



PROLOGUE

KING RICHARD'S CORONATION DAY —WINTER 610

Master Brixx follows the other guests out of the ballroom in Burmstone Palace, where the coronation celebration for King Richard had been moments before. Like many others in attendance, he knows something big just happened but isn't quite sure what. He sees the back of his former student Julien Wolfensberger and is about to say something to him when a weird energy vibrates around the palace.

Mwuahahahaha!

Sinister laughter echoes in his mind. The laughter and the vibrations fade.

"Another portal!" he whispers to himself. Brixx runs through the crowd and hops into the first carriage he sees with a driver. "I need to go to Onaxx Academy now! As fast as possible, it's an emergency!"

The three Wolfensberger brothers, Borus, Kassandros, and Julien, along with the rest of the coronation guests, are milling around in the courtyard, waiting for carriages or talking in small groups.

Borus sees Master Brixx rushing toward a carriage and looks at Kass, then Jules. “What just happened?” he asks. One moment they were thrust into a group of nobles celebrating King Richard’s coronation, and now their grandfather, the Wolf, General Burchard Wolfensberger, is throwing everyone out.

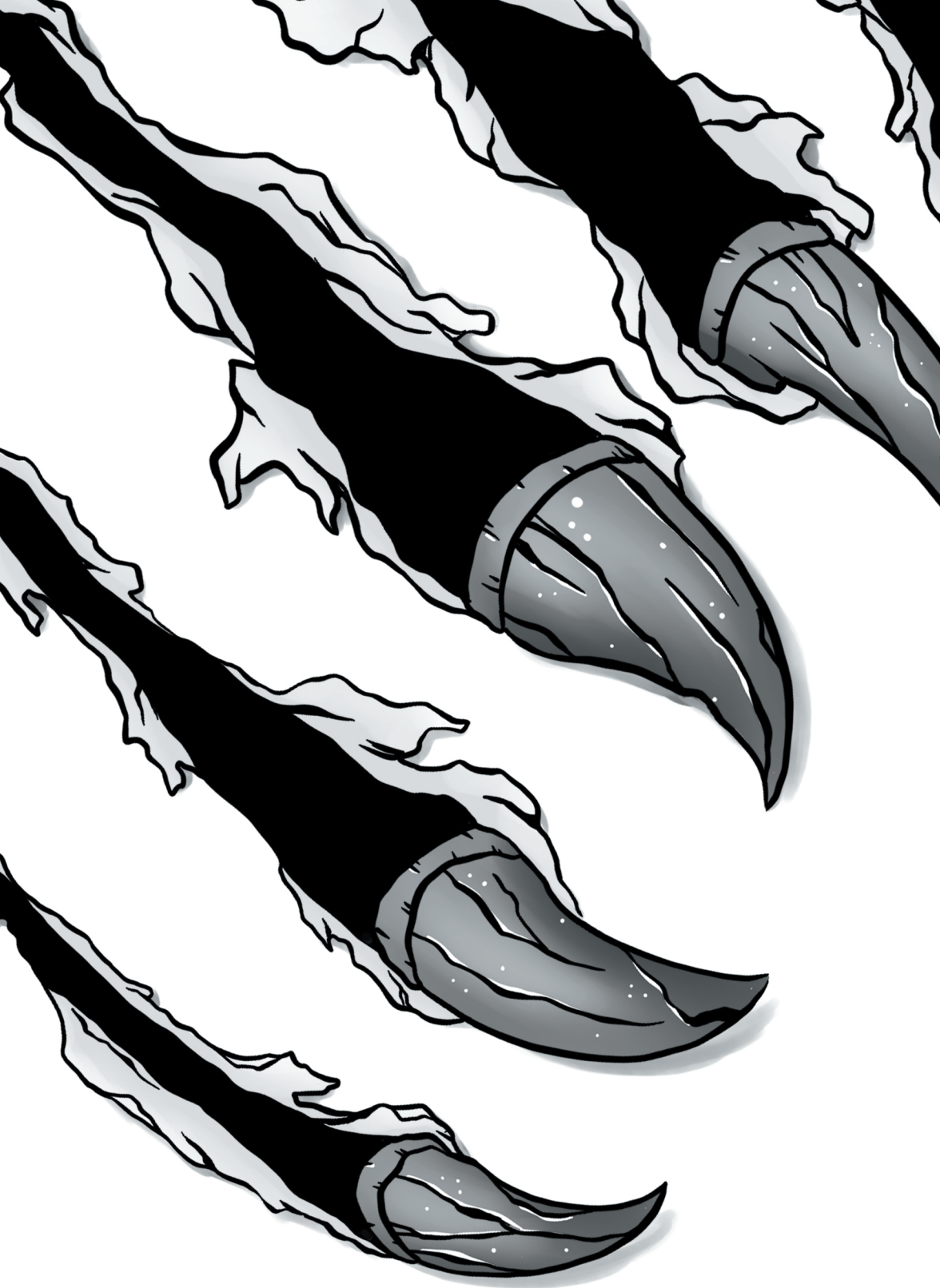
Jules takes a deep breath. “I was on that side of the room and heard a few words. I believe King Renard is dead.”

Eyes widening in shock, Kass is about to say something when the Wolf walks up to them with Princess Émeline in tow. “There you are. Come with me ... I have rooms being prepared for Princess Émeline and then we can talk.”

The princess smiles gratefully at the Wolf and follows closely as he leads the four of them into Burmstone Palace.

WINTER

610



The page is framed by stylized, dark gray leaf-like illustrations in the corners. The leaves have a textured, vein-like appearance and are scattered around the central text area.

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The day after King Richard's coronation, the three Wolfensberger brothers, wearing dark cloaks, huddle in the pouring rain on the doorstep of a gray stone house in Ironhaven, the city in Etria surrounding Burmstone Palace. Borus, the oldest brother, who is closest to the door, knocks again.

"Can't you just open the door?" mutters Jules, the youngest brother.

"Can't *you* just put a shield over us?" growls the middle brother, Kass.

Borus raises his hand to knock again when the door suddenly swings open and all three of them fall forward into a wet heap in the middle of the doorway.

"Borus?" gasps a woman's voice.

"Mother!" Borus replies and tries to drag himself up from under his brothers. He can hear running feet rush forward, and then hands reach out to help untangle them.

Diana and Kenric Wolfensberger gaze at their three sons in surprise. "I thought you were tied up at the palace," Diana says hesitantly.

Borus shrugs, and Jules laughs. "We snuck out."

Kenric smiles. "It doesn't matter. You're here now. Let's get those wet cloaks hung up and you three out of the doorway, so we can keep the rain out of the house."

Borus, Kass, and Jules look at their parents sheepishly, remove their cloaks, and hand them off. Kass takes a step, then loses his balance in a puddle and falls. Borus laughs but stops when he notices Kass's dark glare. Jules catches Borus's eye, then holds out his hand and closes his eyes. The puddle around them disappears. The cloaks and their clothing are now dry.

Borus smiles to himself. Jules is finally getting comfortable enough with his magic to use it on a regular basis. Their mother, however, is staring at Jules, mouth open in surprise.

Noticing her expression, Jules looks at her, eyebrow raised. "What? I thought you wanted to get rid of the puddle ... I can put it back if you'd like to clean it up the traditional way."

Diana shakes her head and pulls him into a hug. "I just ... I've ... never seen you do any spells before, other than when Master Brixx was training you at Wolfensberger Castle. You used to go out of your way to avoid using it. I wasn't expecting that to change."

Borus takes their cloaks and hangs them up on the peg as Jules, seventeen and a third-year squire and weather mage, hugs his mother back. Busy with his task, he almost misses Jules's quiet comment. "A lot has changed. I'm a master mage now."

Stomach grumbling in protest, Borus brushes past Jules and his mother. The motion causes Jules's hair to slide back from his missing ear. Behind him, Borus hears his mother's gasp and he pauses, turning back toward her.

"What happened?" Diana asks sadly. She reaches out to touch the side of Jules's face but then drops her hand. Borus grimaces; he hadn't been there when it happened, but Sir Gregory had sent him a lengthy report.

"I lost it in the fight with Ruschmann Blackwell at Southwind Fort," Jules answers in a neutral voice.

"That was ... a long time ago. Why didn't you tell us you were injured? We got a brief letter from Sir Gregory and nothing from you," Diana questions in a shaky voice.

Borus can feel the mood in the room shifting from excitement at seeing family to something darker. He coughs, drawing their attention to him. He opens his mouth to speak when Kass, nineteen and a knight, blurts out, “Do you have any food around here?”

Jules rolls his eyes at Kass. “We just ate before we left the palace. How are you hungry?”

Kass shrugs, and their father laughs. “Of course we have food. Follow me!” He leads them to the kitchen. Borus sighs in relief at Kass’s timing to help shift the mood.

Withing minutes, Diana and Kenric have set out an assortment of bread and sausages at the kitchen table. His mouth watering, Borus stabs a piece of smoked sausage with his fork and takes a bite. Chewing slowly, savoring the smoky flavor. Just as his parents sit down, the front door opens and shuts.

“Hello?” a young girl’s voice calls.

“Mrpp ... hbbbb,” calls Jules through a mouthful of food.

Shrieking, a thirteen-year-old redhaired girl runs into the room and leaps onto Borus.

Laughing, Borus, a twenty-year-old knight and sword master, hugs his little sister. “Hello, Sabine!” He tilts back in his chair, trying to get a better view of her. He can’t remember the last time the four of them had been together in the same place. It must be years.

Sabine’s long red hair is in a braid down her back. She is wearing an oversized undyed robe that makes her look rather silly.

Biting the inside of his lip, Borus refrains from telling her she looks silly, afraid to hurt her feelings.

Sabine smiles at him and wraps her arms tighter around him. “When did you grow so much?”

Borus chuckles at the question. “You grew too, Sabine.”

A few minutes later, Sabine is still hugging Borus. Kass leans over and pokes her, sticking out his lower lip, pouting. “You can’t give Borus all of the hugs.”

Borus reluctantly loosens his hold on her. She gives him one last squeeze and then throws herself onto Kass. Borus watches as Kass

holds her close and closes his eyes. He wonders if Kass is also realizing how close they had been to never seeing her again, if things had gone differently after the shipwreck.

Borus waits for Kass to open his eyes, then he tilts his head toward Jules. A gentle reminder that he needs to share Sabine. “Jules needs a hug too,” Kass says, lifting Sabine off of his lap and giving her a gentle push toward Jules.

As Sabine scoots over to Jules, Borus takes another bite of sausage, closing his eyes. They pop open when he hears Jules gasp, wondering what it could be now.

“When did you start attending Onaxx Academy?” Jules blurts out. Borus drops his fork in surprise, and it clatters onto his plate. He reaches for it, keeping his eyes on Jules and Sabine, and misses, stabbing his finger into a biscuit instead.

Sabine’s face turns beet red. “In Fall 607.”

“Why didn’t you tell us?” Jules says softly.

“I didn’t want to burden you with my life. The three of you are off protecting Etria. I’ve been here safe at Onaxx Academy. No need to add more things to worry about,” Sabine says, voice equally soft.

Borus clears his throat and Sabine turns to face him. “What kind of magic?”

“Shapeshifting,” she says simply.

Borus gazes at her blankly. He peers at Kass, who looks just as confused as he is. Jules, on the other hand, has an expression of wonder.

“Shapeshifting?” Jules says, awe in his voice.

“What’s so great about shapeshifting?” asks Borus. He doesn’t recall hearing much about shapeshifting when they learned about magic as pages.

“First, it’s just as rare as weather magic. Having two mages with rare magic in the same generation in our family has never happened before. Second, she can turn into an animal. Kass, you use a red-tailed hawk, Skye, and know how valuable of a tool she is. Can you

imagine how helpful Sabine could be on a battlefield?” Jules says. To Borus’s surprise, Jules sounds excited.

“Excuse me,” interrupts Diana. “Sabine is *not* going to be doing anything on a battlefield. She is a thirteen-year-old girl. I can’t believe that after the things you have seen and done that you would suggest that she would want to be on a battlefield.”

Now it’s Jules’s turn to blush. “I’m sorry, Mother. But ... we serve Etria. Our family always has. It is a difficult habit to break, that of constantly assessing possible tools that could help in battle. Or the assumption that an enemy is around every corner,” he says with a shudder.

Taking a deep breath, Borus decides, for the second time this morning, to help shift the conversation from the dark path it’s heading down. “We still haven’t gotten an answer out of anyone. Can one of you please tell us how long we were gone?”

Sabine gives them a quizzical look. “What do you mean you don’t know how long you’ve been gone? Time passes the same everywhere, silly.”

Diana hushes Sabine. “You’ve been gone for six months.”

“What!” says Kass in alarm, leaping up and knocking his chair over.

“Easy, son,” says Kenric in a calm voice, placing a gentle hand on Kass’s arm.

“Is that why everyone was being weird last night, when we were announced in the ballroom?” Borus asks quietly.

“They thought we were dead,” whispers Jules.

Borus half stands as Kass walks over to their cloaks. He knows he should follow Kass to make sure he is OK, but part of him needs this chance to rest. Luckily, their father gets up and follows Kass, then leads him back to the table as though Kass is six again.

“Yes, many people did think you were dead,” Kenric says. “Your appearance is as big of a shock to everyone as the amount of time that has passed is to you. But ... rushing off to wherever you think you’re going probably isn’t going to give you more answers. The

Wolf let you sneak out so you can rest away from the chaos your appearance has created at the palace. Sit down and relax. In a few days when the dust has settled, if you still have questions that need answers, then you can go up to the palace.”



In the far north in Sneg, a fire mage wearing a bloodred hooded cape, hiding everything but his face from view, stands in a musty dungeon cell. For this scheme, he is going simply by Pyr. He doubts his associate knows who he really is, but there are those out there who wouldn't hesitate to destroy him if they were to know that he somehow broke his banishment.

In a quiet but cold voice, Pyr announces, “It is done. The king is dead.”

Roger, a young Etrian knight with sandy brown hair, brown eyes, and fair skin, not more than twenty years old, stands in front of him. An annoyingly happy grin appears on his face at Pyr's announcement. “Good. Are the other plans ready?”

Pyr glares coldly at the young knight. “You are too impatient, Roger.”

“You didn't answer my question,” Roger warns.

Pyr bows mockingly. “My apologies, sir. Yes, the next phase will start soon. Everything is in place.”

“Is the castle ready? You're following my exact instructions?” Roger questions.

Pyr pushes away his annoyance at Roger. *I must play the boy's game a while longer.* “It will be ready soon. I am following your exact instructions. However, many of them are vague, so I have been interpreting them in my own way. I am certain you will appreciate the results,” Pyr says with a cruel laugh.

“Excellent,” Roger replies, rubbing his hands together in excitement.

Pyr turns away from Roger. The young knight has become a necessary annoyance. The sooner as he can conclude his business

arrangement with Roger, the sooner he can turn his attention to destroying Onaxx Academy and the training ground for the mages who banished him over two hundred years ago.



The next morning, Jules is lying in his bed at Stone House. His feet hang off the end, and his arm dangles over the side, touching the worn wooden floor. He starts to sit up, deciding he probably should eat breakfast, when his sister appears and launches herself on top of him.

Giggling, she finds his ticklish spot behind his knee and touches him with featherlight fingertips. Jules shrieks and starts laughing and squirming.

“Sa ... b ... ine,” he says, trying to get away from her fingers.

Finally rolling far enough away, he shifts and traps both of her arms with his hand in a quick movement. With his free hand, he tickles her armpit. She rolls around, thrashing, trying to get out of his grip. After a few moments, Jules lets go, and she tumbles off the bed.

He peers over the edge. “Are you OK?”

Sabine giggles from her place on the floor. “Yes. You didn’t damage me. But I almost forgot.” She sits up pushing her hair out of her face. “I came up here to let you know that you have a visitor.”

“A visitor?” Jules asks.

“Yep. Which means you might want to hurry up and get dressed,” she says with a meaningful glance at his oversized pajamas.

“Well ... then you, little sis, need to leave,” he says, stretching and trying to disentangle himself from the blankets.

Sabine leaps to her feet. “I’ll see you downstairs.” She saunters out the door, pulling it firmly shut behind her.

Jules wanders over to the closet in search of some clothes, not sure what he’ll find. They haven’t had a chance to buy new clothing yet, and most of what is in Stone House is too small for everyone except Sabine. Since his parents don’t live in Ironhaven full time,

they only stay at Stone House for special occasions, which means other than the household staples there isn't much in the way of old clothing.

He finally pulls out a pair of green cotton pants that look about the right length and a dark blue tunic. After hastily putting those on, he runs a brush through his hair, getting the worst of the snarls out, and then makes his way downstairs.

Sabine did not tell him who his visitor was. As he rounds the corner from the stairs into the kitchen, Jules stops in his tracks. King Richard is sitting at the kitchen table.

Taking a deep breath, Jules walks slowly into the kitchen. "G'morning, Your Majesty," he says with a flourishing bow.

He glances up just in time to see the king roll his eyes. "We're at your house ... you can drop the formality, Jules."

Jules decides to not answer. Richard is a close friend of Borus and Kass. Because of their difference in age, Jules does not know him nearly as well as his brothers do.

"Do you mind if I eat while we talk?" he asks as his stomach gurgles loudly.

Richard chuckles. "Of course. This is your house after all."

"Would you like any?" Jules offers as he walks over to fire where there is a covered pot sitting off to the side. Sometimes his mother leaves food for them if they end up on different schedules.

"No thanks," Richard replies.

Sniffing the air, Jules is pretty sure it's sausage, eggs, and a biscuit. He reaches out for the pot and wraps his hand around the metal handle. He yelps and lets go, shaking his hand. He momentarily forgot that a metal handle that close to the fire would still be hot. Grabbing a rag, Jules pulls the pot off of the fire and sets it on the counter. As he selects a plate from the cabinet and fills it, he also is putting a spell on his hand to cool it off and help with the burns.

Jules sits down at the table with his plate full of eggs, sausage, and two biscuits. He gives Richard a quick glance before shoveling food into his mouth, deciding he's too hungry to care.

While Jules's face is almost in his plate, Richard speaks. "I suppose I can start. Most of what I want to talk about is me giving you information.

"The negotiations with Les Tropiques Eternels are going well, and a wedding is in the works, although I am not sure when the wedding will happen. As you know, you still have one more year as a squire. Even though you have more than proven yourself worthy of knighthood, it is important that as a new king I stick to tradition as much as I can, at least the first few years. What this means to you is that I will be selecting a new knight master for you. However, so that you have the opportunity to rest and regroup after your adventures on Lua Pele'ele and in Les Tropiques Eternels, you will not have to begin your duties as a squire until this coming fall."

Jules swallows his mouthful of food. "Thank you for giving me a chance to regroup. I am hoping to spend some time at Wolfensberger Castle."

The king nods. "The time I am giving you is yours to do with as you wish. Please, though—stay out of trouble. I am not sure your parents or the Wolf would like me very much if something were to happen to you, or your brothers for that matter, now that you have just returned."

Jules gives him a smile. "I promise, I am not going to go looking for trouble."

"Good, that is what I like to hear. Well ... duty calls. I must head back to Burmstone Palace." King Richard stands up.

Jules hesitates, not sure if he should ask, but decides he needs to know. "Wait ..."

Richard turns to look at him. "Yes?"

"What about Ella?" Jules asks quietly.

Richard takes a deep breath. "In light of recent events I am putting her betrothal to the duke on hold so that Ella can have time to decide what she would like to do. I am not my father. With the succession to the throne secure with my heir, I do not feel I should force my sister into a marriage solely for political reasons." The king

pauses and gives Jules a hard look. “Just remember she is my sister. I will not take it kindly if you break her heart.”

With that, the king turns and departs. When the front door shuts and the sound of crunching gravel dissipates, Jules allows himself to relax a bit. *The king came all the way down here just to tell me I get a new knight master? Strange. At least now I know what is even possible with Ella.*



Borus is sitting in front of a roaring fire in his parents’ house when there is a knock on the door. He starts to get up, but the sound of the door opening and voices indicates someone else beat him to it. He closes his eyes for a moment and jumps when a wet finger pokes his ear.

“Hey!” he growls, reaching up to snatch the offending hand.

Four people laugh behind him. Borus twists and grins when he sees Theo, Lewis, and Kristoff with Kass. He stands up and comes around the couch, reaching out to shake hands with Kristoff when he’s pulled into a bear hug instead.

“I missed you too,” he says quietly.

Just then Jules walks down the stairs. Borus looks up and waves him over. “What’s it going to be? Cards? Dice? ... A ride?”

Theo shakes his head. “Do you not see the pouring rain outside?”

Kass shrugs. “The answer is an indoor activity then. Anyone else have an opinion?” he says, looking around at the suddenly silent group. “Fine, then I will decide ... cards it is!” Kass walks over to the mantle above the hearth and opens a tin with some cards.

The group of six friends sit down at the dining table. Kristoff shuffles the cards, then deals. “Have you been up to the palace yet?”

Jules shakes his head. “Not since we snuck out a few days ago, but we have had numerous visitors from the palace.”

Lewis looks at Jules in surprise. “Oh?”

Jules shrugs. “Yes, the king even came down. I think he decided that if we’re more comfortable here than up in the palace, he’d come here.”

“Can you share what was discussed?” Lewis asks.

“He just wanted to talk about the future, making sure I am aware I have to finish out my fourth year as a squire,” Jules reveals.

“Ah, just boring stuff. But you are free for the next few months! Maybe we should all plan a trip somewhere,” says Lewis with a grin.

Borus, Kass, and Jules all firmly reply at the same time. “No.”

Lewis, taken aback, throws his hands up. “Sorry! I guess you were just on a trip.”

“If we’re done with the interrogation now,” Kristoff looks pointedly at Lewis, “then we can begin our game.”

Rumbles of agreement come from around the table, and the discussion drops.