bubbled barrier clean of any dust, and turned and headed up and out of the basement and locked it all behind him. He threw up the barrier as well.

Once locked, he turned and made his way out of the back room and to the stairs leading to the residence.

A thought occurred to him.

Jacobs may have hidden whatever it was in the back storage room. So, he took the moment to check the back room as well.

Another quick thump of the staff and a ripple of energy went out and up the walls. A few boxes gave a little jump and the mop and bucket clanged, but nothing out of the ordinary.

Joe accepted that result, then continued on up to the residence. He pulled the necessary key from his trouser pocket and manually unlocked the door. There was no point in expending unnecessary energy. Exhaustion was also catching up to him as he was growing light-headed.

There was a moment of pause as he felt a pang

of guilt. He was investigating his old friend as though he were little more than a criminal.

No... he knew Gino... something isn't right here

Despite his questions, Gino only ever admitted to having taken his daughter to buy a wand that shot pink sparkles and how kind and attentive that Jacobs had been.

Once the werebear had left, Joe had immediately questioned Petals on whether or not it was normal for the alleged crime-boss to visit the funeral of “just a friendly shop owner”. Petals shook his head. It wasn't.

Strengthening his resolve, He opened the door and looked to the room he had refused to enter since his old friend's passing. The sorrow struck him like a hammer.

No, Focus!

Another quick exhalation and a forced partition of his mind helped him to push aside the emotion and concentrate. He thumped his staff upon the floorboards and sent out another exploratory probing wave of energy. There was an immediate and alarming pinch to his senses as the wave reached no further than the kitchens and the bed.

KNEW IT!

He hadn't found the source yet, but he was damn-well going to. Joe turned to the kitchens and released another focused wave of probing energy that returned nothing.

A loud roaring growl from his stomach told him it was time to stop and rest. Begrudgingly he did, and turned to look for something to eat.

Chapter 3

Thankfully, Jacobs had kept a tin of Joe's favorite biscuits in one of the cupboards above the chill cabinet. Wisely, he had avoided the cabinet. There was no telling what food had been inside at the time of Jacob's passing, or how long ago it had soured.

While a bit stale, the biscuits had been heavy enough to fill him and sate some of his hunger. He didn't eat all of them, as that would have left him a mess of a human being. Half a dozen was enough to give him some strength and allow him to continue his search. Joe snapped the tin lid back on, and then placed it on the kitchen table. They were still tasty, and he decided he'd take them home with him.

"Home" had suddenly turned into an odd concept. Along with ownership of the store, the residence above it was technically also his. It felt wrong to live in it, and was still unsure as to whether he was going to sell it.

Escaping the dreadfully bleak residence under Bellcreaux's roof was more than just appealing. It caused him to seriously stop and consider whether or not it was worth it.

Joe remembered that he had already noted the cost of running the store and had paid off the outstanding debts Jacobs had incurred from months of dismal or non-existent sales.

With his own debts, he couldn't afford to live there, and it was also a bit of a distance from the Precinct.

I guess that settles it

He decided, then and there, that he would sell the shop once he discovered his old friend's secrets. There was simply no affording the shop and his rent while paying off his loans. Selling might also be the means by which he dug himself out of debt. He might then be able to afford a place of his own.

First things first

Standing from the seat at the kitchen table, he flexed his energies and tested his strength. The staff leaped from the corner by the chill cabinet and firmly slapped the palm of his out-stretched hand. It wasn't dismal, but it was nowhere near as strong as it needed to be. Sleep would restore it.

He moved the staff to his right hand and then thumped it on the floorboards while focusing his attention on the bed side of the room. The rippling wave kicked up bits of dust that had fallen between the floorboards and buffeted the bed sheets.

Once the wave had reached halfway under the bed, he felt it. It was a prick in the back of his mind, but never more. Joe released the wave and let it die, then proceeded to make his way toward the bed. He hunched over and kept a keen eye on the floorboards as he slowly walked heel to toe.

There didn't appear to be anything out of the

ordinary. There were no visible deformations or discolorations of the floorboards, nor were there any latches, hatches, finger-holes, or visible runes.

Joe let out a frustrated breath and then marched to the bed and hauled it away from the wall, metal frame and all. It rubbed loudly against the floorboards in protest and rumbled and shook.

Once out of the way, he went about thumping the floorboards with his staff in hopes of finding a hollow spot. He sought out the secret that was undeniably hidden there. It only took a few prods before the thump became solid and hard.

AHA!

Dropping to a knee, Joe set his staff aside and stuck his ear to the floor. From there he then began gently knocking on the boards. It didn't take him long, but he managed to discern the size of the secret hidden in the floor. It was three steps wide and long. There was no telling how deep it was until he opened it. Despite there being a limited amount of space between the floor of the residence and the ceiling of the storefront below, anyone could create a much larger stash given a proper bit of spell-work. For all he knew, there was a secret room hidden below.

The impressive part was that he saw no seams. The floorboards continued along uninterrupted. He doubted he was supposed to access it from the room below, as that would require him to stand on a ladder and reach up. Jacobs wouldn't do something so reckless and impractical in order to access a secret compartment when he could just do so from the safety and privacy of his residence.

Through that line of logic, Joe could only conclude that the means to open the compartment was magical in nature. Thankfully, he had a knack for barriers and locks. He picked up his staff and turned it around so that it was upside down and the head pointed

toward the floor.

Closing his eyes, Joe calmed the chaos of his mind and opened himself up to the cosmic ‘verse. He could sense all the energies of the room. He could smell the breeze that came in through the open window and hear the gentle fluttering of the curtains. The lengthy and well-worn life of the floorboards he sat upon thrummed their memories.

It was then that he felt the oddity of the secret compartment. It wasn’t visible to him. Anything magical should have had some form of visibility to him in that state of mind. Yet, there was nothing.

Joe opened his eyes and looked to the floorboards in absolute bewilderment. He had no idea what Jacobs had stashed there or how to access it. Blowing out a frustrated sigh, he straightened himself and tried again.

The energies of the room were all there, except for that one spot. Once he focused on it, it became clear. It was as if there was a hole in the world. The square shape was definitively outlined on the floor and was exactly in the size and shape he had discerned it to be from his earlier knocking. Pressing closer with his mind, he finally noticed it. The tiniest pinprick of light sat in the center of the darkness.

Focusing, he managed to press tighter in toward it. Eventually, he steadied his mind enough to focus on the nature of the light source. It was a trigger.

Finally!

Daring to probe it, Joe released a small bit of energy to discern what sort of trigger it was. He managed to get a taste of it before he was struck by something he hadn’t anticipated.

Joe popped open his eyes and tried to lurch away, but he had been too slow. A great, bright bolt of lightning erupted from the floor and struck him like a hammer.

~~

Joe bolted upright and twitched violently. His whole body was numb, and every single muscle felt like it needed to burst from his skin and run the entirety of the city from one end to the other. Exhaustion didn't exactly feel like an issue in that moment.

He looked about the room and noted bits of dust falling from the ceiling. Following the trail and tilting his head back, he noted that his staff was halfway buried in the roof. There also happened to be a man-sized crater in the ceiling.

The floorboards around the secret compartment were charred from what looked like an explosion. The compartment itself seemed to be untouched, and there was also a distinct clean blotch on the floor where he had been sitting. Joe looked to his trousers to note that his pant legs were shredded and singed by explosive electrical forces. His socks similarly had been shredded and were smoking. Joe flexed his toes and stared directly at his socks.

Where are my boots?

Thankfully, his vest, and coat were un-damaged. They were likely the reason he had survived the initial discharge. The bed, sitting to his left, had collapsed upon itself. Based on the broken slats, he presumed that he had landed on it instead of the floor. By the looks of things, the lightning had slapped him against the ceiling and he had bounced off the bed upon descending.

A glance at his watch told him it had suffered from the discharge; it appeared to be dead.

Great!

Joe coughed out a bit of smoke and proceeded to collect himself as best as one could. His hat had launched into the kitchen, and one of his boots was sitting on top of the chill cabinet. The other was in the

sink.

Moving about the room brought something to his attention he didn't usually notice – his hair felt stiff.

He hurried to the water closet and gaped at his reflection. The young man that stared back at him had been singed and burnt to the point that his hair stood on end.

Great! I look like Grimbomb now!

Whipping out his wizard's handkerchief, he went about cleaning himself up. Sadly, no amount of mystical mending would restore the burnt and shredded trousers. He'd have to buy new ones. A quick wet combing helped to soften and relax his damaged hair; that also would not be repaired with magic. He'd have to get it cut shorter and wait for it to grow out again.

Once he was cleaned up as best as he could be, Joe turned and headed for the stairs. Before being walloped by the lightning trap, he had discovered the nature of the trigger in the floorboards. It was designed to respond to one thing and one thing only – Jacobs.

The man was dead, but his essence was in a jar in the basement. Joe headed back down the stairs in order to collect a vial of magic dust from the jar.

~~

Joe turned his coat around and wore it backward. The mattress was stripped from the bed and propped up to act as a shield. Pillows and blankets were stuffed between him and the mattress, and a thin vial of Jacobs' wizard's ash was tied to the end of his staff via his wizard's handkerchief. He had also found a wooden bowl in one of the kitchen cupboards and figured it could act as an improvised helmet.

Once relatively satisfied with his makeshift barricade, Joe took several quick breaths, reached out with his 'delivery device', and dumped the contents of

the vial upon the center of the secret compartment. He pulled back, ducked for cover, and covered his 'helmet' with his hands while tensing.

At first, there was nothing. No explosion or discharge of magic. Then, he heard a *click*. It was loud enough that he jumped and clenched, but nothing followed.

After several long breaths, Joe opened one eye. Still nothing. He opened the other eye and dared to slowly lift his head and peer over the edge of the mattress.

The secret compartment had popped open.

Yes!

Joe leaped up and vaulted the mattress with his staff in hand. The hatch to the secret compartment looked as though it was made from the fused sections of floorboard, and it fit snugly into the hole.

Not wanting another mishap, Joe took his time and probed the lid. There didn't seem to be any more traps, but he decided to play it safe and backed up and hid behind the mattress once more. From there, he reached out with his staff and slowly pushed the lid open. Nothing happened.

So far, so good.

He got back to his feet and crept toward the hole in the floorboards, then slowly went up on his toes to lean over and look inside.

Joe shouldn't have been surprised by its contents. It was a well-hidden secret compartment that likely held something illegal, if not dangerous. Despite that, he was surprised.

He knelt down and examined each item in turn. There was a well-used tome titled *The Fundamental Elementals of Arcane Energies*. Joe recognized it immediately; he had read it at length while studying at the Arcanum. The tome was supposed to never leave the campus, as it was deemed dangerous in the wrong

hands.

How in the holy fireballs did you get your hands on this?

The next item he pulled was a thrice-woven wand made from willow. He didn't know what to make of it. It wasn't a compressed staff, and the magic felt foreign to him. It felt somewhat alive. Setting it aside, he reached in and pulled out the next item.

There was a wire metal cage large enough to trap a sewer rat. It contained swirling clouds of blackness. Joe had never heard of or seen such a thing, but he decidedly left it closed and put it aside.

A block of wood was also hidden inside. It was sanded and polished to a beautiful shine, but it didn't appear to have any latches or seams. Joe set it aside and figured best to tinker with it later. There was another box inside the stash, a metal lockbox that was glowing with arcane seals.

By the gods, what were you into, Jacobs?

Lastly, there was a leather pouch. Joe picked it up and jangled it. There was a satisfying amount of clinking taking place, but he didn't dare open it in case it was a trap.

Wanting to understand more of how the compartment worked, he got down on his hands and knees and poked his head in. The interior was painted black; it gave it a much larger appearance, and the underside of the rim was etched with runes. The runes were anti-magic.

How!

Magic dust was expensive; anti-magic dust was exponentially more so. "By the gods! If you were alive, I'd have you by your ankles and shake you until you squealed!"

After pulling his head from the compartment, he looked again to the leather coin bag. Had the man been holding out? Or was he involved in something much worse?

The arrival of Gino Marcano at the funeral suggested that Jacobs was dealing with some very illegal underground activities.

He was about to start collecting the things and move them to the kitchen table for cataloguing when he heard a strange noise coming from the storefront below. In a panic, he dumped everything back into the secret storage and replaced the lid, cursed at himself for putting it in the wrong way, pried it up, then popped it back in correctly. As soon as the lid sunk into place it sealed itself and the seams vanished.

Shaking his head, Joe stood from where he had been kneeling and straightened himself out, including turning his coat back around. The noise from the front of the store was getting louder.

He threw open the door to the residence and could clearly make out the wailing of a young woman. Despite being off duty, he couldn't ignore it. Joe stepped out, locked the door, and hurried down the steps.

Upon reaching the landing, he could see a young woman kneeling before the front door and wailing as she looked up at the sign that Joe had forgotten to remove earlier. He had posted the funeral notice on the front of the shop for anyone that had wanted to attend.

Joe hurried to the door, unlocked it, and opened it to the full sniffing and sobbing of the young lady. She looked to be just coming of age. Her hair was a bright strawberry blonde, closer to a soft orange, and framed her face in gentle curls. Freckles dotted her nose and cheeks, and she was dressed in a white blouse and green pleated skirt. She didn't wear any makeup and her face was red with tears.

"I'm so sorry." Joe had no other words to offer her. He understood her sorrow, fully and completely. Kneeling, he offered her his hands as comfort.

She looked to be choking back the sobs in order

to say something. Eventually, she calmed herself enough to speak. Unfortunately, it came out as little more than blubbering gibberish that he couldn't understand.

“I’m sorry?”

“I said,” she sniffed and took in several shaking breaths before wailing again, “I’m a horrible daughter!”

WHAT!