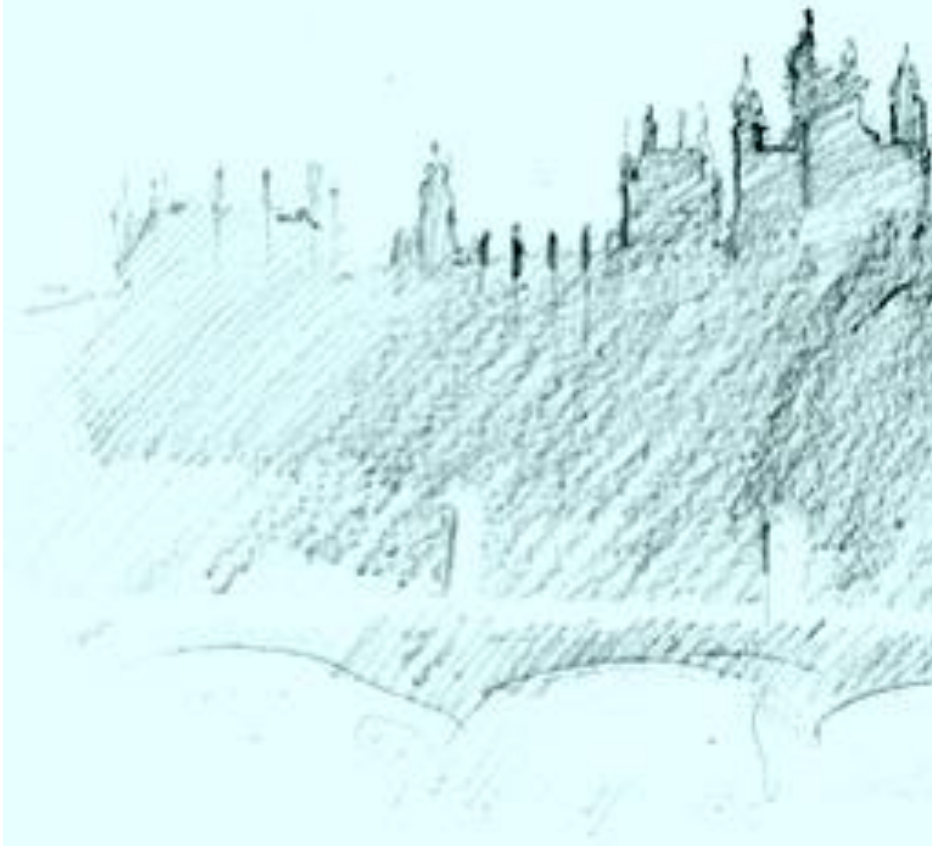


Conjurers Bridge: Origin



by
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One

Vandon Kellen leaned out the window and peered down at the stone. He turned his head and saw his father's head poke out another window and smiled. His father was next door with Vandon's mother and grandfather. He didn't know what kind of pressure his mother had put on Terrill Kellen, but in only three days his father had cleared all of his official Conjuror obligations in order to satisfy his wife's request. And since Terrill Kellen was the second most powerful man around – and the busiest – Vandon knew his mother must have been unrelenting.

He sighed and stared out towards the mouth of the Aberhayle. It was low tide – he could just see the bend in the river. A handful of boats were sailing around it, no doubt heading to the shallows and whatever fish had been stranded in the deeper pools when the tide had receded.

“Vandon.”

He turned back to find his father looking at him, a frown on his face.

“Did you find a path?” his father asked.

Vandon peered down again, concentrating on the stones that led all the way down the side of the bridge to the footing at the bottom. He muttered the small finding spell under his breath and placed his finger in the window ledge. His finger glowed for a moment and then the light detached itself and trailed down the stones, stepping down every foot or so until it reached the footing at the bottom. The light went out but he could still see a faint, white trail.

“Good,” his father said. “Now the path to the stairs from over here.”

Vandon nodded. This spell was harder since he wasn't in contact with the stone it started at. He eyed the trail. There, that was a natural landing, a section that was almost twice as long as anything else close by. He muttered the spell again, tweaking it slightly and pointed his finger. The edge of the landing glowed and then the light trailed up towards the window his father leaned out of.

"Excellent," Terrill Kellen said and Vandon sighed in relief.

As his father's apprentice, he needed his approval in order to become a full-fledged conjurer. Oh, he had lesson from the heads of all of the Ten, but it was your own family who had the final word. As long as it meant no more than two conjurers in each family.

Thank the powers he wasn't a Wailes. There were already two Wailes conjurers so Osred was stuck waiting until one of them died. The man was in his thirties but was considered a youth, living at Conjurers Hall with the rest of the unmarried conjurer's in training.

Vandon liked to think that if he was a younger son he would have chosen to become something other than a conjurer, as his brother had and. But Keetley had never wanted anything other than books anyway.

"All right," his father said. "I'll outline the door over here and you do the same. Then you need to get the stone."

"Yes Father." Vandon stepped away from the window and eyed the frame. This was his workroom so any alterations were his responsibility. Using a similar spell, he quickly outlined the doorway. A split door would be best, he thought, so he could keep the top half open for the breeze. And once they'd excavated the next floor down, he'd add another door. Assuming Keetley wanted to come back to the bridge, that is. He'd been apprenticing to the bookbinder in Waglenn Landing for the past four years and he seemed to like town life.

Vandon couldn't understand it. He liked knowing that the solid stones stretched down to the river, that the magic of conjurers had built this bridge using rocks dug from the ground and stacked together by the strongest magics.

The town – to him – was nothing but a collection of ramshackle wooden huts that were battered by wind and rain and always threatened by the mud of the mountains. He'd take the bridge, where the walls of his rooms were two feet thick and he barely noticed rain or wind.

He tidied his work table – in case his father decided to come and examine his conjuring – before leaving.

Zevach peered up at the bridge. Something was happening, he could feel it. He closed his eyes, trying to pinpoint the cause of his discomfort. He sighed and opened his eyes again. It was a true premonition, he was sure of it, but it was neither clear nor strong. He shifted his hand on the tiller and the boat skidded to the left, across the shallow river towards the village.

He'd tell his mother – he had to – and she would talk to the other shamans. He sighed again and wondered when he'd be allowed into the circle, when he'd be considered an adult.

He'd come into his powers at thirteen, younger than any other male shaman in memory. But even though he'd been studying for three years, the same as any other shaman, his mother said he wasn't ready, that readiness included both years studying and the wisdom of age. It didn't matter that he could do things no other shaman could do, could feel things no other shaman could feel.

The circle called him sensitive to magic – and he was. But he was more than that. Sometimes when he sat in his boat, staring at the bridge, he felt the conjurers create spells and he *knew* the purpose of those spells. At least the more powerful ones.

His mother didn't believe him, which meant she'd not asked the circle for advice. So he'd never mentioned it to his teacher, old Frayn. Not that the old man could help him. Zevach had mastered every single talent the man possessed a year ago and now whenever he asked to try something new, he was told it wasn't possible. So he no longer asked his teacher for help – instead he simply did *impossible* things by himself. Like learning how to determine the purpose of the conjurer's spells.

He looked back over his shoulder at the bridge. Whatever the conjurers were doing, it would affect Rivermen.

Once out on the cobblestones of the bridge, Vandon spotted his best friend.

"Tate," Vandon called. "Where are you off to?"

"Home," Tate said. He crossed the cobblestones to meet Vandon. "My mother wants me to fix a door or something."

"Ah, domestic duties," Vandon said. "I'm helping my father with his."

"The stairs. Is he letting you do the spell?"

"Yes," Vandon said. He shook his head. "But only one attempt. I fear my mother will not let anything delay this, not even my learning."

"How is your grandfather?" Tate asked. "Any better?"

"A little. He can't really walk on the foot, but he can stand long enough to clean and sell the fish."

"As long as you can get it to him."

"Yes," Vandon agreed. "Mother says she will bring the catch up every morning." He looked at his friend and rolled his eyes.

“You think you and your father will be doing that.”

“My deliberately mother married someone who would *not* take over her father’s business,” Vandon said. “Because she hated smelling like fish all day.”

Tate slapped him on the back. “Maybe Keetley will stay.”

“Not if he realizes he’s to help with this he won’t,” Vandon said. “Although Father’s trying to entice him. We’re excavating a whole new floor below the workrooms. Plenty of space for Keetley to have his own workroom as well as storage for his bookbinding.”

“And the stairs would help him get the skins he needs,” Tate said. “From the Rivermen. You know, turtle, shark and seal.”

“I don’t think Father thought of that,” Vandon replied. “I’ll tell him.” They were in front of Tate’s mothers’ house already. Nothing was very far away on the bridge. “I’m off to Waglenn Landing to see about some stone,” he said. “For the stairs. I’ll see you at dinner.”

Tate nodded and ducked through the small door and Vandon kept walking along the cobblestones towards the east end of the bridge. The dwellings were smaller along here – the chandler’s sign hung out over the street and the door to the shop was one of a row of identical doors lining the roadway.

The bridge was too small to have a poor area, not like the towns on each end of it – but the houses here had been built by non-conjurers – people who had had to buy the spells that were used to erect the dwellings. And since conjurers were expensive, the buildings were only as big as they needed to be.

Conjurers owned the bridge - they’d created it with magic. They decided who could live on it and long ago they had decreed that only magic could be used to build on the bridge.

Vandon had heard people grumbling about this, wondering why conjurers kept such rigid control of the bridge, but he knew that it had to be this way. The bridge was too important for there to be any discord on it. It linked the two towns and allowed trade up and down the river. Divisions on the bridge could hurt – even endanger – everyone who relied on the trade it enabled.

Since the bridge had been built with magic, non-magical construction could threaten the integrity of the structure. He'd had to learn all facets of the bridges construction before his father had allowed him to work on the stairs. So the conjurers were cautious about what happened to and on the bridge.

Conjurers also made rules for themselves – people didn't know that, but it was also to keep everyone safe. That's why no single conjurer family could have more than two conjurers at any one time.

The theory was that it kept the council from being controlled by one of the Ten. In practice families were created by marriage. He was being pursued by two daughters of conjurers and he knew it wasn't because either of them cared for him. The parents wanted to join with the second most powerful family on the Bridge. Either girl would have settled for Keetley if he'd been the son to become a conjurer. Anything to align with the Kellens.

He shook his head. And either of those girls would have found a willing mate in Osred Wailes, who couldn't get out of Conjurers Hall until he was either made a full conjurer or married into a conjurer family. Although he could understand why they didn't choose Osred.

two

Osred frowned as he stared out the window. His room in Conjurer's Hall served as both his sleeping chamber and his workroom and books and papers littered the narrow bed as well as the table he sat at. He'd lived in this small room for 18 years and he hated it. Every moment he spent here reminded him that he had countless more years to go.

His brother Rem was only ten years older than he was, and at sixty-five his father looked like he planned on living forever. Osred would be stuck in this room until one of them died. Berhalla, he'd probably die first!

He watched the fishing boats for a while, trying to make the time pass. Although technically an apprentice, he had mastered his studies years ago. But since he wasn't officially a conjurer he couldn't take on work. So he spent his days devising spells that he knew would never be used.

In the early years, when he'd hoped to marry his way out of this room, the spells had been good domestic helpers – to make flowers grow and bloom, to keep bread fresh and floors clean. But as the years stretched out and he'd begun to realize that no daughter on the bridge would ever marry him, his spells had become darker. Spells to cause accidents or diseases. Now he concocted elaborate multi-step spells that he could use to curse those who offended him. Which was everyone, these days.

He longed to use one of his spells on his brother or father so that they would sicken and die and he could move out of this cursed room. But the council would know. And could he live with killing his own blood? Especially when they'd tried to warn him?

He'd been sixteen when they realized that his abilities were far greater than Rem's but by then it was too late. There already were two Wailes conjurers and that was all that was allowed. But Osred couldn't imagine a life as anything other than a conjurer – wouldn't hear of apprenticing to the

fishmonger or becoming a Chandler. He *was* a Wailes conjurer – and the strongest seen in generations. They would make an exception for him, so he'd thought.

But they hadn't. And worse, they'd let him learn. Despite the warnings he'd been insistent, he admitted that, but they should have barred him from learning, stopped him from moving in to Conjurers Hall to live in limbo while everyone else passed through on their way to becoming full conjurers living full lives.

And if they had? He wouldn't be any happier, he admitted that as well, but at least as a fishmonger he'd have a life - work, a home of his own, probably a wife and children. Not this half-life of a middle-aged youth.

It was too late to change now, though. They would never let him become something else, not with all the training he had, all the talent he had. He watched a boat tack back and forth across the width of the river. He'd been thinking about this for a long time. His only choice now was to get off the bridge. Neither town would dare antagonize the conjurers so it had to be the Rivermen.

He had something of value to them – his magic. Mixed with shaman blood, it would make the Rivermen the most powerful people around. And he would father that power.

Zevach nodded. It was all he could do when his mother was talking, after all. She was a woman - the shaman in the house – even though he had more talent her. She had the ear of the circle and she would make all the decisions.

“We are talking,” his mother said.

Zevach turned to see his sister Roula frown and back out through the doorway. As bad as it was for him, she had it worse. She was a Simen, but it seemed that all the shaman abilities had bypassed her and settled on him.

They had different fathers, of course, and per tradition no one but their mother knew who they were. But his mother had been a shaman by the time he was conceived so had probably been able to interest a man with more talent than Roula's father. As one of only three male shamans Zevach had already had women near his mother's age try to bed him in hopes of bearing his child.

"You must give me more information before I can talk to the circle," his mother said. She stared at him until Zevach realized she was expecting an answer.

"I don't know any more," he said. She narrowed her eyes at his answer but he didn't say anything else. She *knew* how unreliable premonitions were. Why did she always expect so much more from him than she did from herself?

Finally his mother motioned to the door and he scrambled up and out before she could change her mind. At least he had an excuse to go out in his boat and stay out of her way. He passed his sister, who sat on the dock their houseboat was moored beside. He nodded and she grunted her reply but didn't say anything.

He quickly untied his little boat and shoved off from the dock, using the small paddle to maneuver out from between the rest of the boats in the village. Soon he was in the middle of the river, his sailed raised and puffed out by a stiff breeze. He'd go close to the bridge, in case his mother heard of his travels, rather than towards the mouth of the river and the fishermen. He sighed. He would have liked the life of a fisherman, if he'd had a choice. Spending all day in your boat on the river, no one to answer to. He'd been allowed to stay on one of the bachelor boats a few times and he'd enjoyed the fishermen's easy camaraderie.

Once he was a shaman he could get his own boat and live by himself. That might be even better. His sister wanted to come and live with him. As a shaman's daughter who would never be a shaman, she'd told him she had no plans on having children with anyone who wasn't powerful. And since the

only males with power were Zevach, his master Frayn and the shaman who lived upriver, who were both ancient, the chances of her having a family of her own were slim. His mother was pressuring Roula; he'd heard that more than once, claiming that the Simen line could not be allowed to die out. Zevach's children would bear the name of their mother.

Vandon ran a hand across his forehead, wiping away the bead of sweat. He couldn't understand how his brother could spend so much time in town. There was no breeze here and the forest seemed to press in on him. He preferred the openness of the bridge and the solid stone beneath his feet over the soggy earth that clung to his shoes.

"I'll take this pile," Vandon said. He pointed to a stack of stone blocks that were half-buried in a pile of sand. The small spell he'd used told him that these stones were good quality – no cracks or weak spots in any of them. He could have told the stonemason which of the other blocks would fail, but that wasn't his business. Besides, if the council found out he'd given his talents away to anyone but them, they would punish him. And Vandon had no wish to work on the bridge gates they were putting in. Bad enough he had to help his father build the stairs.

As a child he'd been fascinated by the bridge and the work the conjurer's did to keep it secure and sound. Now he understood it to be the basest use for talent. Oh it was work that was needed – it just wasn't valued. Not by him, anyway.

He'd rather spend his time creating elegant spells that painted pictures on walls or infused the air with the scent of lavender. Let others do the mundane tasks of fixing structures and healing people.

The stonemason grunted and nodded, his hand outstretched, and Vandon dropped the coins onto his dirty palm. He brushed his hand on his pant leg before turning his back on the mason. He could

have traded his skills for the stone – that was within his rights as a conjurer – but the mason hadn't even had enough creativity to suggest a task he wanted done.

Vandon shook his head. To think that his brother was apprenticed to a man such as this. Although a bookbinder probably had more imagination than this hauler of rock. Keetley did, Vandon knew that for sure.

He stood in front of the stone, running through the spell twice before speaking the words aloud. The stones vanished, leaving a sizable depression on the soft mud. Vandon squared his shoulders and turned, not bothering to say a farewell to the mason.

He'd check to make sure the stones were properly stacked at the base of the bridge pillar but he had no reason to think they were anywhere other than where he wanted them. It was an easy task, after all.

He'd stop by and visit his brother first, though; he'd never hear the end of it from his mother if he didn't. And Keetley did seem to enjoy his visits. Vandon wasn't sure he'd be quite so happy to see Keetley if their positions were reversed – if Keetley was the conjurer and it was he who'd been forced to choose a different life. He shrugged. Keetley seemed happy to bind books and in truth, it was a skill the bridge could use. He turned down a lane and headed towards the bookbinders.

Osred followed the path down the slope to the river. He ducked under the branches of a willow tree and when he straightened he let out an involuntary gasp.

The collection of boats that looked so small from the bridge stretched out into the water 15 deep. He could see the ropes that lashed the nearest boats to each other. In the distance a few figures danced from boat to boat, navigating a path from one end of the floating village to another.

“First visit?”

Osred turned toward the voice. A young woman sat with her back against the trunk of the willow tree. The brim of her hat shaded her eyes from him but dark hair spilled over her shoulders.

“Yes,” Osred replied. He took a step closer to her. “I’m Osred.”

“Are you a conjurer?” the woman asked.

Osred sighed. There it was, the question he *knew* he’d have to answer - but he’d thought it would take longer than this for someone to ask it. “Why do you want to know?”

The woman looked away for a moment, staring past him at the boats and the river. She pushed the hat back on her head and looked right at him, her blue eyes boring into him. He felt a frisson of recognition. He didn’t know her, he’d never seen this woman before, but she had the same look of frustration and desperation he saw when he looked at his own reflection.

“I’m Osred,” he said again. “Osred Wailes.” She started and he smiled. She knew the ten families, then. “I have all the training and power of a conjurer.”

“But you’re not one.” It was a statement, but she looked at him with curiosity.

“No,” he said. “There are already two Wailes conjurers. They will not allow a third.”

“Is that why you are here?”

“Maybe,” Osred replied. “You still haven’t told me your name.”

“Roula,” she said. “Of the Simen clan of shamans. Although I am not a shaman.”

Osred recognized the bitterness in her voice as well. His struggles to contain his own were less and less successful these days.

“Roula Simen. Do shamans inherit their power?” he asked. “The way conjurer’s do?” Could it be so easy? Had he met the person he needed to meet already?

“Yes,” Roula replied. “Although it does not touch everyone with the blood.”

“I see.” And Osred did see. It was the same with conjurers – the power didn’t manifest with the same strength in all those born into the ten families. “And what happens when a shaman has no power?”

“It is their duty to bear a child with power,” Roula said. She cocked her head and shrugged. “If the mother does not have power, then the father must.”

“Indeed,” Osred said. He took another step and sat down in front of her. She wasn’t particularly pretty, but he hadn’t really expected that had he? But she was willing. He could see it in the way she settled back against the tree. “You and I have much in common.”

“Yes,” Roula said. She smiled and Osred grinned back at her.

three

Zevach rounded the corner and skidded to a stop. Keetley was in front of the bookbindery but he wasn't alone. His brother, the younger Kellen conjurer, was with him. Keetley waved him over and Vandon turned to look.

Zevach forced his shoulders to relax and walked over to them. He wasn't fond of any of the conjurers. When he was around them he felt vague warnings of impending doom. Nothing he could pinpoint – he couldn't even tell if it was one conjurer or all of them – but the unsettled feelings made it difficult for him to be near them.

"Zevach," Keetley said. "Vandon and Father are adding stairs to the bridge. Vandon's just secured the stone now. Come watch."

"Keetley," Vandon warned.

"Oh don't be silly," Keetley said. "The stairs are going to be used by Rivermen. We might as well have one there when they're created." Keetley turned to Zevach. "The stairs are to make it easier for grandfather to get fish to his shop."

"You might actually be useful," Vandon said and Zevach felt a jolt of warning. "You have a boat, don't you?"

"Yes," Zevach replied. Every Riverman over the age of twelve had their own boat, which he suspected Vandon knew.

"It would be helpful to have a view from below," Vandon said. "It will be me. I don't think father would set foot in your boat."

"I'll come too," Keetley said. "I'm curious and this will be a great view of the bridge."

"They might be your stairs one day," Vandon said before he turned towards the bridge.

Zevach met Keetley's eyes. His friend shrugged and Zevach smiled. If Keetley was living at the top of the stairs at least he could visit him more easily. It took more time than he could often spare to dock his boat and climb the banks of the river to the town.

Vandon steadied himself with one hand on the mast. Keetley sat beside Zevach, who had one hand on the tiller even though the boat was tied to ropes that stretched to two of the piers. The stone he'd bought from the mason was piled up on the footing of one of the piers.

His father had liked the idea of using a boat and Vandon had to admit that the perspective from it was excellent. He was having a hard time concentrating though. He was used to the solidity of the bridge beneath him and the sounds and movement of the water unnerved him. Not that he would admit it to his father.

He peered up the arch of stone. The first door would be right *there*. He whispered a spell and a rectangle appeared, etched in white. Another spell and a stone block rose from the pile and merged into the existing bridge. He continued to whisper, setting steps halfway up the arch. He paused for a moment, then created a narrow landing, before trailing stairs up towards the outlined rectangle. Once he knew the first step was flush with the doorway, he pulled stones away, creating an opening for the doorway.

His father peered out and down before waving at him to continue. Vandon trained his eyes on the house next door – his grandfather's home. He traced another door and quickly created stairs leading from the landing to it. This time when he hollowed out the doorway his mother leaned out and waved. He waited until she disappeared before turning back to the stairs that led up to his family home.

"Now for your room, brother," he said. He took his time with this spell. He wanted the stairs to be more subtle. Almost invisible unless you were actually beside them. He traced a doorway and cut the

stone, but left them in place. "It will be ready for you if you ever decide you want to set up shop here." He looked at Zevach. "Can you take me closer? It's time to test the stairs out."

Zevach released one of the ropes and tugged on the other and the boat drifted towards the base of the pillar. Vandon stepped out onto the footing. A few stones remained stacked beside the new stairs.

"Thank you for your help shaman," Vandon said. He was sincere in his thanks, but he used the title the Riverman didn't yet have in order to assert his own authority. "Are you coming up with me Keetley?" His brother shook his head and Vandon shrugged. He had doors to create. He took a step up, not bothering to test his work. The stairs were solid – he'd made sure of it. In a few minutes he was stepping through the doorway into his grandfather's house.

"Are you going to live on the bridge?" Zevach asked. "I thought you planned on staying on land." He pulled the rope that secured them to one pier, bringing the boat close enough for him to loosen the knot.

"My mother wants me here," Keetley said.

"I'll visit you," Zevach said. "Since you'll be the one using those stairs." He coiled the rope and stored it away before setting the oars into their locks. The other rope was still tied to the pier so he started rowing towards it.

"I know." Zevach could hear Keetley's sigh over the sounds of the river. "But it would help my grandfather."

"As long as they don't make you take over from him," Zevach said. "You love what you're doing now. I would hate to see you selling fish."

"Why do you care?" Keetley asked. "No one else seems to."

Zevach untied the second rope and coiled it beside the first. He sat down before answering.

“So few people are able to choose their path,” he said. “It helps to know that you can choose to do something that gives you joy.”

“Being a shaman doesn’t give you joy?”

“I’m not a shaman,” Zevach replied. He bent over and grabbed the oars and started rowing away from the bridge. “At least not yet. And I find no joy in trying to understand the premonitions and vague feelings I have. And my sister.” He shook his head. “Shaman blood holds nothing but misery for her.”

“Can she leave?”

“And go where?” Zevach pulled the oars in and stood to unfurl the sail. He could row to the Riverman village but he liked the feeling of gliding across the water. That was one of the small joys in his life. His friendship with Keetley was another.

“She could buy passage on one of the traders,” Keetley said. He moved over to allow Zevach room to sit on the bench beside him.

“Would you have done that if you’d been forced to become a conjurer?” Zevach couldn’t see his sister taking such a drastic step no matter how unhappy she was. Shaman blood belonged to all Rivermen, no matter whose body it coursed through. If she left, the rest of the family would be blamed and the bloodline would die out.

“Probably not,” Keetley said. “I am thankful I have an older brother.”

“I’m sure Roula wishes I was her sister, instead of her brother.” If he’d born a girl with his power, Roula would have been free to choose her own life. As it was, their mother considered her nothing more than a way to breed the next Simen shaman.

“She asked me,” Keetley said.

Zevach turned to look at him but Keetley was staring at his feet.

“She asked you?” His mother would be furious if she found out. “Did you ...?”

“No,” Keetley said. “I turned her down.” He looked up and Zevach saw the confusion in his friend’s eyes. “I like Roula but the thought of her bearing my child.” Keetley shook his head. “She said I could never acknowledge it as mine. I couldn’t do that. How could any man?”

Zevach tried to settle the knot in his stomach. He shivered. Something was in motion, something that would change the course of all their lives. He stared at Keetley. Both Rivermen and conjurers would be affected.

“It is our way,” Zevach replied. He gazed out towards the village. Could he do anything to stop what was about to happen? “It has always been the women who choose who will father their children, the women who raise them alone.” He turned back to his friend. “I am glad you refused Roula,” he said. “Shaman and conjurer blood should not mix.”

“Why?”

“It is forbidden,” he said, not really answering the question. He didn’t know why, he just knew his mother would be furious if she found out Roula had planned it. He must talk to his sister.

“I need to take you home,” Zevach said. He pulled on the tiller and grabbed the sail as the boat turned. “I am sorry.”

“I knew I shouldn’t have told you,” Keetley said. “This will ruin our friendship, won’t it?”

“No. You fathering my sister’s child would have ruined our friendship. I am sorry, but I need to talk to Roula and you will be a distraction. For both of us.”

“All right,” Keetley said. “Take me into shore. I’ll walk back to town.”

Osred hiked back along the road, trying not to whistle. Once he was married the council had to allow him to leave the hall.

It would take some time, but he was certain he could get used to living on a boat. He wouldn't be allowed to call himself a conjurer – at least not on the bridge - but the Rivermen wouldn't care about the rules of the bridge. And he could still do magic. Even the council couldn't take away his birthright.

He paused and looked up at the tree canopy overhead. He hadn't been this happy in years – maybe never!

Roula had claimed that a child must be conceived – their child – before they could reveal themselves to her people. So he would visit her at the tree every day until they were sure of a child. A few months at the most, that was all he would have to wait. Then they would wed and he would be free. He would have a life now and not have to wait until his father died. And when he did, Osred would already have children with power. Children with the power of both conjurers and shamans.

His family would make their own rules. The conjurers and the Rivermen would have to do what *he* said.

He smiled as he followed the path back towards the bridge. It would be so easy. No one even cared what he did as long as he did not use magic. No one would even notice anything until it was too late.

Osred suppressed a laugh. He had to remain calm, though. He didn't want to raise any suspicions. Not when freedom and power were so close. He'd gained so much more than he'd hoped for when he set out to seek a Riverman woman. It was fate, it had to be. It was so easy.

When Zevach finally tracked his sister down a wave of premonition so strong that he stumbled washed over him.

“What have you done?” he blurted out.

Roula looked up at him, startled, and then a slow blush crept up from her neck to her forehead.

"I am doing my duty," she said. "Trying to conceive a child with power."

"With who?" It was unspeakably rude for him to ask and his sister glared at him and turned her back. "Keetley told me you asked him," Zevach continued.

"Just as well he said no," Roula said. "If he is so bad at keeping secrets."

"Roula." Something in his tone must have caught her attention because she turned to face him, less angry and more wary than she'd been. "This current leads to ruin."

"For whom?" she said. "I must bear a child with power or I will be scorned by our mother – by our whole community. Other than you, the only Rivermen with power are old and almost dead. Must I lie with men with rotten teeth who smell of decaying fish and shit? *That* current I will not take."

"You do not know their politics or customs," Zevach said. "Do you even know why Keetley refused you?" She shook her head and he wanted to shake her. "He could not fathom a world where he could not acknowledge his own child. That is how they live on the bridge and in the towns."

"It doesn't matter," Roula said. "It's my decision." She turned and walked away.

He stared after her, the knot in his stomach twisting furiously. He would have to tell his mother. His sister would hate him for the rest of her life, but their mother must be told. Roula must be stopped.

He closed his eyes and felt that as the truth – that his sister did not bear the child of a man from one of the ten families. The knot did not disappear – the sense of impending doom – did not disappear.

He sighed and felt the truth of his sister having a child with a man from the ten. He grunted and dropped to his knees, his head pounding with pain. A worse outcome then, if he did not stop this. Shaking, he rose to his feet and set off in search of his mother.

four

Vandon sat at the communal table, his eyes drooping as he waited for supper to be served. He was tired. Although he'd done as much work with magic as possible, finishing the doors and then dragging the day's catch up the stairs for his grandfather had required more manual labour than he'd done in years. And his mother had asked him to come by tomorrow morning in case Keetley had to be at the bookbinder's early. He shook his head. His brother could arrange to be needed at the bookbinder early forever so the task of dragging fish up the stairs would always fall to Vandon.

"Conjurer Kellen."

Vandon looked up to see Osred Wailes cheerfully take a seat across from him. "Osred." Tradition dictated that Vandon call a non-conjurer by his given name even though the man was a decade and a half his elder. Usually it made the other man frown, but not tonight. "You look well." Had the elder Wailes conjurer died? Vandon couldn't think of anything other than becoming a full conjurer that might cause the air of happiness that hovered around Osred.

"I am well, thank you," Osred said. He leaned back and smiled.

"What's happened," Vandon blurted out. He shut his mouth tight. "Sorry. I don't mean to pry." But he did want to know. Osred simply nodded, a wide smile on his face. A smile that Vandon had never in his life seen on the other man's face. He couldn't help but stare as Osred looked around the room, grinning.

Tate rushed in and grabbed a seat beside Vandon just as the cook – a woman who had been cooking and serving at Conjurers Hall for as long as Vandon could recall – carried in a platter of stuffed and roasted fish. She was followed by her apprentice, who carried a mass of stewed seaweed.

"I hate seaweed," Tate mumbled in his ear. "Tastes like mush. What is it? Vandon?"

“Shhh.” Vandon gestured towards Osred.

Slowly, one after another of the other five unmarried men noticed the change in Osred’s demeanor and one after another they stopped what they were doing and simply stared at him.

“What’s going on?” Tate whispered. “What’s wrong with Osred?”

“Not sure,” Vandon replied. “But it’s not just me – everyone’s noticed.”

The servers placed the patters on the table and silently left but only one hand reached out towards the food – Osred’s. All other eyes were on him. Osred Wailes looked up from spearing a stuffed fish, flashed a bright smile around the table, then put the fish on his plate.

“I do not have news to share,” Osred said before reaching for the seaweed.

“But you do have news,” Brond Dabel said.

“Not to share,” Osred said, smirking. “I am simply going to enjoy my meal.” He scooped up some seaweed and deposited it on this plate. With an exaggerated motion he handed the fork over to Vandon, who shrugged and took it.

Once he’d taken a portion of seaweed he handed the fork to Tate.

“I thought you hated seaweed,” Vandon said as Tate heaped it on his own plate.

“I do, but it’s better than nothing,” Tate replied. “Brond is going to hate Osred more than ever for this.”

“Yes,” Vandon agreed. Brond had been living at Conjurer’s Hall almost as long as Osred. Brond hadn’t had to wait for a father or grandfather to die before becoming a conjurer but it was taking him more years than anyone had taken to learn what was needed. When Vandon had first come to live at the hall he’d felt sorry for Brond. Then he’d realized that although the man was slow, he was mean. Once he’d finally made conjurer he’d practiced his meanness on Osred, who had no way to retaliate. Osred’s talent was far superior to Brond’s but as a non-conjurer, he could be punished for any offense.

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Brond was so dim that he actually thought the rest of them saw him as a leader, when the reality was that they tried to ignore him.

“You will tell me,” Brond stated. “I am your better.”

The room went silent. Osred carefully set his fork down, looked across and met Vandon’s eyes, before swiveling his head to look down the table at Brond. “You may be a full conjurer,” Osred said. “But you will *never* be my better. I owe your position a certain amount of respect but I do not owe you the contents of my thoughts.”

“I am your better,” Brond insisted. “Say it!”

“I will not,” Osred replied. The joy that had suffused him seemed to have been replaced with his usual sourness and anger.

“You will,” Brond said.

“Brond,” Vandon interrupted. “He does not have to tell you anything. And it is unforgivably rude of you to demand it.” He would take this to the council. Not to help Osred but because the limited amount of privacy you had when living in such cramped quarters had to be inviolable. Even Brond had to know that. And it seemed he did. He glared at Vandon, but picked up his fork and shoved some food into his mouth.

Vandon sighed and relaxed. He nodded to Osred, who reddened but nodded back. Vandon would hate to need another man to stand up for him. And Osred was right – Brond was not his superior – if it ever came to a fight, Osred would win. At least he’d win against Brond. Brond would be dead but Osred would face serious consequences from the council.

“I hear there was trouble at dinner last night.”

Osred looked up and frowned when he saw Rem standing in the open doorway.

“Did father send you to question me after Brond tattled to the council?” His father would never come and talk to his youngest son himself. Not when he wasn’t a conjurer. Sometimes Osred wondered if his father was afraid he’d kill him so he could have his title.

“Vandon Kellen mentioned that Brond had been disrespectful,” Rem said. He took a single step into the room. “I took it upon myself to see what was so private you couldn’t share with your housemates.”

“They are not my housemates,” Osred said. “And there was no need for Kellen to interfere.”

“He thought there was,” Rem said. “And Father agreed. Some of you need to get married and move into your own homes rather than fight over who is the leader here.”

Osred nodded, but it was simply to stop Rem from saying more on the subject. His brother had had the good fortune to fall in love and marry an appropriate woman before he was a full conjurer and he was insufferably smug on the subject of marriage. He knew Osred had been refused by every single suitable woman in the Ten, yet he always talked as though finding a wife was simple.

“No one will have Brond,” Osred said. And it was true. At least he didn’t have the humiliation of seeing Brond marry someone who’d refused him.

“You’d better take care not to insult him,” Rem said. “You could both be living here for some time.”

“Not me,” Osred said. “I have plans.”

“Do you? Has someone agreed to marry you?”

“Not yet,” Osred replied. Normally he wouldn’t tell his brother news like this, but he wanted him to stop looking at him with pity. “But she will.”

“Oh ho! Who is it?” Rem asked. “Which of the young ladies on the bridge reconsidered?”

“Not someone on the bridge,” Osred said. “But I cannot tell you who. It has yet to be formalized. Her mother ... family, does not yet know.” He smiled now. He was almost out of this hollow life.

“From one of the towns?” Rem said. “But where will you live? Mother and Father do not have room for you in their household.”

Their parents had room – what Rem meant was that their parents would have nothing to do with Osred while he wasn’t a conjurer. “I won’t be living on the bridge.” There, let Rem think on that.

“You won’t be allowed to leave,” Rem stated flatly. “You know the council has authority over all conjurers.”

“I’m not a conjurer,” Osred said. “As everyone reminds me. Council has no authority over me. They cannot tell me where to live or whom to marry.”

Rem took another step into the room and closed the door to the hall. Osred looked up and met his solemn gaze.

“They will not let you leave the bridge,” Rem said.

“They will have to kill me,” Osred said. He hadn’t truly meant it until he saw his brother’s face harden. “They’ve already discussed what to do if I try to leave? Is *that* why father will barely look at me now? As far as he’s concerned I’m already dead!”

“The knowledge you have learned – the spells you have learned – belong to the council,” Rem said. “They will not let you take them off the bridge.”

“They’d rather make me live here until Brond pushes me too far and I kill him? Or is that what they are hoping for? I’ll kill Brond and then they can kill me. That way they get rid of their two biggest problems.”

“Of course not,” Rem said.

“Why did they let me study?” Osred asked. “If they were never going to let me become a conjurer, why did they let me learn magic?”

“You wouldn’t listen to reason,” Rem said. “Mother hoped you would realize the futility and give up, but you didn’t. Father has never forgiven her for talking him into it.” Rem paused. “That’s why he stays away. He feels he’s let you down and he can’t bear to have you accuse him.”

Osred stared at his brother. Their father might blame their mother, but Osred did not think he felt guilty. “Get out,” he said. “I can’t talk about this anymore.”

Rem nodded and quietly left. He closed the door behind him, leaving Osred alone in his cramped room. He would not spend the rest of this days living in this one room. He would not! He would go and live on a boat with Roula whether the council liked it or not.

He picked up a book and started to leaf through it. He had spells – powerful spells that he would use on anyone who tried to stop him.

Rem was right, he hadn’t listened to reason when he decided to study conjuring. And he wasn’t going to listen to reason now either. He would get out of this room and off this bridge. Or he would die trying.

Zevach paused, his hand on the door handle. He dropped his hand to his side and took a half step away from the door.

He should leave. He should turn around, get back on his boat and drift on the river for as many hours as he could.

But he wouldn’t. He leaned closer to the closed door.

“It is forbidden.”

His mother's voice. Not raised in anger, no, she was beyond that. Her voice was low with the threat of real violence.

"I don't care," Roula said. *She* was defiant. Did she not recognize how angry their mother was? Or did she feel she had nothing to lose?

Zevach half reached out to the door again. He knew how to end this. Should he tell them or should he simply go and do it? He swayed from foot to foot, trying to determine the best path forward but either he was too close or neither choice was better than the other. What to do, what to do.

"Come back here!"

Zevach danced away from the door just before it slammed open and his sister stormed out.

"You told her," she accused him. "I hate all of you!"

He watched as Roula stomped across the deck towards the shore. She dropped into the shallow water and splashed her way to land before the sweeping willow branches hid her from sight.

"Zevach."

He turned to face his mother.

She stared at him for a moment before nodding.

"Frayn had a premonition that you have a solution," she said. "Do it." She spun and closed the door angrily behind her, shutting him out.

His choice was made for him. He had to admit that he was relieved. He didn't know whether it was the right path but the fact that Frayn felt it was gave him hope that it would divert disaster.

He would need Keetley's help.

Vandon looked up to find Keetley at his door. With him was Zevach, the young Riverman who had helped when he'd built the stairs.

“Yes?” His brother never came to Conjurers Hall, not unless he had to. Keetley and Zevach exchanged heated whispers and Vandon’s curiosity edged into concern.

“Come in and close the door,” Vandon said. He set his book aside and stood up as the two youths came into his room.

“I need your help,” Zevach stated.

Vandon looked from Zevach to his brother. Keetley didn’t look happy. What was going on?

Zevach sighed and ran a hand through his hair. “I must apologize,” he said. “I will start at the beginning. I am a Riverman shaman. At least I will be,” he said. “When my master feels I am old enough.”

“A shaman.” Vandon was surprised. Not that the youth was a shaman, but that his brother, who outwardly rejected everything magical, had a best friend with powers of his own.

“I have the power of foresight,” Zevach continued. “And right now I am trying to avert disaster.” He closed his eyes for a moment and when he re-opened them, the look in them was haunted. “I need your help.”

“Disaster for whom?”

Zevach closed his eyes again. “For Rivermen *and* conjurers,” he said. His shoulders slumped and he opened his eyes. “I’m sorry I cannot be more specific than that. There are two paths, neither of which holds good news, but one path is much worse than the other.”

“I see,” Vandon said, although he didn’t really see. “What role does Keetley play in this?”

“I brought him here,” Keetley said. “Otherwise Zevach would never have been allowed in Conjurers Hall. We need to find Osred.”

“Osred?” Vandon was surprised. “What do you want with him?”

“I need to tell him that my sister will not marry him,” Zevach said. “She is the Simen shaman and needs to bear a child with power, but she will not marry him.”

“Aren’t you a Simen shaman?” Vandon asked.

“Yes, but the name is inherited through the mother.”

“A shaman mother and conjurer father,” Vandon said. “Such a child would have power.”

“If a child is born through this union, disaster will befall us all.” Zevach said. “That is my premonition. My sister is bitter with the choices life requires of her.”

“As is Osred,” Vandon said. This was Osred’s great secret. But he would never be allowed to leave the bridge – never. So this child, this potentially all powerful child would be a Riverman. And what about Osred? He had power, enough to destroy the council, maybe even enough to tear down the bridge. “He’ll be so angry,” Vandon said. “Come with me, both of you. Father must be told.” Council would need time to prepare. If they had the right spells ready they could contain Osred’s rage. If not ... Zevach’s premonition would come true.

five

Osred tucked his spell book into his pocket and walked along the river. If he had to, he would ask everyone on every boat where to find Roula.

He was ready for council. He'd reworked some of his most damaging spells and he had them memorized. And what spells they were! Works of such complexity that he'd had to break some of them into two or three parts.

He was targeting the Ten. No random spells affecting any and all, oh no, he was a much better conjurer than that. Each of the Ten would be afflicted with a different problem. He had even included his own family. It excluded him because he wasn't a true conjurer, not in their eyes.

All he needed to do was recite the two halves of the spell.

"Roula." He was so surprised to see her that he stopped. "I was looking for you." She had her back to him, but it was her. Her shoulders were heaving. Was she crying?

"Osred," Roula said and turned to him.

Not crying. No she was angry, furious. Osred knelt down beside her.

"What's wrong?"

"My mother thinks she can still control me," Roula said. "That I am not capable of making my own decisions."

"I too have people trying to tell me what to do," Osred said. "And what I can't." He sat down beside her. "But I will not allow them to run my life." He met her eyes and she nodded. "If they try I will make them regret it."

"You are powerful enough to do this?"

"Yes." They had no idea just how powerful he was but they would.

Roula reached a hand up and caressed his face and he leaned into it, savouring her touch. She was as good a match as anyone he'd already been rejected by.

"Can you make my mother regret as well?" Roula asked. "And her mentor Frayn? Everyone else will accept, eventually, but not those two and they could poison the rest."

"Yes," Osred said. "I can make them both regret." He'd add a little twist to the first spell to include the two Rivermen. He knew just the affliction, suitable for people who live on water.

"Thank you," Roula said. She gently pushed him until he was lying flat in the ground and then she straddled him, taking his head in her hands.

When she kissed him he felt his bones melt into the soft earth beneath him. When he kissed her back he felt heat spread where their bodies touched. A bird twittered in the branches overhead and then he lost awareness of anything except her touch, her heat, her scent.

Zevach gripped Keetley's arm, trying to stay on his feet.

"I must go," he said to Keetley and Vandon.

"But this is right, you said this was the right thing to do," Keetley said.

"Yes. But it is a conjurer task. I have Riverman tasks of my own." One he had to hurry to complete before it was too late.

"Let him go," Vandon said. "He's right, this is a conjurer task. Rem Wailes already confirmed what Zevach told us about his sister and Osred. We just have to wait for the council to decide what to do about it."

"And I am needed elsewhere," Zevach said. He nodded to Keetley before setting off down the hall. He scrambled up a few stairs and out a door. Once he was on the bridge he rushed towards the gate. He had to find his sister or all was lost.

His magic helped him find her – find them. When he took one path, the feeling of doom struck him with a physical force – when he ran in the opposite direction, the feeling lessened.

Finally he brushed past a willow and almost tripped over them.

“Roula.”

“Zevach? Go away.” Roula sat up and pulled her blouse down over her bare midriff. Behind her, a man fixed him with a glare.

“Osred Wailes,” Zevach said. “I have information you need.”

“How do you know who I am?” Osred smoothed his tunic and stood.

Zevach closed his eyes and breathed in. Doom but not disaster. When he opened his eyes he met Roula’s angry glare.

“You know what my talent is,” he said quietly. “I cannot let you do this.”

“You could be too late,” Roula said. “Perhaps I’m already with child. And such a daughter! The power of shamans and conjurers together.”

“Or a son,” Osred said. He placed his hands on Roula’s shoulders and her smile turned triumphant. “Be careful what you say to the mother of my child.”

“But it won’t be your child,” Zevach said. “It will be Roula’s child. Hers to raise, hers to mold. Roula will make that child into a weapon.”

“Our child,” Osred insisted. “And we’ll have more once we’re married.”

“Married?” Roula snorted and looked over her shoulder at Osred. “Rivermen do not recognize such an unnatural union.”

“Of course we’ll be married,” Osred said. “Isn’t that what you meant when you said they would accept us eventually?”

“I meant that they will accept my daughter,” Roula said. “They will accept a shaman with conjurer blood. They would never accept a conjurer living amongst us. And my daughter will be shaman – she must live with her people.”

“But ...” Osred’s shoulders drooped. “I am moving from the bridge to be with you.”

“No, never,” Roula said.

“You were just using me?”

Zevach took a step back. Osred had gone from confused to angry and he wasn’t sure Roula understood what he was capable of.

“I am shaman,” Roula said. “My child will be shaman but since I have no power, her father must have it.”

A wave of anger and despair almost overwhelmed Osred. He’d thought he’d found a way out of his room, thought he’d found a way to have a life. Thought he’d found someone who wanted to share that life. But it had been a lie. All she’d wanted was power. His power for her child. And she didn’t even see how she’d wronged him.

“Don’t worry,” Roula said, taking his hand. “If there is no child this time we will try again.”

He brushed her hand away and she frowned.

“What is wrong?” she asked.

“Everything,” Osred replied. And it was. He had nothing, would *always* have nothing. He stepped away from the shaman and started reciting spells. Roula’s brother shouted but he ignored him, speaking the words under his breath. The first half of the spell was almost complete. He added the part he’d thought of for the Rivermen, including all of them, even Roula. He was on the last sentence when he became aware that someone was *in* his magic, reshaping his spell.

He spoke the words of his spell louder and was confused when he heard a slightly off tempo echo. He looked to find Roula's brother talking – somehow he was changing the words of the spell, changing the meaning in subtle ways. How was that possible?

Roula looked from him to her brother, then she shoved him and he stumbled. His concentration was broken and the magic he'd created trailed away from him. Roula's brother said a few more words and then he was quiet.

"What did you do," Roula said. She hit him in the chest before turning to her brother. "Zevach, what did he do?"

"Curses," the youth replied and Osred smiled. "They were too powerful for me to stop, although I did change them."

"It doesn't matter," Osred said. He pulled out his spell book. "I can finish it any time I want."

He opened the book but then a wave of power blew into him. Osred stumbled and dropped to his knees. His grip loosened and the book fell from his grasp. Pain flashed through him and he fell over.

"More magic?" Roula asked. She toed Osred but he didn't move.

Zevach reached out and put a hand on the man's neck. He was dead. "The conjurer council must have decided what to do about him." He felt old today, and tired. He sighed and met his sister's worried gaze.

"Our world has changed," he said. "On the bridge and on the river." He looked out across the river and shivered. Osred Wailes had changed the course of the future.

Zevach scratched his beard and sighed as he knocked on the door to the bookbindery. He was getting too old to climb the stairs.

“Keetley.”

His old friend looked up and smiled. “Zevach, come in. You took the stairs, I see.”

“Of course,” Zevach said. “I did help build them after all.”

“That was a long time ago,” Keetley said. “The last major spell to create something new and positive on the bridge before Osred’s curse.”

“Yes,” Zevach agreed. “That is why I have come.”

“You’ve had a premonition,” Keetley said. “It’s been years since you had one.”

“Over ten years,” Zevach agreed. “And you will not like this, but it is important. You and your daughters are the last who carry the blood of the Ten and *you* are the last person with any knowledge of true conjuring. That knowledge will be needed one day.”

Keetley looked at him and nodded. He pulled a small journal out from beneath a stack of cured leather. “I started this two years ago,” he said. “When Vandon died.” He sighed. “I never wanted to be a conjurer, but I didn’t want them to die out. I know not having a son was difficult for my brother – difficult for all of them.”

“Part of Osred’s curse,” Zevach said. “At least Vandon didn’t try to perpetuate the foolishness of so many of the others.”

“Yes. As hard as it was for me to watch the last Kellen conjurer die, it would be much worse to see some poor afflicted idiot call themselves a Kellen.” Keetley sighed. “Thankfully my own daughters were not affected.”

“Unlike the children of Rivermen,” Zevach said. He’d often wondered how one man could have carried such hate within him, but Osred had. Conjurers were no more – Osred’s curse had taken their ability to father children - and the Rivermen children were born with amphibious features – webbed

hands and feet and a diminishing ability to stay on land. They truly were men who could only live on the river.

“Yes,” Keetley agreed. “But any of the Ten would have welcomed such children if they’d been able to father them. Did your premonition show you anything else?”

Zevach sighed. “It was vague, but I am doing the same as you. Documenting the talents and abilities of male shamans.”

“So we are the last of our kind,” Keetley said.

“Yes,” Zevach agreed. “For now.”