

Devin did not like to be followed.

His current tails were two well-dressed Englishmen. They stayed a good 50 feet behind him and switched off every few minutes. Devin stopped at a deli window, pretending to inspect the merchandise, but he was really trying to catch sight of his tail. The man walked into a bakery. His friend, slightly taller, took his place outside.

Walking down the sidewalk, Devin kept his eye on the tall one. Sure enough, he soon peeled away and casually started walking behind him. Devin stopped.

The tall man stopped.

Now that he knew he was being trailed, Devin had a protocol to follow. At the tender age of 14, Devin was an up-and-coming maker of Thaumic Energy products. Some thought that they could take rather than buy.

How very wrong they were.

All across London, Devin had built traps and escape routes in convenient places. One advantage of having a customer base of wizards with thick wallets was a rather thick one yourself.

Devin rolled back his sleeve and checked his wrist display. According to the map, there was an escape tunnel in an alley a few blocks away. Devin hitched his backpack up higher and nonchalantly headed toward it, snow crunching beneath his boots.

The short man from before was back, trotting along behind him. Devin turned off onto a quiet, residential street. As he turned the corner, Devin caught sight of the tall man, jogging to catch up to his companion.

Walking swiftly now, Devin looked for the side street that was his destination. His turn was the second on the left. He passed some flats, a four-way intersection, and a street vendor. Risking a quick glance back, Devin saw that his two tails were now walking side by side. One of them reached down a bit with his hand, and it disappeared up to the wrist. The man quickly pulled it back. His hand reappeared, followed by a metallic glint that looked suspiciously like a knife. Devin quickened his pace.

*Wizards.* This situation was infinitely more dangerous than he initially assumed. What the short mage just did was something only achievable through magical means. He had folded spacetime.

Magic is often nothing more than card tricks or misdirection, but real, powerful sorcery is the manipulation of matter in all of its states. The more kinetic energy the particles have, the easier it is to control. Mages could even influence states of matter that science hasn't discovered, like the theoretical exotic matter that could stabilize wormholes. The short wizard had done just that. He had folded space to bring two points together: his hand and his knife.

Devin turned around and snapped a quick photo of the two mages. Still walking, he ran facial recognition on them. The short one was Galexianlyn Murik. His companion was Lennix Whitmore. There was no other useful information; they were well under the radar.

Two street thugs hired to rough him up? That he could handle. But two wizards? Impossible. For a skinny, unarmed, 14-year-old boy to defeat two fully trained sorcerers would be as likely as them turning into a whale and a bowl of petunias.

*Well*, Devin thought, *not entirely unarmed*. That alley had better be nearby. What he needed now, more than ever, was a quick escape.

Like a gift from on high, Devin caught sight of the tiny alley. It barely fit the term. The alley was more like a slit between the two houses than an alley, ending in a low wall. Either way, he couldn't afford to pass up what might be his only escape just because it was a bit shabby.

Rushing down the slit, Devin reached the dead end quickly. Checking his wrist display for instructions, Devin hoped he was in the right place. His directions to the escape route said that he was to push the brick fifteen up from the ground and three from the right wall. The brick would flip out, becoming a door handle he could use to access the tunnel behind. The shaft would lead him out to a nearby street.

Devin pushed the brick. Nothing happened.

He pushed with both hands. Still nothing.

Devin crouched down and threw his shoulder against the brick. He bruised his shoulder. The brick didn't move.

He turned, chest heaving. He must have taken a wrong turn. He had to get out. He would *not* be trapped here.

Before Devin could even take a step, the two mages that had been following him turned the corner.

Devin almost panicked. *Almost*. But if he panicked now, all was lost. If he could keep a clear head, he might make it out alive.

Trying to seem calm and confident, he called out, "Who sent you here?"

Whitmore laughed, a deep, throaty laugh. "Why, your own mum and dad sent us here. They want you to come home, boy!"

"Yer lil tinkerin' has caught their eye. We could use someone like you," Murik said with a nasty grin.

The words brought a wave of memories, and the memories hit him like a freight train.

Devin was born into the Blackwell family, a line of wizards unbroken for thousands of years. For whatever reason, be it interbreeding or random chance, he, Devin Blackwell, was the first mortal to carry his family's name. They cast him out for it.

When he was just over twelve years old, well past the time that children would have exhibited magical qualities, the Blackwell family, his own *parents*, disowned him for not being a wizard. For not being special. For not being better.

Forced to fend for himself, he put his many other talents to use. Devin did odd jobs online, mostly for wizards from ancient houses with deep coffers that needed technical support. He started experimenting with Thaumic energy, the type of energy that magicians use, and became a leading researcher and developer in the field.

Devin built a business empire from nothing. He sold his wares to wizards everywhere. The depth of his research into the source of all magic was unrivaled. His discoveries about Thaumic energy even enabled it to be stored and channeled in ways never dreamt of. Wizards came from every corner of the Earth for his devices. These wizards, these exceptional, magical people that his family wanted him to be like, came to *him*. They came to him, the low down, scum of the earth *mortal*.

And now, now that he had built himself up from nothing, a nothingness imposed on him by his own family, they wanted him back. Now that he had something they wanted, they wanted him back. Now that he, without magic or sorcery, had achieved things that they never could, they wanted him back.

Devin steadied himself against the alley wall.

Whitmore's words jolted him back to reality.

“Ey! You comin’ or am I gonna have ter getcha?”

“No,” Devin whispered, “I’m not going back.”

Everything he had done since he had been cast out was to show, no, to *prove* that they had made a mistake. To prove that he could make it on his own, without them, without magic, without help of any kind.

But there was still a lingering feeling, deep within his heart, that he wasn't better, that everything he did was trivial compared to the greatness that was achievable through wizardry. The nagging feeling that however good he was, however smart he was, however many wizards needed him, it still wasn't enough. His parents wanted him to be better. They would never be satisfied.

Murik pulled out the knife he had hidden. Whitmore summoned a fireball with a click of his fingers. Definitely wizards.

Devin reached under his backpack and opened his emergency pockets. His bag was not an ordinary backpack. For one, it had zipper pockets on the bottom, for easy access while wearing. For another, it was chalk full of items with unique and unusual uses. The contents included five

pure sodium golf ball sized pellets, a homemade smoke grenade, and a high-pressure liquid nitrogen spray bottle. In the main bag, there were some other bits and bobs that he used regularly.

Devin now reached for his pack's bottom pockets. With one hand, he threw the sodium and smoke grenade into the snow. Gas quickly obscured the alley, but not before Whitmore threw his fireball straight at Devin. He responded by spraying the pressurized nitrogen at it, denying it of oxygen and putting it out.

The first sodium pellet reacted with the snow, creating a sizable explosion that threw the small man into a wall. Devin scrambled onto a trash can and hoisted his body over the barrier. Beyond it was a peaceful little garden with a dry, crumbling fountain in the center. A pigeon flew down from an oak, pecking at the wet leaves that coated the park. Peaceful. Safe.

Devin looked back. He saw a dark figure stumbling through the smoke toward the end of the alley. Just then, the other four sodium pellets went off. As the sodium hydroxide film dissolved, the pure sodium beneath reacted violently with the snow, sending Whitmore reeling. Unfortunately, the displacement of air that the reactions caused cleared most of the smoke away, and the mages didn't seem too hurt. Murik was already picking himself up and dusting off his jacket. Devin had only bought a couple of seconds.

But a couple of seconds might be enough. Activating the voice function on his wrist display, Devin asked, "Harry, where's my nearest tunnel?"

Harry, Devin's virtual assistant, responded in a crisp British accent.

"Fifteen feet down. Multifunctional. Would you like to see its features?"

"Yes."

The page came up with the location and components. Devin blinked in disbelief. He doubled checked his display. There was, in fact, a tunnel just below his feet. Tapping the functions button, he pulled up the other features installed. There was a door with a control panel behind it in this very alley. Only it was halfway between him and the two rather upset wizards.

Devin's face slowly formed a grin.

Below, both wizards had fireballs in their hands.

Whitmore called out, "Oi you! Git back down 'ere or we'll flame ya!"

Devin paused. If he jumped down into the courtyard, he would probably get away. He could get back to his heavily defended workshop, where nothing could get to him. Or he could stay - and fight.

Devin took a long look at his adversaries. To a wealthy house like his own, these mages were just a pair of enforcers that could be easily replaced. If he ran, they would be seen as incapable of capturing a mere boy. All he would be is a boy who could run and make some flashbangs.

If he stayed... If he fought and won, *all* the houses would think twice about attacking him. He could win this fight and all the others.

Devin noticed his hand shaking. He willed his hand to stop. It didn't.

Could he really do this? Did he dare confront *wizards*?

He did.

Devin's looked down at the wizards below.

"No," He stated simply, "I don't think I will."

"Well we can't 'ave that," Murik said, "We wouldn't want ter deliver a damaged package."

"No, we wouldn't want that," Devin replied, eyes twinkling.

Devin smile broadened; he lept down into the alley.

Devin's legs buckled as he landed. He rolled under the first fireball, but the second nearly caught him in the chest. Devin dove out of the way, staggering against the trash can. Murik came charging at him with his knife, so Devin knocked over the can and shoved it in his path. The wizard tripped and went down, cursing.

Devin looked up just in time to see Whitmore snap his hand against the air, sending a shockwave hurtling toward Devin. He tried to run, but he slipped on the icy cobblestone. Devin dropped hard, hitting his head. Blinking back spots, he saw the air ripple above him just before the wall at the end of the alley exploded, showering the courtyard beyond in bricks and masonry. Displaced air is a powerful thing.

On the other side of the can, Murik was slowly getting up, still a bit shaken from the exploding sodium. Devin grabbed the metal lid and swung it into his jaw. He went right back down, unconscious this time. Shake the brain, shut down the body.

Whitmore returned to fire, throwing a steady stream this time. Using the lid like a shield, Devin slowly advanced toward the secret door. When his fingers couldn't bear the heat anymore, he flung the lid away and ran to the wall, frantically searching for the secret brick.

Devin scrambled back as a burst of flame came lancing through the space where his hand had been moments earlier. Turning, Devin saw Whitmore walking over, a fresh fireball in one hand, shackles in the other. He looked weary. The extended use of magic was clearly taking its toll. Devin turned back towards the wall. He couldn't get it open without being fried. But then again, he didn't have to be the one to open it.

Scraping together some ice and snow, Devin chucked his makeshift snowball at the mage. It struck Whitmore full in the face. He cursed and threw his fire, but missed. He dropped the

shackles and brought his hand to his bleeding lip. With his other hand, he once again pushed at the air, sending a gale at Devin.

But Devin was already moving. As soon as he saw the snowball connect, he stumbled toward the door. When Whitmore pushed at the air, Devin threw himself back to the ground, under the hurtling winds.

The wall exploded inward, exposing the crawlspace where Devin had his tunnel. Scrambling into it, he opened the control panel. Four red switches sat inside a gray, electrical-looking box. Devin flipped them all up.

At four different points along the alley, bricks pulled away to reveal large nozzles. They jutted forward and locked into place. Then, they released high-pressure streams of liquid nitrogen.

Whitmore fell to his knees, shivering. Although the gas concealed him, Devin caught sight of a flickering light from a flame he had summoned. Devin moved farther down the tunnel as the gas crept in.

The jets of liquid nitrogen stopped nearly a minute later, sputtering out the last remains of the giant tank's contents. The wizards' prone figures were splayed out on the ground. They unconscious from lack of oxygen, their lips blue from the freezing temperature. Devin poked his head out from the tunnel and grabbed matches from his backpack.

Devin stood there and looked at his conquered foes for a moment. He struck the match against the bricks and lit a fallen branch. Instead of burning the bodies, he went to the wall and scorched the bricks with his taken crest, a fox's head with a stag's antlers. His hand didn't shake.

1. I think improved on my comma usage around dependent and independent clauses.
2. I added a lot of material late in the writing process, but I think it really improved the story.
3. I had acknowledge that some parts of my story didn't flow well and could be better. I had to rewrite some large sections to improve them. I have learned that making big changes to a first or second draft is oftentimes necessary.