

Excerpt from ↑THE ARROW RUNE

The story so far . . . Lured by the possibility of attracting the notice of a certain girl by winning the archery tournament, Ed Lewis has come to the Scarborough Medieval Faire in upstate New York. Tucked into his pouch, he finds an ancient iron arrowhead marked with two Anglo-Saxon runes: ↑ and ƿ. The first is *Tiw*, a war god; the second, *Wyn*, means “Joy”. Ed has no idea who put the arrowhead there or what the runes are supposed to signify, yet it seems right to mount it on an arrow. When Ed shoots the arrow, he inadvertently opens a gateway to an alternate world. Three Briton warriors come through and forcibly kidnap his mother, *Alrun*, closing the gateway behind them. Now, with his best friend, *Josie*, his uncle *Alf*, and *Alf*’s partner, *Dennis*, Ed must go through the gateway to rescue *Alrun*. But first, he must figure out how to use the arrow to reopen the gate.

It was after dark by the time we got back to the faire, and the spectators had all left. Only the vendors were still there. They all slept in their tents, like we did, to guard their wares. There was a group gathered around a small fire in the center of the green, but *Josie* was sitting at our tent. She had a kettle going on the camp stove. There was a white cloth on the ground at her feet, with a few glory-twigs scattered on it. She scooped them into her bag as we came up.

“Hi,” she said, folding the cloth and tucking it under her belt. “Help yourselves to coffee and tea. There’s leftover dinner inside if you’re hungry.” It was like she’d been expecting us.

Before we could answer, *Egili* poked his head out of his pouch, *dooking* quietly. *Dennis* scooped him up.

“What ho, furry brave friend,” he said. “You saved us dinner? There’s a good beast.”

Egili nipped the end of his nose.

Josie made a *tchking* noise, and *Egili* looked at her with an expression that clearly said, “What? What’d I do?”

Dennis laughed. “He minds you better than he does me, *Josefina*. You are his true love.”

“No, *Alrun* is. *Egili*’s mad at you for going off to rescue her without him. What happened?” she asked, looking at me.

“I couldn’t make the arrow work,” I muttered. “Like a key, I mean.”

“He doesn’t know the charm,” Uncle *Alf* said.

“Neither does he,” I added.

“And I suggested we come back here, where the gate opened before,” *Dennis* put in, before Uncle *Alf* or I could say anything else. He explained about the meteorite, the sky iron, and the *doppelgänger* idea. *Josie* didn’t bat an eye.

“Makes sense,” she said, “and I think I can help you with the charm.” She pulled a folded slip of paper from beside the white cloth under her sash. “I found this on your work bench beside the other arrows.” She handed it to me. “*Alrun* must have put it there. No one else writes like that.”

Josie was right, the paper held a few lines of Old English mixed in with some runes. Mom had learned to write Old English from *Dennis*. She’d asked him to teach both of us when I was in third or fourth grade. It was fun for a while, because *Josie* joined us whenever she was around and *Dennis* was a good teacher. He was funny, using the old riddles and poems as examples, and making up new ones. I lost interest after a couple of years – I mean, none of my friends talked like that and I was trying really hard to sound like everyone else – but I could still read and speak it. Mom never let me give it up completely. And now, looking at the three lines she’d carefully printed on that slip of paper, it occurred to me that this was the language Uncle *Alf* had always spoken to her before *Dennis* came. Old English was *Anglisc*. Their native tongue.

“What does it say?” Uncle *Alf* asked, peering over my shoulder. He had never learned to write, even American English. Just his name and the numbers, and he could

Excerpt from †HƆ ARROW RUNE

only read a little more. I couldn't believe I had never made any of the connections. Idiot. But what connections? They couldn't really be Angles or Saxons if they were from a different world.

"Read it, Dennis," he demanded.

"I can do it!" I snapped. I forced the anger and confusion out of my head and focused on reading the text. It was written like a poem or song, but I was used to that, thanks to Dennis. Literally translated, it went:

*Thunor's stone and Tiw's ax, fill the hole in Woden's gate
Sunwise thrice and moonwise back, Egil's kin work well the lock
Open sky-gate, open path, open world-road, Wyn's key*

Yeah, I know it doesn't rhyme. Old English poems don't, even in Old English. And Mom had used runes for all the names; sometimes just one, like † for Tiw, sometimes all of them, like MƆXƆ for Egil, so it didn't look like any poem you'd be used to. But the meaning seemed clear enough, except for the parts that weren't. *Thunor's stone and Tiw's ax* had to mean the arrowhead, or maybe the whole arrow. But *Fill the hole in Woden's gate*? It could mean that the arrowhead or arrow would fit the keyhole in Woden's gate. Or it could mean, *Hey, you! Put that thing into the keyhole in Woden's gate.* Or put yourself into the latch. Assuming you could figure out what Woden's gate was. And who were Egil's kin? Who was Wyn? I'd never heard of an old god named Joy.

I ranted on like this, feeling more and more frustrated every second. Uncle Alf shut me up with an answer.

"We are Egil's kin," he said. "Alrun and I. And you. He was my mother's mother's father. The arrowhead was made for him. For his children and his children's children down to this day."

"Why an arrowhead?" Josie asked. "Why not a key?"

"He was the greatest Bowman ever to live. He would have such an arrowhead. No one else would know it for what it really was."

"Okay, that's all very clever," I said, "but where's the frigging keyhole?"

"There is none!" Uncle Alf growled. "There is no key! There is the sky-iron and there is the charm! That is what we must use!"

Dennis laid a hand on his arm. "Ælfweard, please, not so loud. The walls are thin."

Josie elbowed me in the ribs. She could tell I was about to snap back. "Let's all go outside where the target was and try to work the charm," she said. "Okay?"

I stomped outside. Josie had cleaned up the wreckage of the target, but I knew exactly where I'd set it up. I planted my feet, pulled the arrow from my quiver, and stuck it straight up, pointed at the sky. Nothing happened, of course.

"Now what?" I demanded. "Turn the arrow? Turn myself?"

"Walk a circle," Uncle Alf said. "Sunwise, like this." He swung his arm clockwise.

"I know sunwise!" I snapped. I started walking.

"*Gesingan!*"

"I don't know the tune!" I yelled.

"Remember!" he yelled back. "They sang it to you to sleep!"

I stared at him. "The lullaby? But these aren't the words."

"They would not use those words," Alf said. "Too dangerous. I told them not to use the song at all, but they didn't listen. You remember it. You must."

I didn't, even though I'd dreamed it so many times. It always vanished as soon as I woke up. I closed my eyes and tried to hear it. I could hear someone talking over near the campfire, cars on the highway, a plane far off and way up. No song. I shook my head.

"Remember," Uncle Alf whispered, almost begging.

"Quiet!" I took a deep breath. "Please." I started humming, trying to find the notes. There was something there, right at the edge of my hearing. I thought maybe I could

coax it out if I just gave it a few real notes to play with. A couple of notes clicked. I tried the combination again and a few more fell into place. A whole phrase came back, and an image came back with it: Mom and Dad, sitting on opposite sides of my bed, singing. My throat tightened and almost choked the song, but I swallowed the knot and hummed louder.

“Þæs is god,” Uncle Alf whispered. *“Gesingap wordes eac.”* Sing the words now.

I swallowed, held the arrow up again, and started singing the charm.

“Wait,” Dennis said. He gave Egili to Josie. “Call your parents in the morning. Tell them as much as you think they’ll believe and ask them to come help you pack up. We’ll be back as soon as possible, but don’t wait here for us.” He came and stood by Uncle Alf. “All right, Eadgar, sing on. We’ll be right behind you. Um, we do walk behind him, Alf, right?”

“When he turns moonwise,” Uncle Alf muttered. “First he walks around us. We must stay very close. Do not lose sight.” He looked as grim as I’d ever seen him.

Dennis noticed, too. “Right. Don’t go too fast, Ed.”

I nodded. My lips were suddenly dry as ashes. I licked them, swallowed, and began to sing. I took the first step sunwise, then the next, and the next. Circling Uncle Alf and Dennis. I finished the charm by the end of the first circle and hesitated.

“Gesingap,” Uncle Alf whispered.

I repeated the circle and the song and kept going. Halfway through the next circle, the steps got harder, like walking in loose sand. I pushed on and it got like wading in water. At each word, the water got deeper. The arrow got heavier. I began to worry that maybe the tune wasn’t right. Maybe the memory was bad. I ended the third circle and turned back moonwise. I was in thigh deep, and the water was cold, thick, and getting thicker. I was half aware of Uncle Alf stepping in behind me, Dennis beside him. Their hands were clenched together. I stumbled but caught myself. Dennis took hold of my belt.

“We’ve got your back, Ed,” he murmured.

I pushed on, but the weight of the arrow was too much. It was all I could do to keep walking and singing. My arm drooped more and more with each note, until it was pointing forward. And the weight went away. The air thinned a little. I could move more easily. At the end of the verse, the stars began to waver. There was a crack, and a dark line formed in the air at the tip of the arrow, with a smell of bitter smoke. The iron began to glow a faint blue-green. I kept singing and took another step, pushing against the strange gravity that fought to hold me back. The arrow tip touched the slit and the glow brightened. The patterns in the wrought sky-iron began to writhe like snakes. The slit tore open, a sound like a raging fire, and folded back like the halves of a double gate.

There were stars in there, wavering in an indigo sky. I hesitated, surprised by how many there were, how bright. And different, not a single constellation I knew. It freaked me, and my voice wavered. But I shook it off and sang louder, went toward them, step by step, note by note. It seemed a straight line, though I’m pretty sure I was still turning moonwise. The pressure didn’t let up, it gusted in my face. And it was colder now, numbingly cold, pressing in so hard my eyes began to tear. Cold mist swirled around my knees. The blue-green sheen of the arrowhead was a ball of ice, leading onward. I wasn’t aware of anything else but that and the stars, ahead, behind, above, below. And the cold all through me.

The stars were pulsing, some bright, some dim. I took aim at one, a bright one that seemed the closest, but the nearer I came to it, the harder it was to walk. I forced myself against the pressure, the freezing wind. The point of the arrow touched something hard. I leaned into it, hardly able to move my foot. A slit formed in the dark indigo ahead of me. I pushed harder, and it opened a crack, just a crack, and inside was a swirl of fire, a billow of reeking, hot wind that jetted through the crack, singeing my chilled face. I stumbled back against Dennis, lurched sideways, and the slit squeezed shut

instantly, cutting off the flame.

I turned toward another star, but that was even harder. I hesitated again, and the cold became so thick it hurt to inhale. I tried swinging the arrow from one side to the other, till I felt the pressure ease again. I went that way till one small, yellow star came into view, brightened, till it was the only star I could see. The arrow twitched, like the nose of a hunting dog. The point of the iron touched the point of light, and now there was an edge there, the outline of another slit in the indigo sky. It widened, and other stars shone inside the slit, with a crescent moon. They looked familiar. I took one, careful step through.

“Thunor’s stones, keep moving!” Uncle Alf growled.

He pushed, and I stumbled forward a few more paces, fell to my knees. My legs were shaking, like I’d climbed a mountain. I gasped in a lungful of air. It was cool, but not cold. Sweet on my lungs. Sweet to smell. Damp. Quiet. So very quiet; no plane, no cars, not a single voice. I hoped that was a good thing, because I couldn’t go another step.

“Are we there yet?” Josie asked. She gave a faint laugh, but her voice was shaking.

It took a moment to sink in: Josie wasn’t supposed to follow us. But there she was, a dim outline behind Dennis.

↑