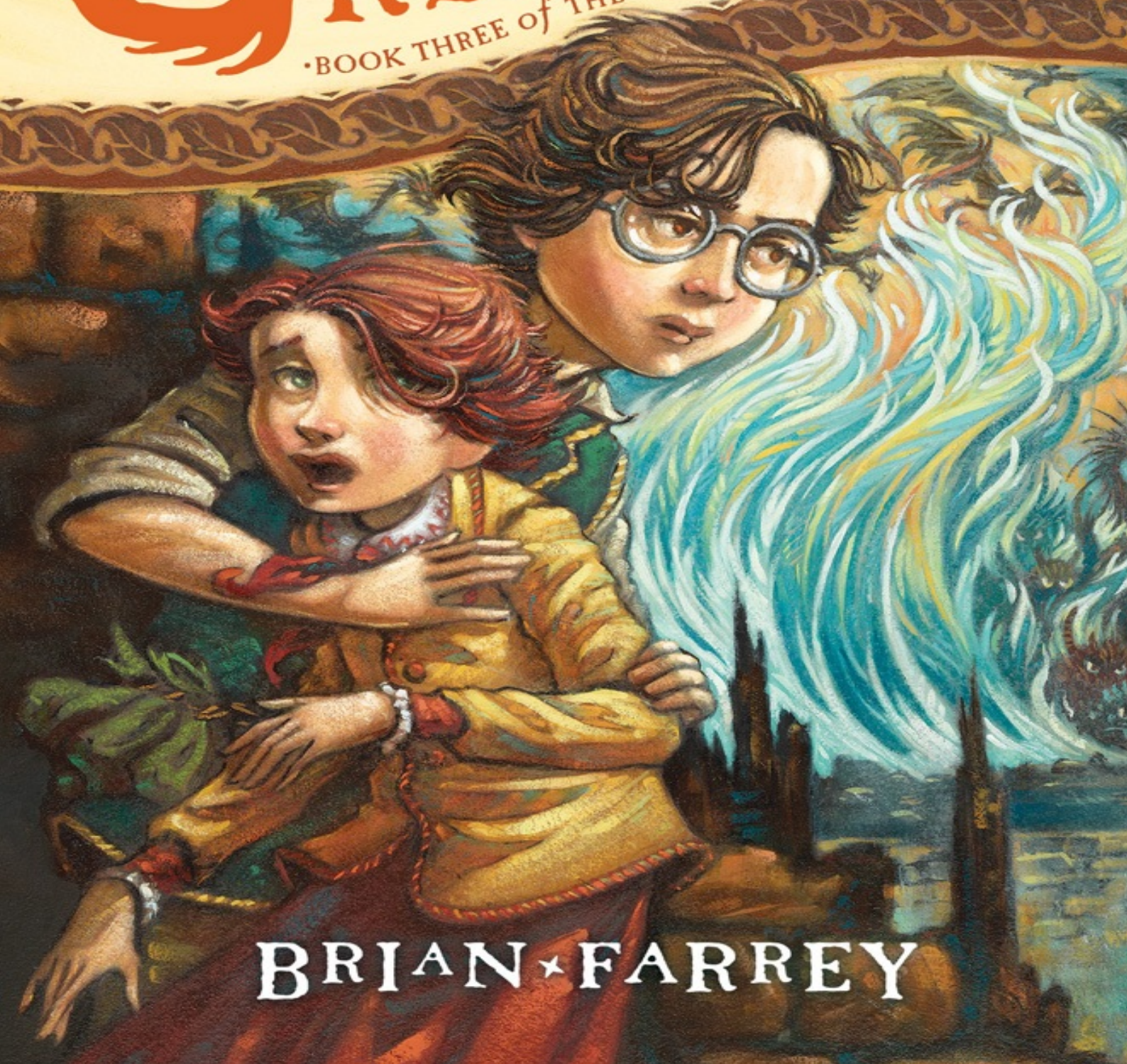


THE GRIMJINX REBELLION

•BOOK THREE OF THE VENGEKEEP PROPHECIES•



BRIAN FARREY

THE
G RIMJINX
REBELLION

BRIAN ★ FARREY

illustrated by
BRETT HELQUIST

HARPER

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Dedication

*To Jim, Mark, and Pam,
who've always known the truth about the Vanguard*



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PART ONE



THE CRECHE



1

Portents

“Portents bleed the foolish and feed the wily.”

—*Mendar Grimjinx, sole survivor of the Rexian Ziggurat plunder*

Of all the wisdom passed down through the generations of the Grimjinx clan, the bit I think about most came from Jerrina Grimjinx, wife of Corenus, our clan father. She said, “Tomorrow’s eyes penetrate yesterday’s haze.”

It means that when things get hectic—like when you’re fighting off balanx skeletons or stopping a madman from blowing up every mage in the Five Provinces—it’s hard to get perspective. It’s only with time that you can reflect and see clearly what would have been obvious.

If, you know, you hadn’t been distracted by all the running and screaming.

Looking back, it’s all very clear to me now. The Creche, the war, the Scourge . . . each one shined brightly in my past, like a beacon leading me to my fate. At the time, you could have told me what was coming but I wouldn’t have believed it. Yet the signs were all there.

I was going to die.



No expense had been spared for the Dowager’s party.

The Banquet Room in Vengekeep’s town-state hall was the largest, most lavish room in the whole city. Silky red draperies hung from the ceiling, framing walls that had been decorated with woodcut depicting key moments in Vengekeep’s history. Long tables buckled under the weight of roast hemmon, freshly steamed vegetables, and a collection of the best vintages of ashwine ever assembled. It would have been a party worthy of the High Laird himself.

It was a shame no one showed up.

I stood in a small antechamber tucked into the Banquet Room’s north wall, hidden behind a golden curtain. I peeked out and did a quick head count.

“Twelve people,” I announced in a whisper. “But they look happy to be here. You’ll have a captive audience.”

Dowager Annestra Soranna sat on a stool. Her hands picked at the formal gown that clung tightly to her frail frame. She hated dressing up. "*Sallah kesh*," she said, only loud enough for me to hear.

The Dowager, in her never-ending quest for knowledge, had asked me to teach her ancient *pa* Goblin, the language of thieves. She didn't *quite* have the hang of it yet. She thought *sallah kesh* was a form of swearing. Actually, it meant "prudent soup." I figured I'd get around to correcting her. Someday.

To the Dowager's right stood Neron, her most trusted guard. On the other side, decked out in his official uniform as Protectorate of Vengekeep, stood Da. He gritted his teeth at the news.

"Twelve!" Da said. "Well . . . that's a *good* sign. Twelve's a lucky number for thieves. There are twelve clans in the kleptocracy, twelve charters in the Lymmaris Creed. . . ." His voice trailed off as he failed to identify other ways to make twelve people sound promising.

The Dowager's nose wrinkled as Ma brushed powder onto her crooked cheekbones. "I heard Ull Lek, the butcher, is here," Ma said cheerily. "He's the wealthiest man in Vengekeep."

Ma, Da, and I were taking turns trying to keep the Dowager from worrying that a banquet thrown in her honor had attracted so few people. Earlier, Da, who was in charge of security, had told Ma and me that over three hundred invitations had been sent to dignitaries and the nobility throughout Korr Province. Nearly all had been returned with polite regrets. A few, Da had added, were less than polite.

"I appreciate your optimism," the Dowager said, a gentle lilt to her voice, "but we all know *well* why there are so few people here."

Ma looked surprised. It was easy to mistake the Dowager as being doddering and unaware. In truth, a razor-sharp mind lurked beneath that befuddled exterior, ready to cut anyone who believed the facade for a second.

It was hardly a secret that her brother, the High Laird, was facing . . . popularity problems these days. His erratic behavior had been raising questions for a year now. But in the two months since the exile of the Sarosan pacifists, he'd gone positively naff-nut. Unjust taxes. Centuries-old freedoms revoked. Even his most loyal subjects were unhappy.

I had hoped to see my friend Callie Strom here tonight. But both she and her cousin, Talia, Vengekeep's mage, were absent. This suggested truth behind another whispered rumor that had slinked its way across the Provinces: the Palatinate, the mages who governed magical law for the High Laird, was also trying to distance itself from the government.

I was worried about Callie. From the letters I'd received while studying with the Dowager at Redvalor Castle, it sounded like she had come a long way in her magical training. Talia said she had a real talent. What worried me was how close she was getting to the Palatinate. If the recent past had taught me anything, it was that the mages couldn't be trusted.

I turned to Aubrin, my eleven-year-old sister, who sat in the corner, scribbling in her journal as usual. To break the tension, I tried snatching the book. But she saw me coming and did a tuck and roll to get away.

"Come on, Jinxface," I said. "When are you going to let me see what you're always writing?"

She raised an eyebrow. "It's not time," she said. It was what she *always* said when I wanted to read her journal.

The gold curtains parted and in came Castellan Jorn, chief magistrate of Vengekeep. His thick fingers clutched an oversize key made of brass and encrusted with fake jewels: the symbolic key to the gates of Vengekeep. Jorn presented it to anyone of importance who visited the town-state.

He bowed low before the Dowager. "My lady," he said, "I believe we are ready to begin."

"You look marvelous, Annestra," Ma told the Dowager.

The Dowager kissed Ma, then Ma and Aubrin slipped through the gold curtain to join the others in the Banquet Room. Jorn straightened his robes and followed Ma and Aubrin.

“May I have your attention!” we heard Jorn call out, his bass voice thundering off the room’s walls. “As you know, every one hundred years, the reigning High Laird throws a Jubilee to commemorate another century of benevolent rule under the Soranna family. In one month, we will mark *five hundred* years of unification for the Five Provinces!”

The Dowager cringed on hearing the smattering of polite applause. Given the mood throughout the Provinces, many people doubted the Jubilee would happen at all.

“This Jubilee,” Jorn went on, “is especially exciting for Vengekeep. As per custom, members of the royal family offer their patronage to a town-state they feel most exemplifies patriotism for the Five Provinces. Tonight, we gather to celebrate that the Dowager Soranna has graciously chosen Vengekeep!”

Jorn paused, expecting applause. Silence.

“As such,” he continued quickly, “the Dowager will oversee Vengekeep’s celebration, offering her insight until the Jubilee begins in one month. It is now my extreme pleasure . . .”

I took the Dowager’s hand as she nervously licked her lips.

“. . . to introduce Her Majesty, the Dowager Annestra Soranna!”

Neron pulled back the curtain. A smile lit the Dowager’s face. We walked into the Banquet Room to meek applause from the stateguard and Jorn’s overzealous cheers. But most of the guests stood immobile and frowning. The Dowager waved as she took her place at the head table next to the Castellan.

“Good people,” the Dowager said, “it is I who feel honored to be among you tonight. For centuries the High Laird’s Jubilee has served as a symbol of your sovereign’s devotion to these lands we all forge day to day. . . .”

As the Dowager continued, I spotted Aubrin trying to get my attention. She wiggled her eyebrow and jerked her head. I looked where she was motioning. All I saw were the people of Vengekeep. Ull Lek, the widow Bellatin, Abrinar Benrick, the cobbler. Nothing out of the ordinary.

Then, just as the Dowager started describing her plans for Vengekeep’s Jubilee celebration, the widow Bellatin—a frail old woman who’d devoted her life to teaching girls to be proper ladies—stepped forward and flung her arm toward the Dowager.

Splat! A large, juicy blackdrupe struck the Dowager’s chest, exploding in a mess that left the front of the Dowager’s gown stained purple. The Dowager’s jaw dropped.

Immediately, a retinue of Provincial Guards—the Dowager’s protectors—was upon the widow, holding her stick-thin arms at her sides. But the widow strained against them, her face flushed with rage.

“The High Laird is bleeding the Provinces dry!” Bellatin said with a roar. “The money I inherited from my husband should have kept me for life. Now I am nearly destitute, thanks to the High Laird’s new taxes.”

I swallowed hard. The widow had been one of the wealthiest women in town. The idea that she was poor seemed inconceivable.

Da, two stateguards at his side, approached the widow. “Arrest her,” he said with a sigh.

“No.”

The Dowager raised her hand as she spoke. The Provincial Guards released the widow. The Dowager smiled at Bellatin, even as the widow stared back defiantly.

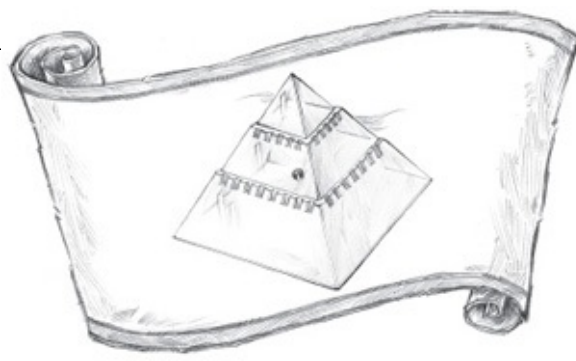
“Tomorrow,” the Dowager said, “you will come to the Grimjinx house and we will discuss your

grievances. I have the High Laird's confidence. Perhaps I can—”

~~But the widow would hear no more. She gathered her skirt and stormed from the Banquet Room.~~
Everyone fell silent.

Mortified, Jorn jumped to his feet. He fumbled to hand the Dowager his napkin, which she used to mop up the mess down her front.

“So,” Jorn squeaked, “you were saying about the Jubilee?”



2

Jaxter's New Shadow

“Plan twice, steal once.”

—Yevill Grimjinx, creator of the Grimjinx family code

The rest of the banquet was a quiet, miserable affair. Not exactly the celebration Jorn had intended. I'm sure. He'd hoped to show the Dowager off like a prize. Instead, when we finished eating, the Dowager excused herself and we all walked back to my parents' house in silence.

The second we were home, she snapped her fingers at her soldiers. A tall, broad-shouldered Satyr woman with a neatly trimmed brown beard stepped forward.

“Luda,” the Dowager said, “from here on, you are Jaxter's bodyguard. Your duty is to protect him at all times.”

A *bodyguard*? I knew Luda by reputation. She could be . . . intense. The horns that stuck up out of her helmet looked sharp enough to gore an entire herd of cargabeasts with a single swipe.

“Your Majesty,” Luda said in a deep and determined voice, “the boy will always be safe while I am around. This I pledge!”

I looked up at her in mock skepticism. “I'm not sure she's qualified.”

If I hadn't just been placed in her care, I suspect Luda would have ended me right then. The Satyrans of Rexin were proud warriors. She stomped her cloven hooves and thumped her breastplate with her armored fist.

“I have defended the Tor of Belos against the marauding hordes from the Rexian bileswamps!” she bellowed. “I have slain a herd of rampaging sanguibeasts on a stampede through the farmlands of my home! I have—”

“It was a joke!” I threw up my hands. “You have jokes on Rexin, right?”

From her stony look, I guessed they didn't.

“Dowager, this isn't necessary—” I started.

But the Dowager's face was very serious. “I'm sorry, Jaxter, but if I'm in danger, you're in danger. I should have assigned you a permanent guard months ago, following the affair with the Sarosans. After tonight, it's clear I can wait no longer.”

“But—”

“Jaxter!” An edge in the Dowager's voice sliced the air. She looked exhausted, angry, and defeated.

She closed her eyes and her face relaxed. "There is no discussion. Good night."

~~Luda snapped to attention, her armor clanging, and she bowed to her sovereign. The Dowager nodded in return, then made for the stairs. Aubrin fell in next to the royal, taking her arm.~~

As the other Provincial Guards took their posts, Ma eyed Luda with curiosity. The Satyran had already attached herself to me like a second shadow.

"If you ever give up your job as a guard," Ma said, looking Luda up and down, "you should consider a life of thievery. You'd be very good at stealing objects on the top shelf." She paused, hoping Luda would crack a smile.

She didn't.

Da said, "And where will you be sleeping tonight, Luda?"

Luda folded her hefty arms. "I do not require sleep. I will hold vigil outside the young master's bedroom and protect him, as is my charge."

"Yes, well, nothing like a good vigil," Ma said. "Get some rest, everyone. Big day tomorrow."

"Indeed," Da said, grinning at me. "*Someone's* got a birthday."

With all the attention being paid to the upcoming Jubilee, I was worried people had forgotten my birthday. Of course, if they had forgotten, I had a plan. I was glad I didn't have to use it. After such a tense evening, waking everyone up at dawn with noisemakers would have been frowned upon more likely.

Hand in hand, Ma and Da went upstairs. I followed, with Luda at my heels. Walking past Aubrin's room, I found my sister sitting on the windowsill next to her bed. She leaned her head on the glass, gazing up at the two moons passing side by side against the night sky.

"Not tired, Jinxface?" I asked, standing in her doorway.

It was several moments before she looked at me. Her eyes, normally bright and mischievous, seemed sad. Even her smile lacked its usual energy.

"I'll be in bed soon," she said quietly.

"You were trying to warn me," I said, "about the widow. How did you know she was going to throw fruit at the Dowager?"

Aubrin shrugged. She slid from the sill and crawled under the covers of her bed. As she blew out the candle on her nightstand, she whispered, "It's good to have you home, Jaxter. Get some sleep. Don't forget what Kolo said: *Volo ser voli.*"

My chest tightened. Those words—a par-Goblin proverb meaning "Yesterday is today"—had been haunting me for months. It was the last thing Kolo, the former Sarosan leader, had said to me.

Just before he was imprisoned in a shimmerhex, Kolo had tried to warn me about . . . I still didn't know quite what. It had something to do with the Palatinate and the Great Uprisings. But all that information about the Uprisings had been outlawed hundreds of years ago by Mannis Soranna, the first High Laird. How could Kolo know anything about the Uprisings? And how was I supposed to learn?

For the last two months, I'd used my position as the Dowager's apprentice to gain access to the biggest libraries in all the Five Provinces. If any record of the Uprisings existed, it would surely be available to royal eyes only. But not even the darkest, most unused shelves with the oldest, dustiest books held any answers.

My obsession worried the Dowager. I'd never told her exactly what I was looking for. I had only the words of a possible madman to go on, after all. But she could tell something was upsetting me. This trip to Vengekeep was supposed to be relaxing. Now, between my frustration with Kolo's warning and the disastrous banquet, relaxing was proving harder than I imagined.

I kissed Aubrin on the forehead and went to my room. There, I found Maloch Oxter, stripped down

to his breeches and sitting cross-legged in the hammock Da had slung above my old bed. Like Kolo Maloch's da had been trapped in a shimmerhex for the role the Shadowhands had played in stealing from the High Laird's vaults. Maloch, who worked for the Vengekeep stateguard to hide the fact that he was a thief, had moved into my room so Ma and Da could continue to teach him thievery.

As a result, my room now had a distinctly . . . *sweaty* smell.

Maloch was hunched over, whispering to a small, glowing crystal cupped in his hand. The second he entered the room, he muttered something and tapped the crystal. It went dark.

I smirked. "How's Reena?"

Our friends Reena and her brother, Holm, had left the Provinces with their parents and the rest of the Sarosans. But Reena and Maloch stayed in touch with a pair of magical crystals Maloch had stolen from the Dowager. It was all kept very quiet—Reena's people didn't exactly like magic—but I got the impression Reena and Maloch talked a lot.

A lot.

Maloch stretched out and stared at the ceiling so he wouldn't have to look at me. "Fine. The Sarosans have started over again on an island. They're very happy."

"And Holm? His poetry any better?"

Maloch could only smile. "Worse than ever."

I changed into my nightshirt. "How are things coming along with the new Shadowhands?"

Ma had restarted the elite group of thieves, and Maloch had signed on as the first recruit. As a stateguard apprentice, he could get information on criminals from around the Provinces who might make good Shadowhands.

"Slowly," he said, clearly unhappy. "Your ma's very picky about who we let join."

Maloch was anxious to have the Shadowhands back in operation. He hoped their first heist would be to steal the other Shadowhands—including his father—from the Palatinate Palace, where they stood as glass statues.

"Trust Ma," I said. "She knows what she's doing."

I put out the candles and crawled into bed. I was seconds from sleep when a thought popped in my head that would keep me awake for hours.

How had Aubrin known what Kolo had said to me? I'd never told her.

In fact, I hadn't shared Kolo's last words with anyone.



3

The Sentinels

“An accomplice is only two silvernibs away from being a snitch.”

—*The Lymmaris Creed*

Every birthday, for as long as I could remember, started with me waking to the scent of fresh-grilled singemeat sausages wafting up from the kitchen downstairs. The morning of my thirteen birthday, I awoke to the smell of sweat and rotten eggs.

I opened my eyes to find Maloch’s bare foot a hairbreadth from my face. He lay unmoving on the hammock above, his leg dangling over the edge. Grimacing, I slid onto the floor and crawled quietly out the door. Just outside, I ran headlong into Luda, standing at her post.

Maybe she really didn’t sleep.

“It’s my birthday,” I announced, stepping around her. “In thieving circles, it’s traditional to hug the birthday boy.”

“I am not a thief,” she said stiffly. “And I do not hug.”

Given that her arms were as big as mokka tree trunks, it was probably for the best.

I resolved to forget about Kolo and the Uprisings and the Jubilee and just enjoy being thirteen. Luda shadowed me downstairs, where we found my family already gathered around the table near the tallest pile of singspice flapjacks I’d ever seen.

“Happy birthday, Jaxter!” Ma and Da cried. Aubrin pulled out the chair at the head of the table for me.

Once Maloch and the Dowager came downstairs, we all dug into breakfast. As was tradition, I led us in a spirited rendition of the Grimjinx birthday song. Standing on my chair, I threw back my shoulders and belted:

*“Birthday! Birthday! Steal another year!
Eat up all the scorcake till it disappears!
Getting what I want is fun!
Hide your purses, here I coooooome!”*

Ma and Da linked arms and joined in. Every verse got louder and louder. We were in rare form when we got to verse twenty-three, which glorifies past birthday conquests. By then, though, Maloch and the Dowager were looking a bit glassy-eyed, so we cut the song short. I sang the other fifty-five verses in my head.

Next came the presents. I unwrapped Ma's gift first and found a set of new green velvet pouches to replace the ones I'd lost. They even came stocked with a healthy supply of the twelve essential plants used to counteract magic.

From Da, I got a new leather wristband with a secret compartment to hide the vintage lockpick he'd received when he turned thirteen. They'd been passed down through the Grimjinx family for almost three centuries.

Aubrin gave me a pair of vallix skin gloves, capable of handling cursed items without contracting the curse. Ma passed me a package from Nanni, my grandmother, delivered just yesterday. Inside, I found my very own official copy of the key that opened the Grimjinx family album. Now I could do what every thirteen-year-old Grimjinx had done for years: throw away the duplicate key I'd secretly forged when I was seven.

I wasn't expecting anything from Maloch but he surprised me. "Since you're here for a month until the Jubilee starts," he said, "I'm giving you kioro lessons. You need to learn to defend yourself."

Of course Maloch's gift involved hitting. And sweating.

Finally, the Dowager handed me a scroll sealed with a purple wax disc bearing the Soranna crest. "It's a royal pardon," she said. "Good for one nonviolent, relatively harmless, but most certainly illegal shenanigan at a future date. Use it wisely."

I thought Da was going to faint dead away. He gripped Ma's hand excitedly, his mind no doubt making plans for our next family vacation/heist. I didn't have the heart to tell him it was a joke. The Dowager had given me my gift before we left Redvalor Castle: an antique spyglass.

Usually, a thief's thirteenth birthday celebration would have lasted all day and into the night, with fistfuls of scorchcake and endless rounds of Shave the Grundilus. Just my luck that on *my* thirteenth birthday, everyone had responsibilities.

As we cleared the breakfast plates, Da prepared for a meeting about Jubilee security, the Dowager braced herself for a day discussing celebration plans with the Castellan, and Ma talked about her phydollotry shop appointments.

"But," Ma said, "the festivities will continue tonight with a birthday dinner fit for a High Laird."

All the while, I kept my eyes on Aubrin, who'd barely touched her food. She was quiet and withdrawn, just like last night. I hoped I could get her alone to find out why she was upset.

Luckily, Ma gave me the perfect opportunity. Before heading out, she handed me a coin purse. "Why don't you three"—she indicated Maloch, Aubrin, and me—"head to the market and get the hemmon we can roast tonight?"

Then she and Da left for their jobs while the Dowager went upstairs to don her head-of-state robes. I placed the coin purse into Tree Bag, the satchel that Kolo had given me.

Maloch went to the corner of the living room where he stored his apprentice armor. "Count me out," he said. "I'm going to get some broadsword training in."

"Maloch," Aubrin said, frowning, "we never see Jaxter anymore. Can't you skip *one* day of training?"

Tears pooled in her eyes. Her lower lip trembled. Maloch instantly looked remorseful. In the two months Maloch had been living with my family, he and Aubrin had grown close. Which meant he was now completely under her thumb. "Fine. But not because I want to spend time with Jaxter. I, um . . ."

need to buy some oil so my armor doesn't rust. Lemme get some money." Maloch disappeared upstairs.

Aubrin turned to me. The tears were gone and her frown was now a devious smile. She pointed her head. "Do you see this face? It is a *weapon!*"

"Well played, Jinxface," I said, and we bumped elbows.

Even Luda had to concede, "I fear your cuteness arsenal."



Brassbell Promenade was uncommonly quiet when we arrived. A rumble of distant thunder just beyond the valley had scared most market-goers into returning home before the storm hit. Several merchants were hoisting heavy cloth awnings to protect their wares.

Along the way there, I kept Luda distracted while Maloch and Aubrin competed to see who could pick the most pockets before we got to the butcher. Aubrin brought out Maloch's fun side. I think having a sister made him less of a garfluk.

When we reached Lek's shop, Aubrin was the clear winner, having nicked nearly three times more loot than Maloch. She celebrated with an odd little dance that involved shaking her hips, raising her arms in the air, and grunting like a sanguibeast. Luda stared blankly. She had *no idea* what was going on.

Without warning, the wind picked up. A woman selling monx cried out as her awning collapsed. A baby started keening in her mother's arms. A street musician plucked his oxina and played an Avian lullaby. As these things happened, Aubrin's head spun around to watch each of them. First, the awning collapse. Then the baby. Then the musician. She had a strange look in her eyes. Like she recognized all of this. Like it had all happened before.

Thunder rumbled, closer this time. Aubrin slowly looked up. Tears slid down her cheeks. "It's time," she said.

"What are you talking about, Jinxface? Time for what?"

The air above us crackled. A ring of blue energy formed just over our heads. Together, Maloch and I pulled Aubrin away from the vortex in the sky. We knew quickjump rings when we saw them. Luda crouched, ready for anything.

Two hooded figures fell from the glowing circle. As they landed on the cobblestone street, there was a snap and the blue circle vanished. The new arrivals wore dark green robes with magical sigils embroidered in gold around the hem of their cowls. They pulled back their hoods, revealing leather masks with metal grids where the mouths should be and round, silver lenses in place of eyes.

Palatinate Sentinels.

The Sentinels were elite mages, highly skilled in spells beyond the grasp of ordinary mages. Whereas the Palatinate governed magical law, the Sentinels enforced it. Most often, that meant they hunted down rogue mages.

Both Sentinels had their spellspheres resting in their palms. The taller mage stepped forward. "Aubrin Grimjinx!" she called out, turning her head from side to side.

Maloch and I shared a look. What could my little sister possibly have done to warrant a visit? How did she pick a mage's pocket?

Aubrin gently pulled herself from my protective grip. With perfect posture, she walked right up to the tall Sentinel. "I'm Aubrin Grimjinx."

"Come with us," the smaller Sentinel said, beckoning with his free hand.

Aubrin nodded. The tall Sentinel held her spellsphere aloft and chanted in the magical language.

“Hang on a minute!” I shouted. Maloch and I rushed forward. “What’s going on?”

“Jaxter, please,” Aubrin whispered. “You don’t know what you’re doing.” It was like she wasn’t my little sister anymore. She was suddenly very calm, very mature.

“We’re keeping these naff-nuts from taking you anywhere,” Maloch said, clenching his fists.

Naturally, Maloch considered violence first. I opted for diplomacy. “Our father is Protectorate of Vengekeep. Let’s go talk to him. You know, without weapons and magic and . . . meanness.”

“The Palatinate does not recognize the authority of Vengekeep’s Protectorate,” the shorter Sentinel squawked. “Stand aside.”

“It’s okay,” Aubrin said. “I’ll go with them.”

“The zoc you will!” Maloch said. He and I each grabbed one of Aubrin’s arms and pulled her away.

The mages advanced, spellspheres sizzling with power.

“Uh, Luda,” I called out, “remember that pledge you made . . . ?”

But the Satyran was already on the move, charging forward with a determined war cry. Her fur hands flew up to her shoulders where she kept two broadswords crisscrossed over her back. With a tiny *ssshhk!*, she drew the swords from their scabbards and leaped in front of me.

The tall Sentinel spoke a single word. A cone of smoky gray light shot from her spellsphere and struck Luda. The Satyran’s back arched as her face clenched in a silent scream. A second later, she collapsed like a limp doll.

Before I could check on Luda, the tall Sentinel spoke again. More gray light spiraled from the spellsphere and came right at me. I clutched Tree Bag and braced for the inevitable pain.

But nothing happened. As the gray light touched me, it exploded into a shower of harmless white sparks that disappeared as they hit the street. I looked at the Sentinels. They looked at me. Clearly, that shouldn’t have happened.

Maloch charged. Bent over, he drove his head into the stomach of the smaller Sentinel. As the pair fell, they tumbled and brought the tall Sentinel down with them.

A crowd of people had formed a circle, murmuring and pointing at the melee. Using his hand-to-hand kioro training, Maloch fought to keep the Sentinels from using their spellspheres.

“Go!” he shouted to me.

Grabbing Aubrin’s wrist, I pulled her through the assembled throng and ran.

“Jaxter!” Aubrin protested. But I was hardly paying attention. My mind raced with options, trying to figure out the closest, safest place to hide.

Then it hit me: the Dowager! The royal family could overrule the Sentinels. I led Aubrin back toward our parents’ house. If we were lucky, the Dowager hadn’t left for her meeting with the Castellán.

Lightning flashed and rain started to fall as I hurried Aubrin through the backstreets and alleys of Vengekeep. Splashing through puddles, we turned the corner and saw our house ahead. I pulled Aubrin tight to me and yelled to the two Provincial Guards at our front door, “Get the Dowager!”

One guard ducked into the house while the other moved, as if coming to help. But before he could get far, the air above us lit up and hummed. The two Sentinels dropped from a new glowing ring and stood between us and the house. The tall Sentinel chanted. Red light encased the guard, freezing him to the spot.

I stepped in front of Aubrin and shook my fist at the shorter Sentinel. “Don’t make me get brave,” I warned him, my voice cracking. “Bad things happen when I try to be brave.”

I fumbled with my pouches, searching for something to help us escape. But Aubrin laid her hand on

my wrist. I looked down. She was smiling, soft and innocent. "Jaxter," she whispered, "it's okay. You need to trust me. I'm going with them."

I stood there, slack-jawed. Aubrin threw her arms around me and squeezed. Then quietly she stepped over to the Sentinels, took a deep breath, and winked. The sizzling ring of energy in the sky changed from blue to green. It lowered around the Sentinels and Aubrin. A flash and they all vanished.

The Provincial Guard, freed from the red light, shook his head and looked around, almost as if he'd forgotten why he was there. A moment later, the other guard emerged from our house with the Dowager in tow.

"Jaxter?" the Dowager called out from under a thin parasol. "What's happening?"

By now, the rain was falling so hard that the entire world blurred. My clothes grew heavier as they soaked up every drop. I stood there, staring numbly at the spot where my sister had disappeared. I couldn't even form the words to explain it.

"Jaxter!"

The shrill voice came from behind. I spun around to find my friend Callie Strom racing down the street. Her fists pulled at her gray apprentice robes, hoisting them up over her shoes as she ran. She doubled over as she reached me, trying to catch her breath.

"Am I too late?" she asked, her eyes searching the neighborhood frantically.

The Dowager met us in the middle of the street. "Someone tell me what's going on."

My head had started to spin. I could feel my left hand twitch. My lungs hurt. And I couldn't stop staring at that spot on the ground.

Aubrin.

"Jaxter!" Callie grabbed my arms. Her puffy cheeks and red eyes told me she'd been crying. "Do they already take her?"

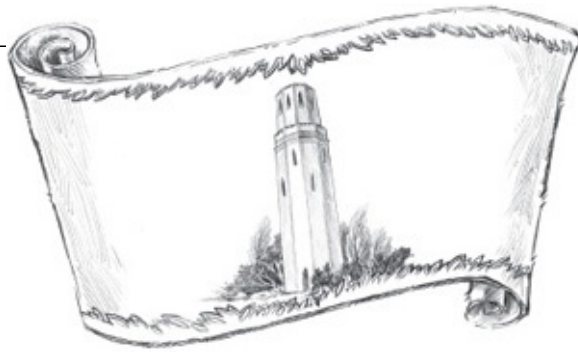
"Take who?" the Dowager demanded.

I nodded, stupefied. "Yes," I said. "Yes, she's gone. She was here and then she— Wait. How did you know—? Callie, did you know the Palatinate was coming to take Aubrin?"

Callie shook as she sobbed. "O-only s-since th-this m-m-morning."

"How could you know?" I asked.

She buried her face in her hands. "Because it's *all my fault!*"



4

An Ancient Decree

“The only difference between a lie and a truth is the telling.”

—*Manjax Grimjinx, former commander of the Provincial Guard*

“There’s a very good reason.”

Ma had been repeating this for the last hour. It was less convincing each time.

My family had gathered in the parlor of Talian’s home. As a member of the Palatinate, Talian could explain what had just happened to Aubrin. “You wait and see,” Ma continued. “It’s a mistake or a miscommunication or . . . or something. We’ll get it straightened out. Aubrin will be home by sundown. All very simple.”

Da put his arm around her. Their weak smiles told me that neither believed what Ma was saying. The Palatinate had dispatched *Sentinels* to take Aubrin. There was nothing simple about this.

“Some mistake,” Maloch said with a grunt. His tussle with the Sentinels hadn’t ended well. He sat in a high-backed chair, his bandaged leg on a tuffet. A large gash on his cheek had just started to scab over. A dark red ring around his right eye promised to turn black and blue in the days to come.

Am I to blame? I wondered. I’d been discreet while researching the Great Uprisings. Maybe word had gotten to the Palatinate. It was very possible Aubrin’s abduction was a warning: stop poking your nose into the Great Uprisings.

Da winked at me. “Some birthday party, eh?”

I groaned. So much for relaxing.

A sob from across the room broke through the sound of the rain outside. She’d been so quiet, I almost forgotten that Callie had banished herself to the corner. She hadn’t stopped crying since she met us in the street.

The Dowager, who had been admiring a glass cabinet filled with phials of sparkling magic elixirs, moved to comfort her. “Callie,” she said in her singsong voice, “please explain what you meant when you said this was your fault.”

Callie eyed my family cautiously. Ma and Da gave the sofa a pat, inviting her to sit next to them.

Callie joined my parents and blew her nose on a handkerchief. “It started this morning. Every day as part of my magical studies, I have to read several history books and report back to Talian on what I learned.”

She pointed to a very old leather book on the table. The cover said *A History of Seers* in green, tarnished copper letters. “I was reading about the history of prognostication in the Five Provinces. The book says that seers are very rare, only a handful are born every generation. Even still, they all share some unique traits. For example, all seers have green eyes. And all seers are left-handed. And . . . and . . . all seers are silent for the first ten years of their lives.”

The room fell quiet but for the ticking of the nearby clock. Ma and Da joined hands and I knew we were all thinking the same thing. Aubrin had green eyes. Aubrin was left-handed. And Aubrin . . .

“No,” Ma said quietly. Her lips pulled back into a pained smile. “No.”

By now, Callie was sobbing again. “And . . . and I just casually mentioned to Talian that Aubrin had only started speaking about eight months ago. And that none of you knew why she had been silent for ten years . . .”

Da was on his feet, pacing behind the sofa and breathing heavily. Ma wrung her hands. All the nervous activity got to Callie and she started wailing.

“I’m so sorry!” she said. “I didn’t realize this would happen. As soon as I told Talian, he contacted the Palatinate Lordcourt. I ran as fast as I could to tell you. I didn’t know they’d come so quickly.”

“Way to go, Strom,” Maloch barked. “You’d turn in your own uncle, wouldn’t you?”

Callie shot him a hate-filled look but didn’t say a word.

I stared straight ahead, letting it all sink in. This had nothing to do with my investigation into the Uprisings and the Palatinate. This was about . . . my sister? A seer? She was a lot of things. A composer. An artist. A pickpocket. But a seer? How could I not have known that?

It seemed obvious now. The night before, when she’d tried to warn me about the widow Bellati. And when she’d known Kolo’s last words to me.

The Dowager wandered over to the glass cabinet again, her back to the room. I could have sworn she was trying not to look at us.

A pair of twin doors leading into the study slid open. Talian stepped through, hands folded at his waist.

“I apologize for the delay,” Talian said softly, sharing a humble smile with everyone. “I needed to contact the Lordcourt.”

Talian had changed since he’d helped me and Callie thwart Edilman Jaxter and fend off the balancer attack in Vengekeep. He looked thinner, his scarlet-and-black robes clinging to his lithe frame. And he seemed much older than twenty. In these past few months, he’d become so reserved, so measured . . .

So adult. It was frightening.

“Mr. and Mrs. Grimjinx,” Talian said, “I must apologize. I’m sure this was incredibly stressful. Please let me assure you the Palatinate doesn’t make a practice of seizing children from their parents without any warning.”

Da exhaled loudly, expelling enough air that he almost doubled over. Ma blinked twice and her smile widened. “I knew this was a mistake,” she said. “Thank you, Talian. Yes, we’ve had quite a scare. But if you can just see that Aubrin is brought back to us safely, we’ll say ‘No harm, no foul’ about the whole matter.”

Ma and Da stood as if to leave. But Talian made no move to see them to the door.

The mage frowned. “I’m afraid I haven’t made myself clear. We apologize for the abrupt way your daughter was taken. But—”

“She won’t be returning to Vengekeep.”

At the sound of this new voice, we all turned to the open study doors to find a tall woman wearing the majestic robes of the Palatinate Lordcourt. A gold-rimmed monocle covered her left eye. The

smile on her lips could have frosted the windows with ice. We all stood. Not to be respectful because of what my great-great-uncle Gellimore Grimjinx always said: *Sit with your enemy, never stand again.*

“My name is Nalia,” she said. But we knew who she was. It’s hard to forget someone who, just two months ago, tried to have your entire family imprisoned as part of a plot to destroy the Palatinate.

“What are *you* doing here?” I asked.

Nalia ignored me and swept across the room to address my parents. “I came as soon as Master Talian told me there was a problem. The Palatinate deeply regrets this inconvenience.”

Inconvenience? Prison was inconvenient. This was inexcusable.

Da looked ready to explode, but Ma put a steadying hand on his shoulder and did what she always did when facing down an adversary: she smiled. “And why won’t my daughter be coming home?”

Nalia took a chair across from the sofa and motioned for my parents to sit. They didn’t. “You know, of course, that we believe your daughter is a seer. Even as we speak, the Palatinate is testing Aubrin. The tests are safe and harmless. If it proves true, she’ll be taken to the Creche.”

“The Creche?” I asked. “What’s that?”

“It’s a special facility,” Talian explained. “All seers live there from the moment their abilities are discovered. It’s secure and nurturing, a place for them to learn more about what they can do. It’s all done in the interest of security.”

“Whose security?” I asked. “Aubrin’s or yours?”

The more hostile we got, the calmer Nalia became. “The security of the Five Provinces, of course. Seers are wondrous people . . . but we can’t allow their talents to be abused. Suppose a seer was kidnapped by an enemy of the High Laird. That seer’s prophecies could reveal information about the Provinces’ defenses. The Creche was built hundreds of years ago as a safe house and, by royal decree, all seers must live there.”

At the words *royal decree*, all eyes moved to the Dowager. She looked down, almost guiltily. “It’s a very old law,” she said meekly. “Not many people know about it.”

Ma’s smile didn’t fade but her harsh tone showed she was growing less patient. “This is all very fascinating but we can’t allow our daughter to be taken away and raised elsewhere.”

“Mrs. Grimjinx,” Talian said gently, “this isn’t done to be cruel. The Creche really is the best place for her. Dealing with visions of the future can be very upsetting. It’s why seers don’t speak for years. At the Creche, she’ll receive the very best care. She’ll be taught how to make sense of her visions.”

“More important,” Nalia continued, “your daughter will receive the very best of everything: food, clothing, education. Every need will be addressed. And when she turns eighteen, she’ll be appointed to a position of respect in the High Laird’s service. She’ll want for absolutely nothing the rest of her life.”

If there was anything Nalia could have said to take the fight out of my parents, she’d just said it. Ma and Da had always claimed that, no matter what, they wanted me and Aubrin to be happy and content. That was why they let me turn my back on thieving and do research with the Dowager. In the Creche, Aubrin would have the best life possible.

I could see defeat in Ma’s eyes. She turned to the Dowager. “Is there anything you can do, Annestra?”

The Dowager shook her head. “I can’t go against royal law. But you have my assurances that what Nalia says is true. Aubrin will be happy and safe at the Creche.”

Ma nodded sadly. “Yes. I can see it now. You’re right. Ona and I only want what’s best for Aubrin.”

Nalia folded her arms and looked smugly triumphant. “Very wise, Mrs. Grimjinx. Now, if you’
excuse me . . .”

She stood and walked back to the study doors. Before exiting, Nalia turned back and threw us her
most wicked smile yet. “Enjoy the Jubilee.”

Talian followed her into the study, asking Callie to show us out. Ma and Da shuffled to the door
heads bowed. As we filed out of the house, I brought up the rear. I felt a tug at my elbow.

“You know I didn’t mean this to happen, Jaxter,” Callie said. “You understand, right?”

“Sure, Cal,” I said. But I didn’t really.

Heading home, I helped Maloch along on his injured leg. Ma and Da slowed down to allow the
Dowager and her guards to pull ahead.

“All right, boys,” Ma said softly. “I think they bought it. Now, let’s go get our little seer.”



5

Dark Times

“Time tames the wary heart.”

—Ancient par-Goblin proverb

Stealing Aubrin from the Creche. Those words alone would inspire pages and pages in the Grimjin family album, detailing what might possibly be one of the most daring heists in our family’s history.

It was a pity we wouldn’t be around to write it.

Rescuing Aubrin wasn’t just about returning my sister to her family. In this instance, it was also about treason. We’d be defying royal decree. And everyone knew the punishment for treason was death. Granted, our family album was overflowing with stories of Grimjinxes who’d beaten death sentences. But that seemed unlikely this time, especially with the Palatinate involved. We had no choice but to leave the Five Provinces. Forever.

With Luda just outside the bedroom door, Maloch and I quietly started packing the few belongings we’d be taking on the trip.

“Exciting, isn’t it?” I asked. “Breaking into the Creche. I mean, you and me breaking into the Palatinate Palace was pretty exciting too. But I don’t think that was nearly as illegal as this.”

Maloch was unusually quiet. He kept eyeing the magic crystal on the nightstand. I could tell he really wanted to talk to Reena.

“You want me to leave so you can—?”

“I’m not going with you.”

I stopped packing. “What?”

Frowning, Maloch sank down on the bed. “You can’t tell your parents. Once we get Aubrin back, I’m staying behind.”

“Mal . . .”

“My da is still a prisoner in the Palatinate Palace. I can’t leave as long as he’s there. You’d do the same for your da.”

It really was a momentous day. Maloch was making sense.

“I have an aunt in Merriton I can stay with. I’m trusting you with this, Jaxter. You can’t say anything.”

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