

The Loyalist Witch: Thieftaker — Fall, 1770

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I

Boston, Province of Massachusetts Bay, 16 October 1770

Ethan Kaille, former thieftaker, newly married bar hand, knelt on the well-worn wooden floor, setting the joint of a table leg. The *Dowsing Rod*, the tavern on Sudbury Street that belonged to his wife, Kannice Lester—and now to him as well—would be full in another hour, and this table, creaky and unbalanced, had been giving him fits since early afternoon. At last, he thought he had it fixed. He needed only to secure this last leg.

As he set the joint, a surge of magick through the tavern floor drove him to his feet. His hammer clattered on the wooden planks and the unsecured limb gave way once more. The sting of the spell tingled in Ethan's legs and feet.

“Ethan?”

Kannice regarded him from the bar, concern in her periwinkle blue eyes.

“I'm all right,” he said, stooping to retrieve the hammer. “Someone cast a spell. A strong one.”

“Janna?”

Tarijanna Windcatcher was, to his knowledge, the most powerful conjurer in Boston, and certainly the person most likely to be casting at any hour, day or night.

“Probably, yes.”

He frowned as he spoke. The casting had seemed to come not from the Neck, at Boston’s southern extreme, where Janna had her own tavern, but from somewhere close—the center of the city. Cornhill perhaps.

“You’re humoring me.”

Ethan met her gaze again. A wry smile curved her lips.

He grinned in turn. “A little bit.” He walked to the bar, set down the hammer, and braced his arms on the worn wood. “The conjuring was too close to have come from Janna’s place.”

“Who else could it have been?”

“I don’t know. That’s what bothers me. There may be a new speller in the city.”

She swiped a hand at a wisp of auburn hair that had fallen across her brow. “Whenever you speak of new conjurers, I get nervous.”

“And why is that?”

“You have to ask?”

He didn’t. Almost invariably the conjurers who arrived in Boston sought to do harm to the cause of liberty, or to innocents, or to Ethan himself. And on each occasion, it fell to him to thwart their dark ambitions.

“Maybe this one will be different,” he said. “Maybe this speller, whoever he is, comes with saintly objectives and a pure heart.”

She eyed him with such skepticism he could only laugh.

“Is that table fit to be used?” she asked.

“Almost.” He returned to it and resumed his work. The buzzing in his legs had faded, but the remembered power of the casting continued to trouble him. He couldn’t usually discern the intent of spells unless they were directed at him. For all he knew, this one had healed a wound or rescued a child from some dire fate.

He didn’t think so, though. Like Kannice, he expected the worst.

Ethan completed his repairs and retreated into the kitchen as the tavern began to fill with its usual patrons. He crossed to the tavern’s rear door and peered out at the alley behind. Leaden clouds darkened the sky, and a cold wind whipped through the streets and byways, carrying smoke from surrounding chimneys and the sour stench of fish and mud from the harbor shore. Not so long ago, he might have taken to the lanes in search of information about that spell and whoever had cast it. But he wasn’t a thieftaker any more. At least not by profession. He was a bar hand. He belonged here, in the *Dowsing Rod*.

Not in front though, and not behind the bar. Kannice would assign him tasks later, as the crowd swelled. For now, he preferred to remain out of sight.

Marrying Kannice had brought him a certain legitimacy among her clientele. Most who frequented the *Dowser* no longer looked upon him with contempt as once they had. Many still considered him a ne’er-do-well, an unrepentant mutineer, but now that he was Kannice’s husband, they did their best to hide their opinion. Kannice possessed a sharp tongue, and wasn’t above banning men of even the most prodigious appetites and thirsts from her establishment if they gave offense. Most weren’t willing to risk losing access to her fine stews and chowders.

To be fair, some of her regulars truly liked Ethan. Many though, still cast anxious glances

his way when they thought he and Kannice weren't watching. They would claim to have forgiven him for his role in the *Ruby Blade* mutiny, but they remained afraid of him. Rumors of his "witchery" persisted, fed by the odd occurrences that had dogged him over the years.

Easier then to remain in hiding until Kannice and Kelf needed his help. Of course, for a time no one was more leery of him than the barman himself. Kelf knew beyond doubt that Ethan could cast, had seen him use spells to save Kannice's life the night of the bloody massacre on King Street. In the days immediately following, Ethan had thought their friendship damaged beyond all hope of repair. But the big man surprised him. Within a few weeks, he had made peace with the idea that Ethan was a "witch." Every now and then Ethan caught Kelf looking at him strangely, as if the barman thought to catch Ethan in the act of magicking. For the most part, though, their rapport had returned to how it was before that terrible night.

Ethan ate a bowl of stew—venison tonight; savory and rich and as delicious as Kannice's other concoctions—and filled a tankard with the Kent pale ale he preferred. Laughter reached him from the tavern's great room, along with an incomprehensible din of shouted conversations. But Ethan kept alert for additional pulses of magick, both dreading another spell and eager to try again to sense the conjurer's intent.

No spell came. He finished his stew and his ale, resisting the temptation to take more of either, and he returned to that open doorway, shivering in the wind, staring out as darkness gathered.

The truth was, he felt more than a little lost. He'd been a thieftaker for close to ten years. It was the only profession open to him when he returned from the prison plantation in the

Caribbean, a convicted mutineer, disgraced, penniless. His thieftaking inquiries gave him more than a livelihood; they gave him an identity, a purpose. Giving them up had proven more difficult than he could admit to anyone. He missed tracking rum-dabbers and rooks and nappers. He missed casting spells. He even missed being hounded by Sephira Pryce and her toughs.

Kannice would think him insane if she knew.

“It’s cold.”

He turned. She stood in the middle of the kitchen, her cheeks flushed, her gleaming hair tied in a loose bun. She was lovely and brilliant and she loved him. He had no business lamenting the loss of a trade that nearly cost him his life day after day. He was fortunate beyond reckoning.

“It is.” He reached for the door handle. “I can close this.”

“No.” She joined him on the threshold and took his hand. Her fingers were warm, smooth. “What are you doing?”

Being a fool. “Looking for conjurers, hoping the author of that spell will wander into this byway and cast again for my benefit.”

A wind gust rattled the fence across the way from the *Dowser*. Kannice crossed her arms.

Ethan closed the door, pulled her close, and kissed her brow. She gazed up at him, worry creasing her brow.

“Are you all right?”

“I’m fine.”

She narrowed her eyes.

“I promise.”

“Well, all right then. We could use some help, if you don’t mind.”

He forced the creases from his brow, the tight lines from around his mouth. “Of course.”

Her frown deepened, but he gestured for her to lead him out to the tavern, and fell in behind her.

The *Dowser* was more crowded than usual. The cold, harbinger of another harsh Boston winter, had driven people to seek comfort in Kannice’s stew and the warmth of the tavern’s stone hearth. For an hour or more, Ethan carried bowls, tankards, and rounds of bread to tables throughout great room, until his bad leg ached and sweat ran down his face.

He caught snatches of conversation as he worked. Much of it was nonsense, but here and there men and a few women spoke in hushed tones of the trial set to commence in another week. At long last, the British soldiers accused of the shootings on King Street were to be held to account—not just their captain, Thomas Preston, but also the grenadiers: Messieurs White, Wemms, McCauley, Hartigan, Kilroy, Warren, Carrol, and Montgomery.

Ethan kept his thoughts to himself, but his stomach turned a slow, uncomfortable somersault. He’d been there that night, a stone’s throw from the Town House. Yes, to his horror the soldiers fired their weapons into the crowd. Four died before sunrise, and a fifth was dead within ten days. And many others were wounded, including his friend, Devren Jervis, who lost an arm. But Preston and his men were goaded by the mob and, more to the point, were under the influence of dark magick. Ethan’s magick, turned to malign purpose by Nate Ramsey, his sworn enemy. Ramsey was long since dead—Ethan had seen to that—and yet the consequences of his

evil still plagued their city.

The throng in the *Dowsing Rod* lingered later than usual, only clearing out when Kannice announced deep into the night that she was weary, and sore of foot, and done serving them stew and ales. This was met with groans and good-natured grousing. Soon after, people began to file out into the night.

A few remained, however, including a cluster of men at a table at the back of the tavern. These included Tom Langer, long a regular in the tavern, who was well into his cups. Kannice watched him and his companions from the bar, her expression slowly curdling.

“They’re doing no harm,” Kelf told her, gathering another pile of empty bowls to carry into the kitchen.

“I’m not so sure.”

Kannice’s misgivings proved well-founded. Within a few moments, Tom was on his feet pounding the table with his fist to the approval of the others.

“I think they don’t never intend to bring those men to trial! Preston, and the rest.” As if anyone could be uncertain as to who he meant. “There’s been delays and delays and delays. More than half a year past and still we haven’t had justice done.

“Who knows what it’ll be this time? They’ve got a hundred excuses, and they all lead to the same place. No trial! No justice! No punishment for them what deserves punishin’!”

“He’s not wrong,” Kelf said quietly, returning to the bar.

“Actually he is,” Ethan said. “I was there, remember?”

The barman’s face colored. He did remember. All of it. The attack on Kannice, Ethan’s

magick, and what Ethan later told him of the conjurings Ramsey had done to bring about the shootings.

Kannice stepped out from behind the bar. “Sit down, Tom. Or better yet, go home. It’s late.”

“We’re just talkin’, Kannice. There’s no harm in that.”

“There is when you’re a fool who’s spent too many hours drinking down my ale.” She smiled to soften the words.

He cringed, even as he chuckled.

“Go home, all of you. I can’t go to sleep until you do, and I’m tired.”

Tom’s companions stood, chairs scraping on the wood floor, and they shuffled toward the door, shrugging on overcoats and pulling on Monmouth caps.

Before they reached the entrance, however, the door swung open, revealing three figures in dark capes and tricorn hats. They entered, and the individual in front, who also carried a brass-tipped cane, reached to take off his hat.

“We’re cl—” The word died on Kannice’s lips.

The man had removed his tricorn and held it now in quaking hands, candlelight shining in dark blue eyes, his gray, plaited hair tousled by the wind.

To Ethan’s surprise, it was Tom who found his tongue first.

“Mister Adams. Sir. This is . . .” He sketched a small bow. “This is an honor, sir. I wonder if . . . if you might allow a humble admirer to buy you an ale.”

Samuel Adams’ two companions removed their hats in turn, and Ethan recognized one, a

tall, handsome man with dark eyes, as Doctor Joseph Warren. The other man was young, slight, and no taller than Adams. He was handsome as well, but his eyes were crossed, giving him a slightly odd aspect.

Kannice and Kelf spared not a glance for the other two men, but gaped at Adams, every bit as awestruck as Tom and the others.

“You’re kind, friend,” Adams said, laying a hand on Tom’s shoulder. “And on another night I would gladly accept your generous offer. Tonight, though, I have business of an urgent nature that allows me no time for such pleasant pursuits.”

“Business?” Tom said. “Here? At the *Dowser*?”

“Aye. With your friend there.” He motioned in Ethan’s direction with the cane. “Mister Kaille.”

II

The way Tom and his friends stared at Ethan, one would have thought Adams had declared him the newly crowned king of England.

“Please make yourself at home, Mister Adams,” Kannice said stepping past the patriot and his fellows to lead them to a table by the hearth. “We still have a bit of stew and bread, and more than enough ale for all of you.”

“Thank you, but that won’t be necessary, Missus . . .”

“Kaille,” she said. “Kannice Kaille.”

Adams faced Ethan. "Why, Mister Kaille. I had no idea. Congratulations to you both."

"Thank you, sir."

Adams, Warren, and the third gentleman arranged themselves around the table, the two younger men leaving the chair closest to the hearth for Adams. Ethan joined them, taking the empty seat across from Warren.

"Doctor Warren, it's good to see you again."

"And you Mister Kaille."

"This is Josiah Quincy," Adams said, indicating the young man with an open hand.

"Josiah, may I introduce Ethan Kaille, thieftaker?"

"Josiah Quincy, *Junior*," Quincy corrected with a grin. "Father would insist." To Ethan, he said, "A pleasure, sir." He proffered a slender hand, his grip stronger than Ethan expected.

"An honor to meet you," Ethan said, and meant it. Quincy had a well-earned reputation as a passionate and eloquent advocate for the cause of liberty. "But I fear it's my turn to correct you, Mister Adams. I was a thieftaker, but I've retired from that profession. I'm a simple bar hand now."

Adams appeared to sag. "I'm sorry to hear that."

"He can still work for you," Kannice said from behind Ethan.

Ethan glanced back at her. She widened her eyes pointedly before facing Adams again. "He works here at the *Dowsing Rod*, but he retains all the skills he employed as a thieftaker. I'm sure he can help you."

Ethan turned back to Adams and gave a small shrug. "It seems my services are

available.”

If Adams found Ethan and Kannice’s exchange amusing he kept it to himself. Instead, he dipped his chin with grim resolve. “I’m glad, because I believe this is a matter uniquely suited to your talents.”

Magick. Ethan’s thoughts returned to the spell he’d sensed earlier.

“Out you go, lads,” Kannice said to Tom Langer and the rest. “No more gawking.”

“G’night, Mister Adams.” Tom peered over Kannice’s head and raised a hand. His friends waved.

“Yes, good night,” Adams called. “Be well, gentlemen, and thank you for your support of our great cause.”

Kannice ushered them out into the night, and locked the door when they were gone. Then she joined Kelf behind the bar. There, she began to wipe down the wood, though she confined her efforts to that part of the bar nearest their table.

“How can I help you?” Ethan asked, his gaze flicking to each of the men. Warren regarded him somberly, but held his tongue. Ethan guessed that he deferred to Adams. Quincy, on the other hand, shifted in his chair, seeming eager to speak.

“Go ahead, Josiah.”

The young man faced Ethan. “You are aware, I’m sure, of the trial set to begin next week.”

“I am.” A memory stirred, something Ethan should have recalled earlier. “You’re helping John Adams with the defense, aren’t you?”

“I am. And my brother, Samuel, is leading the prosecution.”

Ethan straightened. “Isn’t that a little odd?”

“It gets odder. He is a loyalist. I am decidedly not. And yet he seeks to condemn the King’s men while I advocate for their lives.”

Ethan had never heard of such an arrangement. “What kind of trial will these men have?”

“An uncommonly fair one, I believe,” Adams said. “Which is what we have wanted from the start.”

Ethan didn’t respond.

“You know better than to doubt me, Mister Kaille. You will remember speaking to me mere days after the shootings. At the time, I had already urged John to take on the defense of the soldiers. These men must have a fair trial, not only because their lives are at stake—though that is reason enough—but because the world watches us. This is a test of what sort of nation we would be.”

“And the possibility of an acquittal—”

“An acquittal is quite beside the point. The question ought not to be whether these men fired their weapons or whether they were provoked by the mob, or even whether Captain Preston ordered them to shoot. Of course they fired their weapons. And of course they were provoked. You told me yourself that all of them—the soldiers and the mob—were under the malevolent influence of a . . . a conjurer, as you call your kind. Isn’t that right?”

“Aye, sir.”

Adams opened his hands. “Well in that case, these men are both innocent and guilty. Any

verdict will be wrong, and any verdict will be justified. Which is why we cannot be distracted from the larger import of what is about to take place in the Queen Street courthouse. British tactics themselves are on trial. The deaths of Crispus Attucks, Patrick Carr, and the others are not the fault of Preston or his men, but rather of King George III and his Parliament. One might argue that convicting these soldiers would absolve the Crown of blame, which I certainly don't want. And before you ask," he added, "Thomas Hutchinson is even more frightened of an acquittal than I am. And he's also terrified of a conviction. Any result, he fears, will bring renewed violence, which is why he seeks to put off for as long as possible this day of reckoning."

Even before the occupation and the King Street shootings turned Ethan to the Patriot cause, he had been impressed with Adams' intellect. To this day, he didn't always agree with the man's tactics, and was discomfited by the single-mindedness with which he pursued his political aims. He couldn't deny, though, that every conversation he had with Adams forced him to alter his view the world.

Throughout Boston, supporters of the Sons of Liberty spoke of nothing but the trial. And all of them, as far as Ethan could tell, including Kannice, Diver, Tom Langer, and others here in the *Dowser*, desperately hoped for a conviction. They would have been shocked to hear that Adams didn't. Ethan doubted that any of them except Kannice would have appreciated and understood the subtlety of the man's reasoning.

"This is all well and interesting," Warren said, his smooth baritone drawing their gazes. "But it's not why we came."

Adams sat back, his mouth twisting with displeasure. Ethan thought he would have

enjoyed passing the night in conversation about the trial and provincial politics. “No,” he said instead, “it’s not.”

“Mister Quincy indicated that you came to speak of the trial.”

“And we did,” young Quincy said. “But not the merits of either case. We’re here, Mister Kaille, because the trial itself is in danger.”

“In danger from . . .”

Quincy darted a glance to Adams, who nodded encouragement. Turning his odd gaze back to Ethan, he said, “I don’t know how to speak of it other than to call it witchery.”

Ethan inhaled slowly, not wanting to snap at the man. *It’s not witchery.* “Someone used a conjuring?”

“Aye, a . . . a conjuring.”

“Can you describe what the spell did?”

“It snapped the axle of a carriage that bore my brother’s partner in prosecution, Mister Paine.”

Robert Treat Paine was another prominent Whig here in the city. Some in the Patriot cause, alarmed by Samuel Quincy’s appointment as chief prosecutor of the soldiers, had insisted that Paine be added to the prosecutorial team to ensure a vigorous pursuit of the soldiers’ conviction.

“Was he hurt?”

“Thank goodness, no. Shaken, but uninjured. Still, in light of the rest of what’s happened, we felt we had no choice but to engage your services.”

Ethan frowned and looked at the other two men. "There have been other attacks?"

"Only threats," Adams said.

Warren shook his head. "Not only."

"A minor incident, Joseph."

"Perhaps we should allow Mister Kaille to judge how minor."

The incident in question turned out to be an act of vandalism at the home of Samuel Quincy. Two windows had been broken, and a threat had been smeared in mud on the side of the man's house. "Prosecute the King's men," it said, "or protect your family. You cannot do both."

According to Warren, Samuel Quincy and Robert Treat Paine had received other threats as well, all of them in the form of anonymous missives left at their homes in the wee hours of the night, all of them coming within the last fortnight. No one had seen the person or persons who left them, just as no one saw the vandal. The written threats, several of which Josiah produced from within his coat, were vague, scrawled in a spidery hand, written in complete and cogent sentences, though marred by smudges of ink. Each hinted at economic hardship or physical harm should the lawyers follow through on their intention to advocate on behalf of Preston and his men.

The three watched Ethan as he studied the messages, as if they expected him to cast a spell. And the truth was, he wanted to. He had no reason to believe these messages had been created or delivered with spells, but it was possible, especially if those issuing the threats had used conjurings for other purposes. He didn't wish to cast in front of these men, however, or in front of Kelf. Their friendship had healed since the night of the shootings, but the barman still

did not approve of Ethan's abilities.

"Well?" Warren asked after some time. "What do you make of those?"

"The same as you probably do," Ethan said, handing them back to Quincy. "They strike me as no more or less than what they appear to be. Threats: menacing, but unimaginative."

"And is there magick attached to them in some way?"

"I don't know. I would have to cast to be certain."

"Why don't you then?"

Ethan hesitated, discomfited by the doctor's intense scrutiny.

"I would suggest we leave the missives with Mister Kaille," Adams said, seeming to sense Ethan's unease, "and he can ply his craft later. In the meantime, we should show him the carriage."

"Tonight?"

"Well, yes. It will have to be moved by tomorrow."

Ethan leaned forward, pulse quickening. "The carriage was attacked this evening?"

"Yes, just a short while ago."

The spell he sensed. "Where?"

"It's not far," Adams said. "It happened on Cornhill, near the Old Brick Meeting House."

Exactly where he'd thought.

"Aye, all right," Ethan said, standing.

The others pushed back from the table and began to pull on their coats.

"Thank you, Missus Kaille," Adams said, reclaiming his cane. "And to you, good sir," he

added with a nod for Kelf.

Kannice dipped a curtsy, something Ethan wasn't sure he had ever seen her do. "It was an honor, Mister Adams."

"The honor was ours, dear lady. I'm afraid, however, that we must borrow your husband for a short while. I hope you will forgive us."

She looked to Ethan; he stepped closer to her.

"You remember the spell I felt earlier?" he whispered.

"Yes, of—" Understanding sharpened her gaze. "You mean that's what they came to discuss?"

"So it would seem. I'll tell you more when I get back."

Warren led them out into the cold. The sky had darkened to a hard, starless black, but if anything the wind had stiffened. Ethan pulled his coat tighter, anchored his tricorn with one hand, and limped alongside the others. Warren forged a grim path down Sudbury Street toward the heart of the city. The wind buffeted their backs—a small mercy—pushing them along toward Cornhill. As they walked, Ethan plucked shriveled leaves from the trees they passed, doing his best to keep his harvest concealed. He anticipated that he would need to cast at least one spell when they reached the carriage, and he didn't wish to cut himself if he didn't have to.

As they turned onto Queen Street, Ethan did this for the third or fourth time.

"What do you intend to use them for?" Quincy asked.

Ethan eyed him sidelong, earning a disarming smile. He hadn't been as stealthy as he'd hoped.

“I’m not sure I can explain.”

“It has to do with your magicking?”

“He doesn’t like to speak of such things, Josiah,” Adams said from ahead of them. “I’d imagine he fears being hanged or burned for a witch.” He glanced back, eyes dancing.

“I do, yes.” To Quincy, Ethan said, “Spells require . . . fuel, for lack of a better word. Something that has been alive. Most times we use blood, but in a public setting that isn’t always practicable. Leaves or bark or grass can work instead.”

“Even such leaves as these? Old, stubbornly clinging to branches long after their brethren have fallen?”

“For the most demanding conjurings I prefer fresh greens, but for tonight’s purposes, I believe these will do.”

They walked by the courthouse and turned onto Cornhill Street, their footsteps echoing off the façade of the Town House, with its gable and familiar clock. Ethan’s bad leg had begun to ache, the hitch in his stride growing more pronounced with every step.

“What did you do to yourself?” Quincy asked. Ethan wondered if he was always so inquisitive.

“It’s an old wound,” he said, purposefully vague. The man already knew him for a conjurer. He wasn’t ready to reveal that he was an ex-convict.

“Over there,” Adams said, pointing.

Just past the stolid bulk of the Old Brick, and before the graceful spire of the South Meeting House, stood a black carriage, its front supported by wheels, its hind portion resting

crookedly on the cobblestone. One of its rear wheels had rolled free and lay in the center of the lane. The other was still attached to the broken axle and angled inward. The horses had been released from their harnesses and taken away. A few onlookers gawked at the carriage, though from a distance.

“You’ll need to send them away,” Ethan said to Adams, his voice barely carrying over the sound of their steps.

“Of course.”

In the darkness, touched only by candlelight leaking from a few windows, the carriage resembled the carcass of some great beast. Ethan wanted to look more closely, but he waited until Adams and the others had cleared the lane. Then he crawled under the carriage and using a single leaf, summoned a dim glow to his palm.

Holding his hand near to the ruined axle, he examined the break. It looked natural. He saw no sign that the wood had been weakened with any sort of blade.

Using two more leaves, he cast again. “*Revela magiam ex foliis evocatam.*” Reveal magick, conjured from leaves. Power snarled in the stone beneath him, an answer of a kind to the conjuring he’d felt earlier. The ghostly figure of an ancient knight materialized beside him, russet eyes gleaming beneath the carriage: his spectral guide, whom he called Uncle Reg, after his mother’s waspish brother. Ethan eyed the ghost, but Reg kept his gaze fixed on the axle.

A tinted glow appeared on the wood, faint at first, but brighter by the moment. It was red, the color of fine wine: deep and rich. Whoever had cast the spell wielded deep magick—as potent as Ethan’s, if not more so.

“Can you tell when the spell was cast?” he asked Reg.

The ghost gave a tentative nod.

“I felt something this evening, around dusk. Could it have been cast then?”

Reg answered with a more confident dip of his chin.

“Can you tell where it came from?”

A shake of the glowing head.

There were other spells he could try, one that might tell him what the conjurer had used to fuel this casting, and another—a finding spell—that could tell him where this man or woman was now. But the first wouldn’t shed much light on the matter, and the second would alert this person to Ethan’s interest in finding him or her, which would be counterproductive. He did cast a spell to conceal that red magick, begrudging the thrum of power that accompanied his casting. The conjurer would sense it, just as Ethan had sensed the earlier spell, but there was nothing to be done. He couldn’t leave the carriage glowing in that way without drawing attention to himself and this incident.

He tucked his last two leaves into a pocket and crawled out from beneath the carriage. Uncle Reg followed him, invisible to all who weren’t conjurers as well.

“What did you find?” Warren asked. The three patriots gathered around him.

“I’ve confirmed your suspicions. It was magick that broke the axle.”

“Damn,” Adams said, rapping the butt of his cane on the street. “I would have preferred we were wrong. You’re certain?”

“I’m afraid so. All spells leave a residue. And using a spell of my own, I was able to

make that residue visible.”

“As color!” Quincy said, his voice rising. “I saw it coming from under the carriage! It was red, isn’t that right?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Does that color mean anything to you?”

Ethan shook his head. “Not really. Every conjurer’s power looks different. Mine is similar to this, but more russet than burgundy. If I knew the conjurer, I might recognize the hue. But as it is . . .” He shrugged.

“Does the conjurer wear this color? I see nothing on you, but I don’t have your gift.”

“No, sir. But knowing his color—or hers—should allow me to trace other spells, future spells, back to this person.”

Quincy’s brow furrowed. “I see.” Ethan had the impression the young man had expected more from his magick.

“Is there more you need to see?” Adams asked him.

Ethan crossed to the wheel lying in the lane and squatted beside it, scrutinizing the broken stub of axle still attached. He assumed a revealing spell on this would show the same red magick.

“I don’t believe there is, sir,” he said to Adams, straightening. “I would like to speak with Mister Paine, though.”

“We can arrange that for tomorrow. In the meantime, the Sons of Liberty wish to engage your services.”

“To what end? I’m a thieftaker. Or I was. I recovered stolen goods and was paid a fee for their return. In this case—”

“In this case,” Warren broke in, “attorneys for the province are being menaced, their lives may be at stake. None of us is equipped to protect them. You are, simply by dint of your magicking abilities. We require your help.”

“This trial must go on, Mister Kaille,” Adams said, his tone more gentle than Warren’s. “Surely you understand that. As I said before, the world watches us. If we cannot even try these men fairly, honorably, how are we to assume our place among civilized nations?”

“If it’s the pay you’re worried about—”

“It’s not,” Ethan said, his tone hardening as he rounded on Warren.

“Have done, Joseph.”

“I meant no offense,” the doctor said. “Truly. You have skills we require. You *should* be paid, and we have the means to do so.”

“I don’t question your means—as individuals or as an entity. But I wouldn’t know how to gauge my success or failure. This isn’t like recovering a stolen watch.”

“That part seems easiest to me,” Warren said. “When you find this conjurer, when he is placed in gaol for his offenses, you will have succeeded.”

“The problem, Doctor, is that conjurers can’t be placed in gaol. There isn’t a prison on this continent that would hold the person who cast this spell.”

At that, the three patriots shared glances, consternation flickering in Warren’s features, frustration in Adams’. Alone among them, Quincy appeared to enjoy the intrigue.

“How then do we stop him?” Warren asked.

Ethan wanted to correct him, to tell him it could be a woman. That, though, was beside the point. “I don’t know.” He stared at the broken wheel again, thoughts churning. He didn’t want this job; he didn’t like where it was certain to lead him. But he couldn’t refuse them.

Whenever you speak of new conjurers, I get nervous, Kannice had said earlier this evening. So did he, and this was why.

“I’ll work on your behalf,” he said, and was humbled by the relief he read on all of their faces.

“And how will we pay you?” Warren asked.

“We’ll worry about that once I’ve dealt with this speller.”

He didn’t give voice to the thought that followed. *Provided I survive.*