

Excerpt A: The Jubilee Massacre

“Are you nervous, Finian?” Mistress Caelanna asked, resting a hand on the young novice’s shoulder.

He glanced up at her and shook his head, but she saw right through him. “Of course you are. You are very young, and we are going to face a hostile Council.”

“I only worry that I will fail you, Mistress,” Finian answered. “You should have someone stronger with you, someone who can keep you safe. Master Kian.”

She smiled at him. “You think too little of yourself. You are my secret weapon. When the council members look at you, they will see a novice wearing grey and dismiss you as being of no concern. They will not see what a threat you pose.”

Reassured by her confidence in him, Finian squared his shoulders. Looking straight ahead, he stepped onto the transfer portal with her and activated it.

There was a moment of disorientation, then they found themselves moving off of the circle and out into the corridor. The portal at which they had arrived was one of four lining a passage which led to the Council Chamber. It was not the main entrance to the building, but it was the one used by members of the Ruling Council of the Magisterium.

As they entered the chamber, the room fell silent. Mistress Caelanna looked around, surprised that they had interrupted a conversation in progress. It was unusual for meetings to begin before all of the councillors were seated.

“It appears you have started early,” she commented. Her hand tightened on Finian’s shoulder. He thought she was as glad for his presence as he was for hers. The boy did not spare so much as a glance for the councillors seated at their high benches. His eyes were searching the shadows around the corners of the room, vigilant for threats - the way Kian had taught him. “That goes against custom, especially since I was the one who introduced the matter for consideration.”

“You are the one who goes against our customs, Caelanna,” answered the Chief Councillor angrily. “You seek to undermine this Council, and the entire Magisterium, at every turn!”

“No, Chief Councillor, not to undermine it - I seek to make it better. Our people will be more prosperous if they have more freedom to adapt our laws to the needs of their own regions

and towns. For centuries, our people were governed by a mix of magical covens and mundane royals - they-

“And the result was chaos!” interrupted a councillor sitting to the right of the Chief Councillor. This was Turran, the most bitter of Caelanna’s rivals. He was a descendent of the coven family which had founded the Magisterium, Clann Toghairm, which gave him a great deal of influence.

“No - it was the-”

“Enough!” shouted the Chief Councillor. “We have heard your arguments, and we reject them.”

Finian felt Caelanna stiffen. This was not what she had expected from this meeting. She glanced around the room and saw that the seats of her allies were empty. That was the reason for the early conversation; the council had reached its decision already. She flung her hands in front of her, raising a shield just as the Chief Councillor shouted, “Seize them!”

Magical power splattered against the shield as the more zealous councillors released the attacks they had been preparing. Seeing movement to one side, Finian Conjured a wall of stone. On the other side was a group of four Adepts, their hands bathed in auras of ashen grey. They were rushing forward to touch Caelanna with some Necromantic spell. Finian wrapped them in Illusion, and they went past without seeing her, only to be blasted by the magicks being hurled against the shield by the Councillors.

Looking around the council chamber again, Finian saw blood-red smoke forming in front of Master Turran. Whispering a spell, his hands traced a pentacle in the air, leaving behind an image drawn in golden fire. Thrusting his hands forward, he sent the shape onto the figure forming within the smoke and was answered with a howl of rage and frustration.

The onslaught of power from the members of the council was driving Caelanna back step by step, and Finian realized they had to get back to the transfer portals. The door was closing, as some councillor sought to block their escape. Raising his hands, Finian flung lightning at the wooden door, breaking it to pieces. On the other side, two men-at-arms stepped backward, alarmed by the blast. They crossed their spears, but immediately slumped to the ground as Finian Enchanted them to sleep.

Resting his hands on his mistress’s waist, Finian guided her back toward the transfer portal. Then they were gone.

Caelanna staggered off of the circle while Finian worked to lock it against the mages who surely would try to follow them. When he turned back, she was smiling at him, shaking her head. “That was well done, my secret weapon.”

He blushed and looked down. “We should go find Master Kian, Mistress. The council should not have attacked you that way.”

She nodded. "Yes, let us go."

As they hurried out to the courtyard, shouts rose from the area of the gate. Caelanna's estate in Semeck was much like a small castle, with strong walls and a solid gate. Kian was standing in the middle of the open space, watching the men-at-arms move and listening to reports from the Adepts on the walls with them.

"So things did not go as expected," he said, turning his head at their approach.

"No - I thought we had planned for the worst," Caelanna answered, frowning with worry. "But there was no discussion. They just attacked. This can only mean something has changed, something they believe gives them the upper hand."

They frowned in thought for a moment, but then Caelanna's eyes lighted on the novice beside her. "You would have been proud of this young man, though."

"I am sure," Kian smiled back. "He performed well?"

"Not as well as you would have, Master Kian," Finian answered.

Caelanna grinned. "That is hard to say - but you should have seen him, Kian. I think he used something from every school."

Finian shuffled his feet. "Not quite, Mistress."

She threw her head back and laughed. "Oh, that is right - you did not get to show the council your strongest talent. Wait until they see you wield Fae magic!"

Renewed shouting from the walls interrupted their conversation and changed the mood entirely. "They are advancing!"

Kian shook his head, growing somber. "This is all wrong. They should have needed time to assemble. They planned this."

"We should retreat back to the estate at Ardair," Caelanna agreed. "We need to regroup, and they have the advantage here. Let's begin sending people through the portal."

At that moment they heard an explosion and a section of the side wall gave way. A figure wearing a green Adept's tunic hurried out of the breach. Kian stared after him in shock. "Kaevan! No!"

He hurried forward to try to fill the gaping hole in their defenses. With a sinking feeling, Finian ran back into the manor house. As he feared, the transfer portal had been destroyed. Kaevan had betrayed them, then had fled before he could be made to pay the price for his treason.

Caelanna read the truth from his face as he came back out into the courtyard. Wind was already beginning to whip around the house. "No!"

Soldiers in the livery of the Magisterium were already climbing over the walls, and Caelanna's guards were rushing to answer the charge. One of them stumbled and fell beside Finian, groaning in pain. He knelt and yanked the arrow out of the man's shoulder, then he laid a hand on the

wound. There was a golden yellow glow, and the man was Healed.

“Thanks, lad,” he said. Then he gripped Finian’s shoulder. “Listen, boy - we are lost, here. Every one of us would die three times over for her. Get her out - find a way.”

With that, the man was gone, rushing forward to slow the men pushing through the gap Kaevan had made.

The wind was growing stronger, and Finian looked up to see Caelanna clenching her fists. She gave a wordless shout and flung her hands upward. Suddenly the press of men at the gate and at the hole in the wall eased. A tangle of brush surrounded the estate, blocking the advance of their attackers with thorns as hard as iron and as sharp as spears. Clouds gathered overhead. Kian looked at Caelanna with worried eyes. He whispered to Finian. “This is . . . too much. After what she did in the council hall - she is trying too much.”

All three of them jumped at the sound of something crashing against the gate. Surrounded by red mist was a monstrous shape. As they watched, it slammed a fist against the metal bars, shaking them in their moorings. The seething clouds burst open at that moment, flinging lightning around the walls. Two, three, four bolts struck the ground, one of them hurling the monstrous shape backward.

The attackers paused for a moment, then surged forward again. The thorns near Kaevan’s breach were being hacked away. Caelanna spoke a few more words, and a pinkish mist rose to move in that direction. The men there sagged, some of them falling to the ground in a stupor. Then Caelanna wavered. Kian cried out as she fell, overwhelmed with the storm beginning to spiral out of control over their heads. He knelt beside her, feeling for a pulse.

The fiend at the gate struck again, metal bars twisting under the force of its fist. Reinforcements arrived at the hole in the wall, driving back the men in green livery. Finian looked around the courtyard, closed his eyes, and put out his hands - one gripping Caelanna’s arm, the other Kian’s. Then all three of them disappeared.

Kian sprang to his feet and looked around in shock. His eyes fell on the young novice. “How did you-”

The boy was sagging, exhausted by the effort. Shouting rose around them as servants caught sight of them in the yard. Somehow, Finian had transported them back to Caelanna’s home estate near Ardair. Kian did not have time to wonder how that had been done. Calling out to one of the servants, he shouted, “Fetch Beabeth! The Mistress is hurt!”

Kneeling beside her again, Kian struggled to collect his thoughts. “What can we do. We should have been able to hold at the city house. How could we-”

“We were betrayed,” Finian said as Kian trailed off. “That is why the Council was so decisive - they moved, because they knew more than they should have known.”

Ealcmarran ran up in time to hear Finian’s words. “Betrayed. Kaevan.”

Raising his eyes, he shouted for the guard captain. As they looked around, they saw another man running toward them from the west. Their hearts sank. They knew he was bringing word of enemies advancing.

“We did not see this,” Kian was whispering. “We should be able to hold here, but-”

His eyes turned to Caelanna’s prostrate form. With her incapacitated, their defenses were severely weakened. Ealcmar nodded. “We must expect the worst. If the Council moved against the city manor, we must expect they will move in strength here, as well.”

The man-at-arms arrived and offered his breathless report. “Enemies at the outer palisade. Wearing Magisterium red.”

“Banners?” asked Kian.

“At least three, Master Kian. Councillor Turran’s in the center.”

“Carry word back - slow them at the palisade, but do not take risks. Fall back in good order to the stone wall.”

The guard captain arrived in time to hear those instructions and snapped a salute. “I will assemble our reserves at the stone wall, my lord.”

“What if we cannot hold?” Ealcmar asked. “We must preserve what we can.”

Kian looked around in distress, thinking as quickly as he could. “Where can we go?”

Suddenly, his eyes snapped to Finian. “I know - there is a castle. Old, abandoned. For more than a hundred years. Caelanna and I may be the only ones who know of its existence. There is a portal - we must start taking people through.”

He raised a hand to Finian’s forehead, sharing an image of the location of the transfer portal. “Take Caelanna and Beabeth there, then come back. We will begin gathering the others.”

Ealcmar nodded, already knowing what to do. He began shouting orders at the other servants, gathering the staff to evacuate as quickly as possible. Kian ran off in search of mages - adepts and initiates who could work the transfer portal. Finian lifted his mistress, cradling her carefully, fear and worry lending him strength. Seeing Beabeth emerge from the estate house, he called to the old nurse and started up the hill Kian had identified.

The castle looked even older than Kian had said. Ivy covered the walls and grass hid the flagstones which lay before the entrance. Finian shook his head, hoping that part of the roof was still whole. They would get little but shelter from this place for the time being. Laying Caelanna gently on the soft grass, he told Beabeth he had to get back and fetch others. Then he hurried up the path which led to the portal.

At the estate, chaos reigned. Looking westward, Finian could see mages and men-at-arms lining the stone wall, trying to hold back a tide of invaders. Kian was trying to assemble servants without much success. “Finian! Take Margaret and Sarah!”

“Shouldn’t we help them?” the novice asked, looking toward the fighting.

“No - there is no way to win that,” Kian answered. “I have already pulled mages from the wall to help with the evacuation. We have to get people out of here. They are just trying to give us time. Here - I am coming with you. I will bring Ealcmar and Ciara.”

“No, I should stay here!” Ealcmar argued. “I should be the last to leave!”

“We need you at the castle,” Kian insisted. “We are going to be bringing dozens through the portal soon - you have to get them sorted and placed.”

The small group hurried up the hill toward the portal. Kian stepped on with his two charges and vanished, then Finian followed suit. Just before he finished the transfer, he felt a tremendous explosion from the direction of the estate house, and the ground bucked beneath his feet.

“That way!” Kian was shouting, pointing the others along the path which led to the abandoned castle. Grabbing Finian’s arm, he stepped back onto the transfer portal and activated it.

A scene taken straight from Hell greeted them on the other side. Shouting men fought across the entire space, while monstrous creatures strode back and forth wreaking havoc. The estate house was in flames, and one corner looked as though it had been crushed by a fist. Hearts in their throats, Kian and Finian started down the slope.

“No! Go back!” A man wearing an adept’s tunic was waving at them. Finian recognized him as Medrin. “They have not seen you - go back!”

“But - we have to go down and help!”

“There is nothing to help - there are four Council members down there! It is lost!” shouted Medrin.

“The people - we have to help evacuate!”

“Yes, the others are coming - go back! Be ready at the other side of the portal - I will start sending people through!”

Kian and Finian did as he said, hurrying back up the slope. They went through the portal and moved aside to make room for others. Minutes passed. Finally Kian stepped onto the portal and tried to activate it. He raised a stricken face to Finian. “He . . . destroyed it.”

They stared at each other for a long time, trying to understand what had happened. Finally, Kian whispered. “He lied. There were no others. He just wanted us to get out.”

Dazed, barely able to see what was around him, Finian went to the abandoned castle and tried to help the others arrange for the night. Kian did not move from the portal; he knelt beside it throughout the night, keeping vigil for the friends he had lost.