the Children's Crusade

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Summary

When Garrick finds an incomplete time travel rune in Col. Mairi's notes, he's determined to find a way to save Xaden and everyone else. Imogen's not so sure, but when they end up further in the past than they imagined -- back at their very first meeting, when they were seven and six -- they're both determined to find a way to stop as many bad things from happening as they can.

Even with their friends' help, though, how will a bunch of kids find a way to save their parents, their homes, and the world?

Notes

AO3's down, and I've been meaning to test posting here anyway....

Chapter 1

Garrick was burnt out. Not just in the magical sense, though he'd been running against the edge long enough that Chradh had stopped chiding him for it, but just plain exhausted. He'd been running for weeks trying to keep everything under control with Violet.

Because Violet was all Tyrrandor had left. No Xaden, no Bodhi. No living Riorson bloodline at all unless there was something Violet hadn't mentioned. Garrick wasn't sure he believed the old folktales but it certainly felt like it could be the end of everything they'd worked for.

So he did the most desperate thing he could imagine doing.

He went to the library.

When Imogen found him there hours later, her laughter woke him from a sound sleep.

"Hiding in the last place anyone would look for you, Tavis?" she asked, punching him in the shoulder.

"No! No," he answered, still startled, and something in his tone was desperate enough that she stopped laughing. Instead she sat down across from him and looked at the book he had laid out.

"What *is* this? I've never seen runes like this," she whispered, her eyes tracing the complex forms and combinations of symbols. She turned it toward her to get a better look, flipping through the pages. "Are these Colonel Mairi's notes?"

"Yeah, I thought there might be something we could use, you know? There's a lot of unfinished projects, ideas I don't think she ever got to test."

"Anything useful?"

Garrick sighed, taking the book back from her. "At this point there's only one thing I can think of that would help." He flipped back to the page he'd marked before he fell asleep, then handed it to her. He focused on her face, watching her read and gauging her reaction.

He wasn't exactly surprised when Imogen's eyebrows climbed almost to her hairline. "Shit, this isn't even a rune, it's a whole fucking array of—holy fuck, does that say *wielding time*?"

Garrick just nodded, watching confusion and hope and anger war on Imogen's face.

"Why didn't she *use it* if she had something like that?"

"It's not finished," Garrick told her. "And besides, she had Liam and Sloane and I bet she wouldn't be willing to put them in danger of not existing or killing herself trying to make it work."

"Maybe." Imogen studied the pages of runes laid out in artful lines and circles. "Fuck, this has almost as many runes as the wardstone."

"Right? It might be more; some of them are bindrunes. I'm pretty sure trying to imbue it would kill me." He snorted. "At least I wouldn't have to worry about it, because I'd be in the past."

Imogen just rolled her eyes at that. "Don't even joke about dying, Tavis, you're not allowed. There's too much work to do." She kept looking at the array, tracing the lines of the runes with her fingertip. "How far back do you think it'd take someone? This looks like the *fate* rune, but it's crossed, what would that do?"

"I think it would take you back to the moment your fate either changed or became set, but either way, it'd be a key moment in your life."

"So probably Calldyr?" Imogen shivered.

"If it was, it'd still mean a chance to redo everything since then." He didn't specify what *everything* was, but he was pretty sure she would be thinking the same things. Draithus. Xaden and Bodhi. Liam. Quinn. But it was Xaden that he saw in his head again and again, Xaden the night after the Battle of Basgiath, his eyes ringed in red, confessing what he'd done like he expected Garrick to be his executioner.

She cut him off from that line of thought. "If we're lucky, it could be when our parents decided to secede from Navarre." The period between the secession and the Battle of Aretia was short but could buy them a lot, especially if he was careful what he tried to do. What he tried to tell his dad. They went back and forth for a while, discussing the runes in the array. Every time Garrick started talking about what he could change at this time or at that time, a new way to save Xaden or make things better for him, Imogen cut him off or redirected him.

"I'm not sure I trust it," Imogen said finally, putting an end to it. "There's no way to test it, and it'll kill you if you try? No."

"But I could save Xaden—"

"If it was possible to save him you already would have," Imogen snapped. "You did everything he asked from you and more and—"

"And it wasn't enough—"

"Maybe there *isn't* enough!" She stood up as she cut him off, like the chair couldn't contain her anger. "Maybe he just fucked all of us over and—" Imogen stopped, her nails digging into her palms, her anger too much to be allowed out of her mouth.

Garrick couldn't remember the last time he'd seen Imogen this *furious*. Yes, she was always angry, but not like this, not red-faced with her hands in fists at her side. He should have let it go; he knew the right answer was to let it go.

He said it anyway.

"You would do it for Quinn, wouldn't you?"

Imogen screamed, and it wasn't a word, just a snap of anger and noise that hit Garrick in the gut harder than she'd ever punched him. Then she stomped out of the library.

He stayed where he was, staring at the array and seeing nothing, until the magelights turned themselves off for the night. Then he went to bed, and he got up in the morning, and he kept going through the motions of fighting, of carrying messages, of moving supplies. After a few days Imogen stopped ignoring him, but they never spoke about it again.

That didn't mean he wasn't thinking about it, though. The idea worried at him any time he sat still too long: during long flights, when he was trying to sleep, any time he was stuck in a meeting or waiting on a response to bring back with him. The runes might as well have been tattooed on the back of his eyelids.

Autumn was threatening to rush straight into winter before he knew it. He'd started walking Riorson House at night when he couldn't sleep, trying to keep himself from obsessing over the fucking array. He'd memorized so many fucking runes trying to find an answer that Trissa had given up on making suggestions, and there was still nothing that felt like a solid answer. He needed distractions instead.

When he was younger—he laughed at himself, for thinking like he was an old man having just passed his 24th birthday. *When he was a cadet*, he would have distracted himself from thought spirals like this with whatever he could find. Women, usually. Churram. Alcohol. All three on a really interesting night.

He hadn't slept with anyone since Draithus, though. He didn't admit to himself what had shifted, but he no longer found the idea of fucking any random woman into oblivion appealing, regardless of what Imogen said or didn't say.

Wandering the House after midnight was going to be less appealing as winter came on, though. For one thing, the stone floors were fucking cold under his bare feet, but he hated wearing socks to bed.

He froze in the doorway to the kitchen. The moonlight from the window made Imogen's pink hair practically glow as she sat on the counter, tearing a bread roll apart and eating it slowly. She looked tired, and yes, they all looked tired, but seeing Imogen specifically looking so tired, the deep shadows of the moonlight making the dark marks under her eyes more dramatic, hurt him.

She looked up at him, and Garrick was sure her eyes saw straight through him.

"Genny?" he asked, his voice almost choked by the heart in his throat.

Imogen groaned and jumped down from the counter. "Come on, idiot. I had an idea." She pushed past him, and Garrick was so surprised that it took him a minute to turn and follow her. It was several minutes of following her up stairs and down halls before he saw the library ahead.

Colonel Mairi's notes were still on the table where he'd left the thin book. Someone had dusted around it, and his own loose papers were stacked neatly underneath it. The staff who worked in the House were as determined as anyone else to keep going until the last, and it made him all the more determined to fix it.

Pushing the loose ends of her hair back behind her ear, Imogen flipped the notebook open. She grabbed the inked pen he'd left there and started laying down lines right on top of Colonel Mairi's own notes.

"What are you doing?" Garrick asked, leaning in. Violet would kill us if she saw, he started to say, and then he almost laughed at the absurdity of that thought..

"If I fill in the last part like this, and split the power-drawing runes… that should allow *two* people to imbue the array. It'll probably kill us both if it fails, but there should be enough power to fully imbue and trigger it, if it's going to work."

Garrick stared in wonder at Imogen. "You're fucking brilliant, do you know that?"

"Yeah, well. I'm not letting you kill yourself over Xaden without me. Somebody needs to keep an eye on you." She shrugged and started pulling strands of magic into the air, knotting them together and then burning the runes one at a time into the surface of the library table. Garrick used a flick of air to pick up the notebook and hold it so both of them could see it, knocking everything else to the floor in the process, and then started pulling on Chradh's power as well. Garrick could feel him watching now, melancholy seeping through their bond, but the dragon didn't say anything.

Once they'd burned the last rune into the tabletop, Garrick took a deep breath and stepped back. Sweat was dripping down his face, and he no longer felt the autumn chill, even with his feet bare. Imogen looked energized, probably the best he'd seen her look since Quinn died.

She glanced up at him, her eyes as determined as she'd been when he saw her at her Threshing. "Ready?"

"Thank you," he said instead of answering her. "No matter what happens, Imogen, I l—"

Imogen slammed her hands down on the tabletop, the last of Glane's power blasting into the array. Garrick matched the gesture, his words forgotten, and then everything went white.

Chapter 2

When his vision cleared, Garrick was looking directly into Imogen's eyes and his first thought was that she was as beautiful as the day he met her.

Which was easy because this *was* the day he met her. He'd nearly forgotten they'd met in passing before they first spent any real time together.

"Imogen," he whispered, in awe of her. Because it had worked, brilliant fucking woman that she was, the additions to the rune array had worked. More than worked, because the Imogen standing in front of him right now was still blonde, hair pulled back in pigtails, all of six years old.

"You know her already?" said a quiet voice behind Imogen, and it was Bodhi, six year old Bodhi, and Garrick's brain was already spinning out. Sweet Bodhi, who had also just met Imogen all of an hour before, who had no red around his dark eyes.

"What happened?" Imogen hissed, but Garrick remembered this day clearly.

"This is the day we met," he told her. His voice was so high in his own ears and he could feel himself blush.

Bodhi stepped in, looking back and forth between them. "You're being real weird," he told Garrick. "I'm gonna get Xaden." He was gone before either of them could think of something to say to him.

"How did you even know that?" Imogen asked, leaning in closer so she could whisper.

"I- remembered what you were wearing. I only saw your hair in pigtails like that once."

"Yeah, because you said that's how babies like Sloane wear their hair." She stomped her foot. Garrick wanted to laugh at her doing something so… so six-year-old, but he could feel himself wanting to tug her pigtail for snapping at him. Apparently some things are just wired into kid brains, he thought.

"Shit, sorry, I forgot about that," he admitted.

Imogen scoffed. "You would." She put her hands on her hips and Garrick felt like he was seeing both of her at once- the woman he knew and the little kid, all knees and elbows. "That doesn't explain why I'm six, idiot."

"Maybe since it was both of us, the magic decided our fate changed when we met?" Garrick shrugged.

"I guess. Fuck, now what? We're *kids*, we can't-"

"Garrick?" Another young voice echoed down the hall and Garrick froze.

"Xaden?" Garrick hesitated before turning around. It didn't make sense. They were all kids, there was no way, but he still braced himself, trying to shove away how Xaden had looked the last time he'd seen his best friend.

"I thought you were getting snacks. Where'd you find a girl?"

"That's Imogen," Garrick thought quickly. "Her mom and dad are here for-" He stopped as he realized what he'd said. When he looked at Imogen, her eyes were already wide in realization, her body shaking a little, her eyes shining.

"My whole family's here," she said with quiet awe. "My mama and my sister and- and my papa!"

Fuck, of course, he thought. Garrick hadn't thought about it at first because there was so much to think about, this was so wildly outside of their plan, but that meant not only was his dad here and his aunt Morag but his mom was still alive out in the country.

Before Garrick could put his thoughts together into a sentence, Imogen had broken into a run. She dashed through the halls straight to the Assembly chamber, Garrick right behind her and Xaden on his heels.

The door to the chamber was closed and it towered over six-year-old Imogen, but she used all of her strength, hanging from the latch to open it and shoving it open with her shoulder until she could run inside.

Garrick, a little taller and a little wider, had to stop to open the door further. By the time he got into the room, Imogen was already in her father's lap, her face buried against his shoulder as she sobbed "papa, papa," over and over to him.

"Young man, would you happen to know why young Imogen is so upset?" Garrick's spine straightened instinctively at the sound of his father's voice. He looked over and it blew him away—not only was his father alive but he looked *so young* standing there next to Fen. In his head he did the math; if he was seven, then his father wasn't much older than Brennan had been. Wasn't that a wild thought?

Xaden skidded into the room right behind Garrick, nearly bowling him over, and then it was Fen looking… much more amused than Garrick could ever remember him looking, actually. Like he thought they were cute or something. And then he realized that despite his father's words, his dad was looking at him the same way.

Huh, that was weird to think about.

Garrick tried to hold himself together but there were already tears on his face as he looked at his father and then his dad was there scooping him up in a hug. Despite everything that had happened—that was going to happen—that he hoped was *not* going to happen—despite all of that, he felt safe in that minute, in his father's arms.

After they both finally calmed down enough to make up some ridiculous story about scaring themselves talking about bad things happening before Xaden had found them, Fen adjourned

the meeting for dinner.

"We need to write down everything we can think of as soon as we can," Garrick whispered to Imogen after they were ambushed by a fretting Bodhi outside of the Assembly room. "It'll be too easy to forget." Imogen agreed.

Dinner itself made Garrick aware of the body he was in for the first time; his father had to stop him before he made himself sick because his eating habits were built around a much larger body. Imogen sat on her mother's lap and picked at her food, and Garrick could tell she was thinking the whole time. After dinner all four of the kids went up to the room Bodhi and Xaden shared.

"I need paper," Garrick announced. "Have you got blank notebooks?"

"I did some sums in this one but it's mostly new," Xaden handed one over, then another. "This one's good though." Garrick automatically handed the nice one to Imogen and grabbed pencils for both of them.

"What're you drawing?" Bodhi asked, looking over Imogen's shoulder as she started scribbling.

"Not drawing," she said, and then she paused. "Maybe drawing. Mostly writing."

"Kay, what're you writing?" Bodhi asked again.

"Don't bug them," Xaden said and immediately looked down at what Garrick was writing. "What's that?"

Garrick paused for only a second before Imogen jumped in. "It's a secret right now," she said confidently. "We'll tell you when it's ready."

"Where'd you get a secret?" Bodhi sounded impressed as he sat on the floor next to Imogen.

"Yeah, how'd you two get a secret? I was with you when we ate." Xaden was not impressed. Garrick realized that he wasn't sure he'd ever actually had a secret from Xaden when he was seven, or even for a couple years after that. They just… didn't work like that.

"That's part of the secret." Imogen didn't even look up at him.

Garrick couldn't take his eyes off the frown on Xaden's face. Even though Imogen was the one talking, it was aimed directly at him.

"Why didn't we talk about telling people?" he asked Imogen.

"It wouldn't matter. We weren't going to be here." She didn't look up from her notes.

Garrick tore his face away from tiny Xaden (he was so small! Bodhi was so small! Imogen was so small!) and resumed scribbling down everything he could remember. The thoughts were all over the place: venin attacks he remembered, how Draithus went down, Panchek, when Zolya fell, the Battle of Basgiath, what he remembered about the wards, fucking

Varrish, Resson, everything with Violet, back through his years at Basgiath, fostering, the Apostasy, and even that was ten years in the future.

Fuck there was so much. The farther back he went, the harder it was to remember details and the more emotional he felt. The dates got more vague, but the broad strokes were there before that.

"This is so boring." Xaden sat down next to Garrick. "Are you crying?"

"No," Garrick said, though he could feel how hot and blotchy his face was.

"Why's your writing so weird?" Xaden was bending in to look at it. "That's not how you write in lessons."

"Reasons," Imogen answered before he could.

"Ims, you can't just keep snapping at Xaden forever," Garrick looked up. "We've gotta figure out how we're gonna save the world."

"If you're saving the world, I'm in," Xaden insisted. "You can't do it without me."

Imogen laughed. "I totally could. I could save the world with just Garrick and Bodhi."

"Me?" Bodhi squeaked. "But-"

"Xaden is my friend and I don't want to leave him out." Garrick wasn't expecting that much anger in his answer. Imogen pouted at him again. "Sorry! Thinking is really hard."

"Why don't you like me?" Xaden asked her, his arms crossed about his chest. The glare he levelled at her was… almost adorable. Fuck, it was hard to take him seriously.

Garrick looked at Imogen and she was glaring just as hard as Xaden was. He needed to step in. "She likes you fine," Garrick snapped, trying to stop them. "Just trust me, Xaden, okay?"

Xaden stepped back, blinking at Garrick. "Yeah, okay. Come on, Bodhi, let's go see if there's leftover cookies."

"What was *that*?" Imogen asked after they were alone.

Garrick shrugged. "He's my best friend but I'm his best friend too."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"I don't just trust him because I'm supposed to, Immy, I trust him because he trusts me too."

"Don't call me Immy," she said, then looked down at her notebook and sighed. "What are going to tell them, Gare?"

Garrick sat back, letting his notebook flip closed. "I don't know. Maybe—wait. One more thing we should get down." He flipped the pages again and started drawing in the runes from

the time travel array. "We can use the rune array if we have to prove it to the grownups. Colonel Mairi'll know even if she hasn't invented it yet."

"That's wrong," Imogen leaned over, scribbling on top of Garrick's own lines. "It's like this."

"That one's fate and this one's movement—"

"No I think this one was definitely—"

"It's not; this is the split one—"

"I'll split you, idiot—"

There was a cough from the doorway and Garrick realized Imogen was practically laying on top of him, drawing over his lines.

"We brought cookies!" Bodhi announced. "And milk. And then we gotta get ready for bed and Imogen's sleeping over."

"She's s'posed to go down an sleep with her sister," Xaden added as Imogen shoved herself off of Garrick.

"No, she stays," Garrick said. "So we can tell you what happened."

"But it'll be bedtime," Bodhi insisted. "Where's she gonna sleep?"

"I'll sleep with you," Imogen told Bodhi, and his eyes went so wide Garrick almost choked on his cookie laughing.

"You're a girl," Bodhi whispered, as if any of them didn't know. "It's not chivalry."

Imogen rolled her eyes. "We can sleep heads-and-feet if you're worried."

"Anyway, chivalry doesn't count til you're courting," Xaden jumped in to explain. "Imogen's not a girl til then."

"The word you want is lady," she insisted. "I'm a girl, but I'm not a lady until I'm older."

"Careful, Immy, you're already starting to sound six."

"Call me Immy again and I'll change the timeline by breaking your legs." Luckily for Garrick, Bodhi's and Xaden's mothers came in then to herd them through some semblance of a bedtime routine.

Of course, the last time Garrick had seen Xaden's mom, he'd just almost died, and the time before that had been Xaden's tenth birthday. His mind was already racing, wondering if there was some way he could stop *that* from happening, though he had no idea where he'd even start. Well, he had time, right?

The thought made him giggle to himself as he pulled on a pair of Xaden's sleep clothes. They didn't have much of plan, or any backup, or any idea where they could find allies. Time was the one thing they'd found.

Once they were all dressed for bed, Imogen had assured Lady Riorson half a dozen times that she was fine sharing with Bodhi, and Garrick was tucked into Xaden's sheets (but *not* under his quilt, because the quilt was special), the four of them were finally left alone again.

"Kay, Garrick. I have done all the waits I'm gonna do." Xaden sat up and wrapped his quilt around him like a cloak. "Why are you being weird and why is she so weird?"

Garrick looked at Imogen but she just gave him a shrug that said he wanted to tell them so this was his show. Fuck, how was he going to explain this?

He sat up in the bed next to Xaden, looking his best friend in the eye. "Okay. But you have to promise you believe me. This isn't a game."

"My dad says don't promise 'less you know what you're promising," Xaden said carefully. "But I'm gonna listen."

Garrick took a deep breath. "Imogen and I just got back from the future."

"The future?" Xaden sounded more confused than disbelieving, and Bodhi was just watching with big eyes, so he kept going.

"Yeah, when we're grownups." Garrick said. "We kinda know what might happen, and some of it is bad stuff, so we want to make sure the bad stuff doesn't happen."

Xaden was quiet, studying Garrick and then Imogen for a minute. "What kinda bad stuff?"

Okay, he just had to keep this from getting too dark, right? "Like there's a big war and it's bad and lots of people die." There, that sounded bad but not specific, he thought.

"Do we get to fight? Are we soldiers?" Xaden asked, excited now. "Are we heroes?"

"Yes, we have to fight," Garrick said carefully. "But war's a lot less exciting than I thought. And—and I don't like it when people die." When he looked over at Imogen, he saw that Bodhi had snuck his hand out from under the blanket at some point and they were holding hands now.

"Who dies? What happens?" Bodhi asked.

Garrick had to press his palms to his eyes, trying to keep back all the answers to that question.

"Too many people," Garrick said finally. "I don't want to say til we're older and we're gonna make sure nothing bad happens. Okay?"

"Okay. We'll save everybody," Xaden agreed. "How come I don't get to go to the future?"

Before he could answer that one, Imogen finally decided to help. "You and Bodhi are too important to everybody already. Garrick and I can be sneakier."

"But I'm the best at sneaking!"

"Not like that," Imogen continued. "Like, you're gonna be the duke so people pay attention to your manners and stuff, right? It's like that. Garrick and I can get away with stuff because we don't matter the same way."

"Garrick matters lots," Xaden insisted, grabbing his arm, and Garrick couldn't help grinning at his friend.

"To his friends, yeah," Imogen said, "but not like for being duke. It's like how Garrick's dad talks to people like your dad can't."

"Like how I can sneak stuff out of the kitchen when you're supposed to be on best behavior," Garrick added, and Xaden seemed to give in.

"But you'll be my advice-ers, and tell me all the important stuff, right? Like the council, only not boring?"

Imogen nodded. "We'll definitely tell you the important stuff."

"Kay. I trust Garrick an he trusts you," Xaden nodded and yawned. "Am I the best fighter in the future, Gare?"

"Only when you cheat against me," Garrick snickered, but Xaden looked offended.

"I don't cheat!"

"Use every weapon," Garrick said solemnly, quoting his aunt Morag. She said that all the time in lessons if Garrick or Xaden complained about the other cheating.

Xaden yawned again and laid back down. "'Xactly. Ev'ry weapon."

Garrick couldn't help picking up on Xaden's yawn. When he looked over, Bodhi and Imogen were already asleep.

He wanted to complain about being tired while it was still light outside, and how much being seven sucked like that, but he was asleep before he finished the thought.

Chapter 3

After almost a week of being left largely on their own or at most in the care of older children like Imogen's sister, Garrick was finally starting to feel like he had a handle on being seven years old again. He and Imogen had spent most of that week glued together, constantly whispering or making notes of things they remembered, making plans and arguing about them and throwing them aside.

He was sad when the meetings ended and the council members packed up to return home. He hung around underfoot while goodbyes were said and carriages were packed up.

"Be careful," Imogen told him, all of her adult scorn present and accounted for. He was sitting on the stones outside Riorson House, leaning against the wheel of her family's carriage and her mother had just nearly tripped over him.

"There you are!" Garrick jumped up to meet her and threw his arms around her. "I don't like separating." He mumbled this into her hair, as if that might stop her from hearing him.

He kept telling himself that it was fine, this was different, they would be fine… but none of his goodbyes with Imogen had been easy in years and she was so young. Last time he hadn't seen her again for two years, but it hadn't meant anything because he hadn't even been in love with her until that time. Right now she looked more like the sixteen year old girl who'd gotten sent off alone to a foster home than the woman he met after she crossed the parapet.

As much as he didn't want to think about a future they were determined wouldn't happen, he couldn't help it.

"I'm fine, idiot, I'm just going home," she grumbled in his ear. A little ways away, he could hear his father and Imogen's dad talking about how inseparable they'd been, and he tried not to listen too hard.

"Here, I brought you something." he said, pressing a little paper packet into her hands. "I know the cooks packed lunch for everybody but there were extra of those butterscotches you like so I begged a favor to get the last of them for you."

Imogen's scowl softened a little for him. "Thanks," she said after a minute. "I gotta go." And then she was on the steps and in the doorway in the side of the carriage, and then she was gone.

"Let's get you to where you ought to be, hm?" his father said, catching him by the shoulder and escorting him into Riorson House. He sighed to see the blue sky disappear behind the front doors, but then he remembered where he was going. It was late enough that he'd missed morning lessons, so that meant—

"Yay! Auntie Morag!" Garrick slipped out of his father's grip and ran ahead to the courtyard training grounds where his aunt waited. Morag Tavis was the weaponsmaster of Riorson House, the only person who could reliably put Fen Riorson on his ass, and Garrick's favorite

aunt. She greeted him with a hug and then shooed him to get the practice swords and dummy out since Xaden and Bodhi weren't there yet.

"Don't worry," he heard her say to his father as he came out of the weapons storage dragging a straw-stuffed. humanoid dummy. "I'll keep him busy and wear him out." He set the dummy upright where he remembered it going and then went back to get the wooden swords.

It started out simply, at least in Garrick's mind. Xaden and Bodhi turned up a few minutes later, and Morag sent Xaden and Garrick to spar while she worked on forms with Bodhi. Garrick hadn't yet gotten used to how *young* Xaden looked, and his first instinct was to go easy since he was fighting a kid.

The fact that he was *also* a kid didn't quite make it to the surface before Xaden got him hard in the stomach with the flat of his wooden practice sword.

"Fuck," Garrick hissed. Fortunately there was enough wind knocked out of him that it wasn't loud enough for Morag to hear. He stood back up, trying to drag his attention back to what he was doing. Even though he mostly stopped thinking of himself as an adult fighting a kid, the sparring didn't get any less embarassing. Half of his muscle memory was missing and the other half was accustomed to a lot more reach and a very different center of gravity.

Garrick tripped over his own feet more than once, hitting the dirt due to his own movements at least as often as Xaden put him there.

"Are you okay?" Xaden finally asked, after he'd gone down *again*. He added quietly, "Is this because of the future?"

"Yeah," Garrick said, brushing dust off his trousers. "Again?"

"Take a break, lads," Morag called, answering Garrick's question for them. "Xaden, I want you to come spar with your cousin, I think wee Garrick's forgotten himself after a week without lessons."

"Auntie Morag!" Garrick shouted, both embarassed and loving having her here to chide him again.

"Don't worry, lad, I know you'd not betray me like that. Go ahead and practice some until you remember which end's the pointy bit, eh?"

By the time the first bell rang for dinner, Garrick was starting to feel like himself again with the sword in his hands. He'd worked his way through the forms Morag had taught him as a kid until he felt like he knew his limbs and what they were going to do, and at the bell he stopped to put away the equipment the infantry squad had been practicing with.

He carried the bundle of spears into the storage room and stacked them against the wall, though he held the last one for a long minute. It was taller than he was, but he remembered how it had felt to swing a staff or halberd. Maybe it would make him feel better about his lack of reach now that he wouldn't be over six feet tall for a number of years.

Instead of taking himself to clean up for dinner like he should have, Garrick hung back. Once the courtyard was quiet, he found a staff a little shorter thn the rest, a better match for his current height. He gave it a twist in his hands and then fell into a ready stance for fighting.

His fingers felt stiff and stubby at first when he tried to spin it properly and he dropped it several times, but by the time the second dinner bell got his attention, he felt like he'd made a solid start on recovering the forms he knew.

When he turned to put the staff away, he realized Morag had been watching him.

"You shouldn't be doing that yet," she said, more confusion than anything in her voice, and that was when he remembered. He hadn't leared to fight with a staff until he was a year or so older, once they'd started using metal swords and Morag wouldn't let them spar with them until they mastered them.

Garrick panicked and dropped the staff in the dust. "I'm sorry." He said it like he'd been caught goofing around with weaponry, something he'd learned not to do within weeks of being brough to Aretia for the first time. Maybe she hadn't seen much? "I know I shouldn't play with them, Auntie. I'll put them away."

Instead of reminding him he needed to be careful, she just rested a hand on his shoulder. "Where'd you learn that, Garrick?"

From you in a few seasons wasn't going to be a reasonable answer. He rushed to think of a lie, but Imogen hadn't been wrong when she said he was bad at it.

"I probably saw the infantry squads practice," he tried, and forced himself to grin.

"You know as well as I do what weapons come out for infantry practice," she said, raising an eyebrow at him.

"I don't know. Maybe I saw you with it?" Garrick shrugged.

"So you say, Garrioch," she said quietly, and he swallowed hard, because nobody used the formal version of his name unless something was really wrong. He waited for his aunt to say something else, but in the end she just frowned and pointed him toward the house. "Off to dinner with you, boyo."

She didn't bring it up again the day after, or the day after that, and Garrick assumed it must be fine. He started getting up early to practice with weapons before breakfast. He'd never *liked* having to get up early, but if he was doing it for his own reasons, it felt easier.

"Caught you!" The shout startled him and one of the batons he was using slipped out of his hand and went flying. "Hey!" Garrick panicked before realizing two things: first, it was Xaden who had caught him, and second, he hadn't hit his friend with the baton.

"You okay?" Garrick asked, jogging over to pick up the weapon.

"What are you doing?" Xaden demanded, hands on his hips. "You're already getting lots better than me by being from the future and now you're practicing so you're *even more*

better?"

"I've gotta be good enough to protect you and Bodhi and everybody," Garrick shrugged.

"Maybe I wanna protect you and everybody too," Xaden answered, and somehow the *asshole* was implied even though Xaden didn't yet swear most of the time. "Besides, Dad says teaching's best for learning, so teach me too."

Garrick stared, tonguetied. Of course Xaden wanted to protect everybody. That was what he'd done.

"Fine, but no telling anybody, this is secret."

"Sure," Xaden agreed immediately.

"Not even Bodhi."

That made Xaden hesitate. "How come?"

"His mom always knows when he's got a secret, Xade."

"Yeah, okay, fine. But only for now, we both have to teach him soon, okay?"

"For now," Garrick gave in. Xaden crowded in close and Garrick started drawing out the first few basic moves in the dust with the end of the baton, then showed him how to hold them.

Teaching had its own flashes of memories to go with it, of working with the younger marked ones in the quadrant. Xaden, though? He'd never taught *Xaden*, not really. He liked the idea that he would actually get the chance to take care of Xaden for a change. And this time when they were at Basgiath… well, he tried not to think too hard about what the future was going to look like, there were too many things to change, but he'd sure loved his collection of weapons patches.

The weapons patches he'd earned at Basgiath had always felt like another kind of armor. Every time he added another weapon to his toolbox, he was a little less likely to be caught unarmed or off-guard. Each one was a little bit of additional *fuck you* to the cadets who wanted to kill him and the leadership who wanted to let it happen.

While he was slowly relaxing in the knowledge that he didn't need that armor right now, as a kid in Aretia, he still wanted to have it back sooner rather than later. People were depending on him and Imogen, even if those people didn't know it. And so he worked his way though practice forms and training dummies, keeping a mental list of which he could be proficient with already and which he needed more strength to use: swords, daggers, staves, archery with both traditional bows and crossbows, maces, flails, short scythes, battle axes, morningstars…

The day he pulled out the morningstar, he thought about Tairn. How old would Tairn's first rider be now? He couldn't recall.

He wondered how Chradh was doing.

Garrick was surprised how often he felt alone in his head. He missed the power sometimes, sure—he'd taken for granted the ability to make the air move on a hot, sticky day, not to mention how much easier this would be if he could just walk to Imogen instead of writing a letter and waiting for a reply. But what he really missed was the company. Even when Chradh had been busy, even when there had been a solid wall between them, he'd known the dragon was *there.*

Sometimes at night he climbed into his older brother's bed, not because he was scared but because he was lonely, and listening to Dom's breathing was a little bit like knowing Chradh was there. The older boys teased him about it in the morning.

He didn't mind much. Teasing meant they were there to tease him, after all.

Though that didn't stop him from waxing the bottoms of Dom's shoes and laughing his ass off when his brother went flying.

Chapter 4

"It's taking so looooong," Imogen complained on the carriage ride through Tyrrendor and Deaconshire. "I wish we were flying."

"Even by dragon, it's still hours," Katrina pointed out, because she was older and liked to pretend she was the reasonable one and Imogen had forgotten how infuriating she could be. She hugged her sister tighter.

"I knooooooooow, but it's faster and the view is way more better." The harder she fought to hold onto her adult mindset, the faster it seemed to slip away. Better to grab onto the memories instead, they were more important.

She had a new respect for her mother, who shared the carriage with them despite her dragon being in the air somewhere nearby. Imogen could only think how much she'd have to love someone to pick a carriage over dragonback.

After two days in the carriage with nothing to do but think about things she couldn't explain, it was a relief to get home. Her mother hung her flight jacket by the door while Imogen kicked her shoes off and slid across the wood floor in socked feet just because she could.

"How long are you home, Mom?" Katrina asked behind her.

"I have a few days before my leave is up."

"Good."

Imogen remembered that home meant she could finally write down all the things that had been rattling in her head.

"Stupid Garrick getting the runes all wrong," Imogen grumbled to herself. "Why's he gotta be like that? And he wrote them in *his* notes so he'll probably go put all his mistakes back in."

The whole time she was complaining, she only half-noticed her older sister watching her. Imogen's lips were pursed and her eyebrows were furrowed, and Katrina had to be used to Imogen being a tiny, angry, stubborn thing, didn't she? So why was her sister staring at her?

Imogen decided to ignore it. She went up to her room as soon as they had eaten a light dinner and she and Katrina were sent off to mind themselves until bedtime. She pulled out her coloring pencils but she couldn't find any good paper, definitely nothing big enough for runes. She ran over to Katrina's room instead, hoping to help herself to her sister's art supplies.

Despite a week in Aretia and two days in a carriage, when she knocked and Katrina opened the door, Imogen was a little overcome again at the wonder of seeing her sister whole and alive. She was starting to get settled back into being six somehow but she wasn't entirely six

in her mind yet and she hoped she wouldn't *quite* be. There was so much work to do, after all, and she kind of liked how exciting it was to see her mother or her father or her sister.

"Treeny, I need big paper and I don't have any. Do you?" Katrina waved Imogen into her room and went to the chest of drawers beside her desk to look for the art supplies. Imogen had thought it was pretty silly when she'd had to take the painting lessons and the flute lessons, but the Cardulos were technically a noble family even if her mom considered herself a rider first and didn't take it as seriously as some of the other families, and so she'd had to learn all the *lady arts* (and complained bitterly about it).

"I'm not giving you the ink paints so you can't make a mess," Katrina said as she pulled out the short stack of large papers. Imogen wiggled her nose in offense.

"I'm not gonna make a mess," she told her sister as she reached for the paper. The taller girl held it up, out of her reach.

"Yeah, because I'm not giving you the inks."

Imogen stuck her tongue out at her sister, and Katrina seemed to relax. Maybe there were some advantages to being more of a six year old than she had been.

"I wanted to ask you," Katrina said, dangling the paper over Imogen's head, "are you okay? You've seemed kind of out of it since we were in Aretia."

"I'm fine," Imogen insisted. "Just thinking about a lot." That was an understatement, but it seemed like the only thing she could say.

Katrina lowered the paper until Imogen could grab it from her hands. "If those boys gave you trouble, or there's something you're worried about, you know you can tell me, right, Genny?" Maybe she should tell Katrina too? Would she believe her? She'd have to share more details than Garrick had needed to convince Xaden.

"I know," Imogen insisted. She set the paper down on the bed and dove forward, wrapping her arms around her sister's waist. It was as close to a crushing hug as her six year old arms could manage. "You're the best sister ever."

"I'm glad you think so," Katrina laughed. Imogen came so close to saying something else, but no, she wasn't ready yet. She needed to figure out what to say, she needed to be a little older.

"Thanks, bye," she said instead, grabbing the paper and running back to her own room.

She laid on the floor with her coloring pencils and the large sheets of paper. At first, she was just going to get down what she was sure was the *correct* version of the time wielding rune array, but once she had about half of it down she got distracted by a section that reminded her of a complicated warding rune she'd learned, and then she pushed the top page aside and worked to get that down before she could forget it because it might be useful even if she wasn't yet able to pull enough power to imbue it.

Imogen went back to the time array, but before long she was thinking of other runes she wanted to remember too. She was already forgetting things that should have been right where she left them in her head. In a hurry not to lose her thoughts, she slid the ward rune across the floor and pulled out yet another sheet, scribbling down the bindrune Trisa had invented the week before they left, and then the one that powered the soundshield disks—that one was really useful, after all—and before she knew it Imogen had covered almost all of the paper her sister had given her in runes drawn with the soft, fat coloring pencils in bright rainbow colors. The lines were much bigger than she usually drew, because her fingers didn't quite do what she asked of them yet, but she had the ideas down.

In as much as Imogen had a plan, she was going to fold up the papers and hide them under her mattress with the notebook she'd brought back from Aretia. Unfortunately, she didn't count on how tired she was and how much more work it was to remember every time she did it.

When she woke up in the morning, she realized someone must have carried her to bed. She sat up and looked around the room in a rush, but her rune drawings were nowhere to be found.

Imogen ran downstairs, was about to barge into the smaller family dining room where her parents were bent over the table, but Katrina caught her arm and pulled her aside like she weighed nothing. Instinctively she tried to drop her center of gravity and drive an elbow back, but even before she realized it was Katrina, she knew she wasn't doing any real damage that way in this tiny slip of a body.

Solving *that* problem would just have to go on her already-growing list of things to do.

She let herself relax into her older sister's embrace while Katrina closed her eyes, listening. "I'm not sure what's happened, but Mother's drafting letters and she and Father have been talking to our tutor for at least a quarter mark."

Imogen was certain it had something to do with her missing rune drawings, and Katrina confirmed it a moment later. "I heard them talking last night, after Mother went in to put you to bed. Father doesn't like whatever you were drawing." She'd also completely forgotten about her sister's attempt to sound grown up by calling their parents more formally. It sounded so strange to her six-year-old ears.

"Stop putting on airs. What'd they say?"

Katrina made a face at her. "I don't remember exactly except Papa—I mean, *Father*—wanted to know where you'd learned something so dangerous. What did you even get up to with those boys, Genny? They're all trouble and they made you cry and—"

"Girls? I can hear you. You might as well come in to breakfast like civilized ladies," their father called, and they both peered around the doorframe.

Imogen went in first, trying not to stomp her feet like a child. She was pretty sure she wasn't succeeding. "I don't wanna be civilized, I wanna be a dragon rider like Mama." The Quadrant

had soured many of her opinions about riders, but not all of them. She climbed up into one of the seats at the table, Katrina next to her.

Her drawings were there, stacked neatly between her mother's mug of coffee and a sheet of parchment with her mother's calligraphy.

She'd been… copying the runes? Imogen knew she should stop and work through this logically, but her feelings ran ahead of her again. "You took my runes, Mama?" It came out more accusing than she'd intended.

"You know what they are?" Her mother looked over at their tutor and then back, speaking slowly. "Where did you learn these runes, Imogen?"

Imogen tried to find a sensible lie. Hadn't she learned at least a few of the basics? Maybe she could say she'd mostly been making things up, like they were playing? It had been ages since Imogen had to explain herself instead of just taking awkward memories, and she was going to have to practice, apparently.

"I learned some in Aretia. The boys showed me how to knot them. I think they're pretty so I made up more." To her own ears, it sounded terrible, but her parents looked like they *wanted* to believe her. Their tutor even leaned in toward Imogen, complimenting her creativity.

Imogen wanted to laugh and roll her eyes at the same time. When *had* she first learned runes? Probably it was in Aretia, but later, once her mother had her living there for safety.

"I'd like to show these to a friend of mine, little bunny. That's why I'm drawing copies of them. Is that okay?"

"Who's your friend?"

"Her name's Ce—Lady Mairi. You met her at the council meeting. She's got two littles at home, younger than you, but they stayed home with their papa." She handed Imogen a bun with jam spread on it. "She used to draw pictures like this a lot when we were training together and I want to see what she thought of them."

Imogen nodded slowly. This was either really excellent or terrible, and she wasn't sure which it would be. Her mother's letter to Colonel Mairi—probably not a Colonel yet, either—went on its way, and Imogen got her crayon drawings back and promptly hid them under her mattress with the notebook. She wished she had somewhere more secure, but she hadn't really needed a secure hiding spot until when she was a teen and by then they'd moved.

Things seemed to be almost… normal. In entirely too short a time, Imogen and her sister were seeing their mother and her dragon off. They returned to lessons with Teacher Gràs, whom Imogen had almost forgotten. He was a lot funnier than she remembered, or maybe his jokes had gone over her head the first time. She stayed busy between academics, awkward introductions to things like ballroom dance and poetry recitation, and the beginning of training to be a rider.

She got a letter from Garrick, an absolute mess of obviously coded references and seven-year-old boy adventures. Imogen rolled her eyes at a story about Garrick and Xaden finding a salamander in the fireplace and almost setting Xaden's bed on fire. Maybe all men just needed a little excuse to turn back into seven-year-old boys and forget all the important things.

Not that Imogen didn't have days where she felt truly *six*, small and wanting her Mama and Papa to take this burden off her shoulders.

"Mama? Do you think people can know the future?" she asked the next time her mother was home on leave. They were having an afternoon snack that was allegedly tea, but really was just an excuse for Tracilia to spend time with her youngest.

"There's no such thing as a precognition signet," her mother answered carefully. Imogen was still learning to read her mother's expressions, but she was pretty sure this was not going to be a chance to tell her to the truth. "There are stories where the gods gave people hints about the future, but they're just stories, little bunny."

Imogen scrunched up her face in distaste at the nickname, even though she knew the way her nose wiggled when she did it was half the reason her parents called her bunny. It was such a little kid name, and though she was getting used to being a little kid, she didn't have to like it. Her mother laughed gently and kissed her hair. "Why are you thinking about it?"

"I just… read a story," Imogen brushed it off.

Tracilia raised an eyebrow but took her daughter's lead to change the subject. "I have a friend coming to visit tomorrow and she wants to speak to you."

"A friend?"

"Do you remember I made copies of those runes for my friend Lady Mairi? She agreed with me that they were very pretty and she wants to talk to you about them."

"Okay." Imogen had kind of hoped they'd forgotten about that. She didn't know what else to say.

The next day Imogen was dressed up in company clothes: the kind her mother put her in, practical but clean and easy to keep neat. (Much, *much* better than her father's preference for pretty dresses. Imogen could admit she enjoyed a gown on occassion, but she doubted she'd ever truly be comfortable in something she couldn't climb in.)

It felt so good to go on an adventure with her mother that she didn't really think about *why* Lady Mairi would want to meet with her until they settled in the tea shop across from Celadine Mairi and her stack of paper.

"Hello again, Imogen," Celadine greeted her. "I wanted to speak with you some more about runes, if you don't mind."

Imogen swallowed hard. Would Celadine believe her? She didn't know, and she couldn't talk to anyone, so she'd have to wing it and see what was asked of her, then go from there.

"Your mother said you learned a few of the basic ones from the other kids in Aretia, but the ones your mother sent me were very complicated. If it's okay with you, I'd like to show you some other runes and see what you think about them."

"Can I have teacakes first?" Imogen asked, wanting a minute to think. Both women smiled and laughed softly, then made small talk while they waited for the tea to steep, then cool.

Imogen was allowed to put three cubes of sugar in her tea, which felt like getting away with something. She ate two and a half of the peach jam-filled pastries, careful not to get any sugar dusting on her outfit. Now she felt full on top of her nerves. She wouldn't have eaten that much, except she'd forgotten the taste of the pastries here.

There were so many things that she'd forgotten so completely until she touched them again.

"Ready?" Celadine asked when Imogen had settled. "I'm going to draw out some runes and I want you to guess what they mean, okay?"

By the end of the meal, Imogen swore she'd never make fun of Garrick's terrible lies again. Getting things wrong intentionally, over and over again, was exhausting. Especially because Celadine kept trying to show her the patterns and help her *not be wrong*, so eventually Imogen just gave up and answered honestly.

The runes got complex enough that she had to think about them, logicking through the different squares and intersections. Some of them she recognized from Trissa's lessons, but many of them she'd never learned at all.

After the better part of an hour she was tired and snappish. "Mama didn't tell me this was just gonna be extra lessons."

Celadine just laughed. "In a way it is, I suppose. Imogen, how would you feel about coming to study runes with me?"

That was not what she'd expected. "With you? Like at your house?"

"Yes, you'd stay in Mairghdelle, with me and my family. I'd tutor you in runes and my husband would make sure you're covered in other subjects."

"Would I have to study *lady arts?*" Imogen tried to look suspicious, but judging by the half-hidden smile on her mom's face she didn't think she was succeeding.

Celadine looked at her mother and something passed between them that Imogen couldn't follow. "We can discuss what you'll study, but there will be lots of training to be a rider when you grow up, and you'll have my kids around for company."

"Are you lonely, Imogen?" her mother asked, and Imogen just stared at her. How could she be lonely when she had living family?

"Why would I be lonely? I know you have to protect everybody with your dragon, but Papa and Treeny are always around."

Tracilia sighed. "You've just seemed so different since you got to spend so much time around other kids your age."

"Oh." Imogen had the urge to make her mother feel better. "It's different but I like home a lot, and I love you, Mama." She threw herself off her chair and into her mother's lap for a hug, nearly knocking the tea settings over.

"I love you too, bunny." Imogen's thoughts settled as her mother returned the hug. "You could learn a lot from Cel, if you wanted to. It's up to you, though."

This was the first clear sign Imogen had seen that they could change things, hopefully big things. Hopefully enough to win a war. Imogen *had* to believe that wasn't an accident.

She hated the idea of losing time she could have with her family, but if they succeeded, she'd have a lot more time with them in the long run.

"I'd like to try it, please," Imogen said, wiggling around until she was sitting in her mother's lap, looking at Celadine. "Thank you."

"I'm very excited to spend more time with you," Celadine said, standing up. "Do you want to leave tonight?"

"Tonight?" she groaned. "It's gonna take forever to get there, isn't it?"

"It doesn't have to." Celadine's mouth quirked up.

Tracilia stiffened. "Cel, you don't seriously mean—"

"I do it with my littles all the time, it's fine."

Her mother's arms tightened around Imogen. "Isn't she too big to wear? Is it safe? Are you sure Talamh doesn't object?"

"I think Liam's about her size, honestly."

Imogen realized what they were talking about. "I'm gonna ride a dragon? For real?" She was practically vibrating with excitement; she'd missed Glane and flying more than she had really admitted.

"Talamh will help me hold you on. She doesn't mind kids. But she's pretty unusual, Imogen, so you still have to be respectful, okay?"

She jumped to her feet. "I'll be good! I'll be so good! Never look a red in the eye! An I promise promise *promise* to only come from the left front, I'll be *so* careful!"

Celadine blinked. "Did you tell her Talamh's a red, Trace?"

"No." Tracilia squeezed her shoulder. "Where'd you learn how to approach a red, bunny?"

"Um, Aretia?" Imogen lied again.

"If you're both *certain*. But I'll be flying to Mairghdelle too, just to make sure you get there safe. Fine?" Her mother's hand relaxed.

"You're always welcome to visit," Celadine smiled again. "You don't need an excuse."

"Cel—"

"Just teasing!" She turned her attention to Imogen. "Let's go get you packed, kid."

Chapter 5

"What's got your head cloudy? You get another letter from Imogen?" Xaden asked when he and Garrick finished sparring. They'd been doing Garrick's extra trainings for a few months now.

"I get to see Ma again," Garrick told him. "I'm leaving after breakfast."

"Why didn't you tell me?" Xaden whined.

Garrick shrugged. "Dad said I knew but I guess I forgot the day. I'm not good about thinking about things in the future." He didn't like to dwell in anticipation; it felt like he might jinx the thing he was waiting for.

"You're future hero boy! You're like the expert on the future." Xaden frowned. "It'll be boring-er without you."

"I know, I'm the best." Garrick took Xaden's sword to put them away. "We gotta go eat."

Xaden held the armory door shut while Garrick locked it. "Is your mom okay? In the future? I dunno what I'd do without my mom."

Garrick froze for a minute, but pushed past it. He could answer Xaden's question without lying, and he still had ages before Xaden turned ten, and he couldn't do anything right now anyway because he was about to leave Aretia. Xaden's mom was a summer problem.

"I just haven't got to see her in forever," he answered as they made their way to breakfast. His father was already there, bent over some letters or something with the duke, probably talking about whatever was going to get done while they were gone. Xaden swapped plates around so he could sit next to his own mother and put Garrick's plate next to his own, in the space between his seat and Bodhi's.

"Move down, Bodhi, I'm sitting next to Garrick today."

"You're *always* busy with Garrick an I'm already eating," Bodhi complained.

Xaden just scooted Bodhi's chair over a few inches with his shoulder. "Garrick's leaving today so he sits by me."

"You're leaving?" Bodhi's eyes went wide. "Like to–"

"To winter with my Ma on the farm," Garrick jumped in. He didn't know what Bodhi had been about to say but better safe.

"All winter? That's so long it's basically forever," Bodhi adjusted his plate so it was in front of his new location while Garrick slid a chair into the space Xaden had made for him.

"It's just til spring. I'll be back before Xaden's birthday."

"That means you'll miss mine."

Bodhi's mother leaned over to him. "Buck up, kiddo. We'll make sure your birthday is special. And remember, riders don't whine."

Bodhi straightened. "I know, Mama. I'm not whining."

Garrick spent the meal leaning over against Xaden, talking quietly about what Xaden should focus on while he was gone. "I know you don't like throwing stuff as much but hitting a target's super-duper important. And keep looking in the library if you want."

After breakfast, Garrick hurried to use the lessons room to write a quick letter to Imogen, letting her know where to write him for the winter, and left it with the post before his dad dragged him back to their house.

"What do you mean you *haven't packed yet*, Garrioch? We're supposed to be leaving right now."

"Sorry! Packing now!" Garrick stampeded up to his room and threw some clothes and the notebook with his and Imogen's history notes and his bear and his favorite wooden sword in his rucksack and almost fell down the stairs in his haste to get back to the wagon. As he came out the door, his brother Dom and his father were sitting up at the front of the wagon, ready to go and waiting on him.

Dom looked him dead in the eye and started the horse moving. Rory looked back, a hint of a smile on his face even as he said something to Dom that Garrick couldn't hear.

Garrick groaned and ran after. The wagon wasn't moving *that* fast, but he wasn't going to give Dom the satisfaction of him complaining, either.

Man, he missed lesser magic sometimes.

He flung his rucksack up into the back of the wagon and then launched himself like he was trying to get a running mount on Chradh. The muscle memory wasn't perfect, but it was enough to let him get a grip on the back wall of the wagon and then pull up his feet to get onto the running board, then hoist himself into the back.

"Oh, well done, Garrick," his father said, and Garrick gave Dom his biggest shit-eating grin before sitting down to get comfortable for the long ride.

–

Hi Imogen,

I'm writing from Ma's family farm now! It might be a little slower for letters because they have to go into the village before we can post them out an we don't go into town but twice a week sorry. I'll just write lots longer to make up for it.

I've got lots of cousins but right now we're all busy with harvesting stuff and getting ready for winter and it's probably super boring if I tell you I spent a whole day threshing (with WHEAT

and NO DRAGONS).

Hey I was thinking like remember the um how far ahead do you have to think about it to have enough sheep to feed a whole riot anyhow?

Garrick

–

Garrick,

Dragons fly pretty far so they can just go where the sheep are I guess? I'm studying with the Mairis out in Mairghdelle now so make sure you write me here. Lady Mairi said my runes are real good so there! And I'm gonna learn so many more while you're playing with sheep.

I miss my Mama and Papa and my sister though. How were X + B when you left? How's your mom? Do you have any ideas what we need to work on fixing yet? I guess learning is good but I dunno.

Imogen

–

Hi Immy,

I'm gonna learn how to ride a sheep. I think it's good practice. I might ask to go up the road and see Lacie, her family has horses. I bet you'd like her. I don't have like a gauntlet out here for practice so I gotta kinda make it up. The other kids're all older than me out here so I gotta work hard to keep up.

I think X was sad but B was like feeling left out so maybe it's good they have time together. Are you worried about B? He'll be fine. None of that bad stuff's gonna happen so we don't need to worry about it.

Garrick

–

Dear Bodhi,

Do you remember me? I came with my mama. I wonder how you are. Does it get boring up in Riorson House?

We played that game when me and Garrick sleeped over. Can you help with a secret mission for it?

Sincere,
Imogen Cardulo

–

Dear Miss Cardulo,

It is my most honor to asst. I no wut you mean. Me and Xaden talk abowt it some. I can be diskret. 1 futur rider to anothr.

Yrs,

Bodhi Durran

–

Bodhi,

I know you are good at being quiet and not being paid attention. When the grownups are ignoring you, listen to what they talk about. You can learn a lot and tell me if you hear what the riders are scared of. So we can plan.

Imogen

–

Dear Imogen,

Riders dont hav scared. I wil heer and tel you wut my mama toks abowt. And we can plan and be the bestest riders.

Yrs,

Bodhi

–

Hi Immy,

I can't wait until I see you again and I'm gonna show you all the cool weapon tricks I remember. Have you been trying anything like beating people up or knives? I bet you remember it too. I got to ride horses with Lucie a little bit and it wasn't as awesome as dragons but it was pretty cool.

Winter's really really boring and we're snowed in so I don't know when you'll get this letter. Now'd be a good time to have a dragon burning up all the snow. but! My great uncle knows lots of stories and some are venin stories so I'm gonna collect them just in case. Maybe other folks know some too.

Garrick

–

Garrick if you call me Immy again I'll practice so many knives for you.

I can fight some with Liam. Sloane's still too little but she gets mad if we tell her that. Liam's tall as me so he's good practice. Mostly I do archery and Lady Cel says its the best for my focus for doing more better runes. So I do lots of that. I know its a flier thing but its still good against bad guys.

Thats neat you found someone with venin stories. I'm as far from the barren as I can get I think and its not even an eat your veggies story here. When I'm a bit bigger maybe I can use the library Ser Isaac keeps and find something usefuller. I remember V looking so hard for books and there wasn't any much but maybe there's still some now. I kinda wish we had her helping.

In spring you better go to the liberry when you get back. Now you have homework haha.

my name is,
IMOGEN

–

IMMYGEN,

Aw I think you miss V don't you? She grew on you after all ha.

I don't want to be stuck in the library doing reading but I'll do it because it's important and maybe if I'm lucky X found something already and I won't have to anyway. I'll do anything to save him even extra homework.

I've got pictures and stories from gruncle Rick for you to read and also I asked when we finally got in town and like six old people were super super excited to tell stories and they gave me sweets too so that was fun. I like listening to old people when they're not boring.

G

–

See how you like it Garri,

Mostly I just spend my time with Liam and Sloane and they don't know many stories I don't know but that's okay. Sloane likes it when I tell her stories. I'll see you soon now since it's almost spring. Kinda already spring. Everything's green already here like moss, like V growing on me, ha.

I M O G E N

–

Mimsy,

You gave me a nickname! You DO like me! I guess I'm growing on you too.

Garri

_

Idiot.

_

It was the definitely the slowest argument they'd ever had, tucked in between talking about mundane stuff like what their older siblings were doing, the trouble Garrick was getting up to on the farm with his mom's side of the family, and semi-coded references to things they wanted to remember to discuss in the spring.

The mail in the countryside was slow, especially when winter came on properly. It could take weeks for the letters to make their way back and forth from the countryside to Mairghdelle. It was a rough trip, Imogen remembered. Sometimes she got a second one before she finished replying to the first, or Garrick was in such a hurry to send them they arrived with the flap open.

Soon enough, though, it was spring. The roads would be passable again, and Rory and his sons would be needed in Aretia when it was possible for diplomatic travel. Garrick was looking forward to Xaden's birthday party, and resuming training with his best friend and his aunt, and when he'd get to see Imogen again.

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