



# RUNES OF GALLIDON

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## *The Great Drift, part 8*

Maia Jacomus

*a novella chapter set in the world of Runes of Gallidon*

Luka got into queue at the pier to rent a boat. As she waited with five other people ahead of her, she remembered she had walked out on a day's work for Arkadi. And yet, despite the respect she had for him, she knew she couldn't go back, even to tell him she'd be gone for the day. If she gave an inch, anything could prevent her from doing what she was about to. No matter what kind of worry or anger her absence could stir up, she had to stick to the task at hand.

Her typical boat of choice when traveling alone was a kayak. However, considering she would have to carry something from Enzo's home, she decided on the only other watercraft that she could control on her own: a coracle. It was just as wide as she was tall, and shaped like a large—though somewhat shallow—bowl. She received a white banner marked with the number six, designating which pier and which coracle would be hers to use. The pier marked with the white banner had to be reached by climbing down a ladder to a large floating platform. A platform was always best for boarding a coracle, but the platform had to float to follow the rise and fall of the water through the seasons. Still, it was quite sturdy as she set foot on it and looked around for the right coracle. It sat just ahead, with a worn number six painted in white. She used the rope to pull it towards her, then lodged her banner into the secure holder attached to the lip of the vessel.

Luka tried to remember the last time she used a coracle, and how she had boarded it. When she was little, she was constantly tipped overboard by stepping into the round boat the wrong way. She carefully set her foot just beyond the exact center of the craft, then, while gripping the lip with her hands, reached her other foot inside beside the other. She then sank to sit on the bottom, shifting so she was as centered as possible. Feeling stable, she chuckled with relief, grabbed the oar from the platform, and started on her way.

Though it was a smooth, gentle ride, Luka was too afraid of losing the directions to keep them out at all times. So she would memorize the next turn, reach the destination, then stop to memorize the next. Altogether, the trip was taking about an hour. Normally, she wouldn't have minded. She found tranquility in boating, and loved watching the fish swim around her. But with each impatient minute, she hoped and prayed that she would be able to reach Enzo's house, then return in time to free Lani.

After taking her final turn, she steered to the nearest ladder, tied up the coracle to the lowest rung, climbed to the top of the boardwalk.

It was eerie. She wondered if she had taken a wrong turn and wound up at a completely different city. There was hardly a soul in sight, only a couple lanterns flanked the boardwalk every five yards, and the only sounds she could hear were footsteps softened by distance... then nothing. Her heart thudded as she began to panic. If she was in the wrong place, then how long would it take to find the right place? With desperate hope, she knocked on the nearest door. A young boy answered. Deciding that he didn't recognize her, he immediately called for his parents, and his father came to the door.

"May I help you with something?" he asked suspiciously.

"Am I in Eveshade, in Alkat?"

"Yes..."

Her heart calmed in one sweep of breath. "Good, good. I'm looking for Enzo's home. Ah, the

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Baron el'Adal Berat, that is.”

His suspicion eased, and he very cordially replied, “Oh, it’s down to the fork, and to the left. His is the second house to the right. I haven’t seen him around in some days, though. He may be out.”

“Thank you.”

With eager steps, Luka trotted to where the boardwalk forked, turned left, and found the second house on the right. For a baron, it was entirely unimpressive. But for a commoner like Luka, it was formidable. It had two large tiers—the bottom with a patio, the top with a balcony—and was constructed with the deep grayish purple wood of the rivanwood tree, the same sort of tree as the Shadowcast. She entered without knocking. Despite having enough rooms to house more than Enzo, his home was as silent and still as the rest of the neighborhood.

Walking across a multitude of finely woven rugs, Luka peered into every room she passed, all the while looking for the study. On the second floor, she finally found a room filled with bookshelves and artifacts on the walls. Luka still had no idea what a guandao was. The only thing she could think to do was find whichever item might be the most useful in helping Lani. There was a helmet made from an animal skull, a peculiar suit of chain maille made from thousands of pebbles, a dented bronze lantern, and a featureless face mask made of teal-grey stone with holes for the eyes and a narrow slit for the mouth. None of them seemed particularly helpful, but the mask was mildly interesting, with its unusual coloring. Luka took it down from the wall, surprised by how light it was, and held it to her face. She liked the cool smoothness against her skin.

Luka heard a strange noise. It was a distant wail of distress. Luka took off the mask and moved to the door to hear better. The noise stopped. Luka lifted up the mask to her face again, and the wailing resumed. Luka held her breath, then exhaled. The wail sounded so loud and shrill, it made her jump. Then the wail continued, but fainter, with every pant of her breath.

Holding the mask a little farther from her face, Luka blew a long, soft, steady breath through the mouth slit. The wail sounded distant and for the full duration of her breath. She blew harder, and the wail was louder. Whether or not the mask was the guandao, Luka could think of how to put it to use.



After an hour of paddling, Luka returned her coracle back to the pier. However, she realized she ought to keep using it, and instead navigated along the boardwalk near the Shadowcast. She stopped at a ladder, climbed up part way, then used her foot to guide the coracle around the ladder and pushed it so that it glided along underneath the court den’s main building. Then she climbed to the top and lingered near the outside of the court den. Holding the mask up to her face, she blew into it, starting slow and soft, building to a loud climax, then fading again. With her breath, the wail sounded distant, then seemed to come closer and closer until it sounded directly outside the court den, then faded again—just as though someone in great distress was running past. The two foyer Sentries shot out.

“I think she went this way,” one said, pointing to the right.

The other agreed, and both went running down the boardwalk. Luka slipped into the empty foyer, turning into the room leading to the cells, but froze when she saw the warden at his chair. She had counted on him leaving to find the noise, too, but he remained.

“You again?” he asked.

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Luka swallowed, stalling until she could think of something to say. “I just wanted to be here when they take Lani Ouranos away.”

“Well, then wait in the foyer.” He stood up and ushered her out of the room, then noticed that the foyer was empty. “Where’d they go?”

Luka merely shrugged and pointed at the door.

The warden sighed and walked to the door, looking out in both directions. Without thinking, Luka bolted, running through the warden’s room and across the boardwalk leading to Lani’s cell. She could hear the warden’s footsteps pounding behind her, so she let herself drop off the side, reaching out her hands in time to grasp the boardwalk railing. But her grip quickly slipped, so her hands sought out the next available handhold: the truss directly below. She wrapped her arms around it and wrapped her legs around the stilt, then did nothing but keep herself quiet. The warden’s footsteps shook faint vibrations around her as he stepped onto the boardwalk, stopping about halfway along. Luka heard the warden walk around before returning to his room.

Luka unwrapped one of her arms, reached up to the railing, and pulled herself up just high enough to peer over the boardwalk. The warden was gone. Luka pulled herself high enough to crawl between the railing and onto the boardwalk. An onyx-carved combination lock strapped the door tightly shut with a twine made of fine strands of iron. Looking behind her to make sure she was alone, she sat up on her knees to reach the lock and slowly began turning the first dial. When she could feel it unlock, she moved to the next one. Just as she unlocked the second dial, something struck her head, knocking her aside. In alarm, she whirled around and backed against the cell door with a clatter.

“Luka?” She heard Lani’s voice. “What are you doing? Did you find the guandao?”

For a moment, Luka couldn’t remember what she had done with the stone mask. “Kren!” she cursed. “I must have dropped it in the water! Wait. What is a guandao?”

“A pole arm that has a curved blade with a serrated edge. You could have sawed a hole from beneath the cell, instead of creeping over here.”

“Oh. I didn’t find anything like that at—”

Another blow struck Luka across the face, and she cried out. Holding her stinging cheek, she looked wildly around but saw no one.

“What’s wrong?” Lani asked.

“I just got hit again, but there’s no one else here.”

“The Shamaness must have seizkin watching me.”

Luka fumbled with the lock again. Before she could unlock the third dial, her arms were grabbed from behind, and she felt herself being pulled toward the railing.

“You better get out of here!” Lani insisted. “I’ll find another way out.”

Summoning all of her strength, Luka lunged forward and was just able to clutch the lock in her fist. The seizkin continued to try to pull her away, but she kept hold of the lock. Luka slid the third dial another notch as she felt a seizkin trying to pry her fingers loose. She was amazed by their strength, for as small as they were, and one finger at a time, she was pulled away from the lock and thrown over the side of the boardwalk into the water. Luka surfaced and began searching for the coracle when a weighted rope net fell on her, dragging her back down beneath the water. She frantically scrambled to get herself out, pulling on the rope to bring up one of the ends.

A blur of motion swept by, down past her. Then it came up to her eye level, and it was Lani, struggling to hoist one of the weights, her legs kicking hard with double the effort to keep herself from

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sinking. Lani reached out her foot to hook Luka's arm and pull her towards her. She thrust the weight aside and took hold of Luka, pulling her to the surface with her. She slapped Luka's cheek to wake her. Another harder slap on her other cheek brought her around.

"Sorry about that," Lani said.

Luka blinked and tried to focus her water-blurred eyes. "We have to...find the...boat..."

"Boat?" Looking around, Lani saw the coracle floating under the warden's room. Taking care to swim beneath the boardwalk to hide from the seizkin, they moved toward it.

"We should start on opposite sides," Luka advised as she held the rim of the boat, "and we'll have to move in at the same time to keep it balanced."

Instead, Lani turned the boat over, and covered it over Luka and herself. "When the seizkin came out with the net, the warden followed. Saw me jump in. We should hide under here until we're well away."

"Will the seizkin follow us?"

"Only from above. They don't get too near water. Can't swim; sink like stones."

They moved along the length of the court den, then toward the north of town.

"How did you get out?" Luka asked.

"You got me out, remember?"

"I didn't think I did."

"All I know is the lock was off the door."

"Thanks for getting me out, however you did it."

"I put you in to begin with. I owed you."

Lani smirked a little. "You seem different."

Luka smiled with a slight shrug and said, "I just have things better figured out now. That's all."

When they were far enough away, they turned the boat to its proper side. After a few attempts, they managed to climb inside. Lani put up her dripping wet hood to hide her red hair. Luka hugged herself, feeling chilled and wondering what sort of plan Lani had.

They didn't dock until they reached the Eveshade neighborhood, still as quiet as when Luka first visited hours ago.

"Enzo should have some pollen at his home," Lani explained as she climbed onto the boardwalk. "I'm sure there'll also be some defenses we can use."

"What do we do now?" Luka asked.

"Well, if you had been able to use the guandao beneath my cell as I hoped, you could be off free. But now we'll both be stalked by every Sentry in the city and seizkin, chances are. The only thing we can do is figure out how to prove the seizkin's existence before we're strung up by our thumbs and gutted like fish. Any suggestions?"

Luka shrugged meekly. "Did Enzo have any plans?"

"We were about to discuss it when the Sentries came. We split up in our escape. I guess I went the wrong way."

"Well, all I can think of is trying to convince anyone we can. If we can get some people on our side, it could at least buy us time."

"Convince others?" Lani scoffed. "It'd be easier to convince the seizkin to reveal themselves."

As they were heading towards Enzo's house from a different part of the neighborhood, Luka noticed something unusual that she hadn't before: a large tree growing up out of the water, laden with

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dark green leaves and heavy with ripe pink-orange fruit. What puzzled her was the multitude of trinkets gathered in its boughs: combs and brushes, vases and sculptures, picture frames and bracelets.

“What’s that?” Luka asked.

“A Spirit haunt,” Lani said.

“But why all that stuff? I didn’t think Spirits cared about those sorts of things.”

“That one does, apparently. Years ago, that tree was nothing more than a spindle of wood. One day, someone left their brass comb behind, and the next day, the tree was green. Enzo found out that the Spirit loves shiny human-crafted objects. So ever since, at the start of each season, something new is added to her collection, and she keeps fruit growing on the tree year-round. Her name is Tu’enta.”

“Wow. I don’t think I’ve ever known a Spirit by name. It’s almost scary somehow. She’s right there, right now?”

“Probably.”

Reaching Enzo’s house, Lani led Luka upstairs to the second floor, which was one large bedroom suite. While Lani looked for the pollen, Luka looked for a possible change of clothes. Both endeavors were rather difficult, as the whole suite was in disarray: the bed was unmade, dirtied clothes were on the floor, and many others things were in places they obviously didn’t belong.

“Was this room ransacked?” Luka asked with genuine concern.

Lani laughed. “No, this is just how he keeps his room. Charming, isn’t it? I think the bog smell is stronger in here than it is outside.”

Luka looked through the standing wardrobe and found tunics and trousers that were clearly too small for the Baron. “Are these yours?”

Lani crossed over to see. “Yes, they are! Huh. Oh, you know, these are the clothes I had packed to take with me on the Drift. I wonder if…” At the foot of the wardrobe was a leather rucksack. “Ah! Here’s my pollen, my brush—my brush!—and my candle tin.” She took the brush out and used it to stroke the stray hairs from her face. “Why don’t you change into one of those, while I divide up the pollen. Give me your purse. I’ll put your pollen in it.”

Luka untied and handed over her purse, then took a set of dry clothes and hid behind one of the open wardrobe doors to change. When she was finished, Lani did the same, and instructed her to look in the other wardrobe near the balcony. Luka jumped back after opening the door, as a mace fell onto the floor. The wardrobe was an arsenal full of weaponry.

“Really, what did Enzo do before he was a boat captain?”

“Pick out a couple swords for us,” Lani said.

“Swords? Ah, I’ve never used one.”

“Well, pick something out. Unless you want the Sentries to take you to the gallows, you’re going to need something. You don’t even have to use it; you can just hold it and look…intimidating.” Lani poorly stifled a laugh.

Indignant, Luka wanted to pick out the largest sword in the wardrobe, but couldn’t bring herself to lay hands on it. She did not like the thought of drawing blood. Instead, she chose a blunt mace on the chain end of a flail, the iron ball no larger than her palm. It was one of the few weapons that wasn’t sharp and one of the few she could lift. After a brief perusal, Lani took out a long sword with a blade that had a reverse spike midway along the edge. She tucked it into her belt, then ran for the patio, sniffing a pinch of pollen as she went. Luka did the same, and the two watched as, at the other end of the block, glistening trinkets flew through the air, carried by seizkin.

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“No, no, NO!” Lani shouted, pounding the rail of the balcony. She spun around and dashed down the stairs faster than Luka had ever seen her move.

Luka followed along as best she could, out of Enzo’s house and to the haunt of the Spirit Tu’enta. A handful of seizkin were taking the objects from the tree’s branches and flying off with them.

“You stupid beasts! Stop it!” she cried, flailing at the air with her sword.

Luka gripped the wooden shaft her flail in both hands and whipped the chain over her head, knocking aside seizkin. Despite their efforts, Lani and Luka watched helplessly as several seizkin made off with their stolen treasure. Both women turned to look at the tree. Before their eyes, the fruit shriveled into wrinkled masses of skin, and leaves curled and dried, falling to the ground in a carpet of black.

“If Tu’enta comes out of there,” Lani speculated, her voice grave, “then we are all in serious trouble.”

“We have to get her things back,” Luka suggested.

“No. We have to find Enzo. He can speak to her, and he has a plan, I know he does. We have to find him, come on.” Lani ran for their boat. “We’ll start at the Traveler’s Respite, where I last saw him, and go from there.”

“But the Sentries—“

“So be careful, but we’ve got to go.”

As Luka climbed down the ladder to the floating platform where the coracle was docked, she could still see the tree. With a loud, echoing crack, it snapped in half, down the middle along the tree’s height.



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