

The background of the cover is a detailed illustration of a wooden door with intricate carvings. At the top, a woman's face with long, flowing blonde hair is carved into the wood. Below her face is a large, dark metal clasp with a prominent green oval gemstone in the center. The text is overlaid on this background.

THE NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING SERIES

FABLEHAVEN

THE COMPLETE
SERIES

FABLEHAVEN



The Complete Series

BRANDON MULL

ILLUSTRATED BY
BRANDON DORMAN



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BOOK ONE

Fablehaven

THE NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING SERIES

FABLEHAVEN



BRANDON MULL

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Summary: When Kendra and Seth go to stay at their grandparents' estate,

they discover that it is a sanctuary for magical creatures and that a battle

between good and evil is looming.

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For Mary, who made writing possible

Chapter 1



A Mandatory Vacation

Kendra stared out the side window of the SUV, watching foliage blur past. When the flurry of motion became too much, she looked up ahead and fixed her gaze on a particular tree, following it as it slowly approached, streaked past, and then gradually receded behind her.

Was life like that? You could look ahead to the future or back at the past, but the present moved too quickly to absorb. Maybe sometimes. Not today. Today they were driving along an endless two-lane highway through the forested hills of Connecticut.

“Why didn’t you tell us Grandpa Sorenson lived in India?” Seth complained.

Her brother was eleven and heading into sixth grade. He had grown weary of his handheld video game—evidence that they were on a truly epic drive.

Mom twisted to face the backseat. “It won’t be much longer. Enjoy the scenery.”

“I’m hungry,” Seth said.

Mom started rummaging through a grocery bag full of snack food. “Peanut butter and crackers?”

Seth reached forward for the crackers. Dad, driving, asked for some Almond Roca. Last Christmas he had decided that Almond Roca was his favorite candy and that he should have some on hand all year long. Nearly six months later he was still honoring his resolution.

“Do you want anything, Kendra?”

“I’m fine.”

Kendra returned her attention to the frantic parade of trees. Her parents were leaving on a seventeen-day Scandinavian cruise with all the aunts and uncles on her mother’s side. They were all going for free. Not because they’d won a contest. They were going on a cruise because Kendra’s grandparents had asphyxiated.

Grandma and Grandpa Larsen had been visiting relatives in South Carolina. The relatives lived in a trailer. The trailer had some sort of malfunction involving a gas leak, and they all died in their sleep. Long ago, Grandma and Grandpa Larsen had specified that when they died, all their children and their spouses were to use an allocated sum of money to go on a Scandinavian cruise.

The grandchildren were not invited.

“Won’t you get bored stuck on a boat for seventeen days?” Kendra asked.

Dad glanced at her in the rearview mirror. “The food is supposed to be incredible. Snails, fish eggs, the works.”

“We’re not all that thrilled about the trip,” Mom said sadly. “I don’t think your grandparents envisioned an accidental death when they made this request. But we’ll make the best of it.”

“The ship stops in ports as you go,” Dad said, deliberately redirecting the conversation. “You get to disembark for part of the time.”

“Is this car ride going to last seventeen days?” Seth asked.

“We’re nearly there,” Dad said.

“Do we have to stay with Grandma and Grandpa Sorenson?” asked Kendra.

“It’ll be fun,” Dad said. “You should feel honored. They almost never invite anyone to stay with them.”

“Exactly. We barely know them. They’re hermits.”

“Well, they were my parents,” Dad said. “Somehow I survived.”

The road stopped winding through forested hills as it passed through a town. They idled at a stoplight, and Kendra stared at an overweight woman gassing up her minivan. The front windshield of the minivan was dirty, but the woman seemed to have no intention of washing it.

Kendra glanced up front. The windshield of the SUV was filthy, smeared with dead bugs, even though Dad had squeegeed it when they last stopped to refuel. They had driven all the way from Rochester today.

Kendra knew that Grandma and Grandpa Sorenson had not invited them to stay. She had overheard when Mom had approached Grandpa Sorenson about letting the kids stay with him. It was at the funeral.

The memory of the funeral made Kendra shiver. There was a wake beforehand, where Grandma and Grandpa Larsen were showcased in matching caskets. Kendra did not like seeing Grandpa Larsen wearing makeup. What lunatic had decided that when people died you should hire a taxidermist to fix them up for one final look? She would much rather remember them alive than on grotesque display in their Sunday best. The Larsens were the grandparents who had been part of her life. They had shared many holidays and long visits.

Kendra could hardly remember spending time with Grandma and Grandpa Sorenson. They had inherited some estate in Connecticut around the time her parents were married. The Sorensens had never invited them to visit, and rarely made the trek out to Rochester. When they came, it was generally one or the other. They had only come together twice. The Sorensens were nice, but their visits had been too infrequent and brief for real bonding to occur. Kendra knew that Grandma had taught history at some college, and that Grandpa had traveled a lot, running a small importing business. That was about it.

Everyone was surprised when Grandpa Sorenson showed up at the funeral. It had been more than eighteen months since either of the Sorensens had visited. He had apologized that his wife could not attend because she was feeling ill. There always seemed to be an excuse. Sometimes Kendra wondered if they were secretly divorced.

Toward the end of the wake, Kendra overheard Mom cajoling Grandpa Sorenson to watch the kids. They were in a hallway around a corner from

the viewing area. Kendra heard them talking before she reached the corner, and paused to eavesdrop.

“Why can’t they stay with Marci?”

“Normally they would, but Marci is coming on the cruise.”

Kendra peeked around the corner. Grandpa Sorenson was wearing a brown jacket with patches on the elbows and a bow tie.

“Where are Marci’s kids going?”

“To her in-laws.”

“What about a baby-sitter?”

“Two and a half weeks is a long time for a sitter. I remembered you had mentioned having them over sometime.”

“Yes, I recall. Does it have to be late June? Why not July?”

“The cruise is on a time frame. What’s the difference?”

“Things get extra busy around then. I don’t know, Kate. I’m out of practice with children.”

“Stan, I don’t want to go on this cruise. It was important to my parents, so we’re going. I don’t mean to twist your arm.” Mom sounded on the verge of tears.

Grandpa Sorenson sighed. “I suppose we could find a place to lock them up.”

Kendra moved away from the hall at that point. She had quietly worried about staying with Grandpa Sorenson ever since.

Having left the town behind, the SUV climbed a steep grade. Then the road curved around a lake and got lost among low, forested hills. Every so often they passed a mailbox. Sometimes a house was visible through the trees; sometimes there was only a long driveway.

They turned onto a narrower road and kept driving. Kendra leaned forward and checked the gas gauge. “Dad, you’re under a quarter of a tank,” she said.

“We’re almost there. We’ll fill up after we drop you kids off.”

“Can’t we come on the cruise?” Seth asked. “We could hide in the lifeboats. You could sneak us food.”

“You kids will have much more fun with Grandma and Grandpa Sorenson,” Mom said. “Just you wait. Give it a chance.”

“Here we are,” Dad said.

They pulled off the road onto a gravel driveway. Kendra could see no sign of a house, only the driveway angling out of sight into the trees.

Tires crunching over the gravel, they passed several signs advertising that they were on private property. Other signs warned off trespassers. They came to a low metal gate that hung open but could be shut to prevent access.

“This is the longest driveway in the world!” Seth complained.

The farther they advanced, the less conventional the signs became. *Private Property* and *No Trespassing* gave way to *Beware of .12 Gauge* and *Trespassers Will Be Persecuted*.

“These signs are funny,” Seth said.

“More like creepy,” Kendra muttered.

Rounding another bend, the driveway reached a tall, wrought-iron fence topped with fleurs-de-lis. The double gate stood open. The fence extended off into the trees as far as Kendra could see in either direction. Near the fence stood a final sign:

Certain Death Awaits.

“Is Grandpa Sorenson paranoid?” Kendra asked.

“The signs are a joke,” Dad said. “He inherited this land. I’m sure the fence came with it.”

After they passed through the gate, there was still no house in sight. Just more trees and shrubs. They drove across a small bridge spanning a creek and climbed a shallow slope. There the trees ended abruptly, bringing the house into view across a vast front lawn.

The house was big, but not enormous, with lots of gables and even a turret. After the wrought-iron gate, Kendra had expected a castle or a mansion. Constructed out of dark wood and stone, the house looked old but in good repair. The grounds were more impressive. A bright flower garden bloomed in front of the house. Manicured hedges and a fish pond added character to the yard. Behind the house loomed an immense brown barn, at least five stories tall, topped by a weather vane.

“I love it,” Mom said. “I wish we were all staying.”

“You’ve never been here?” Kendra asked.

“No. Your father came here a couple of times before we were married.”

“They go the extra mile to discourage visitors,” Dad said. “Me, Uncle Carl, Aunt Sophie—none of us have spent much time here. I don’t get it. You kids are lucky. You’ll have a blast. If nothing else, you can spend your time playing in the pool.”

They pulled to a stop outside the garage.

The front door opened and Grandpa Sorenson emerged, followed by a tall, lanky man with large ears and a thin, older woman. Mom, Dad, and Seth got out of the car. Kendra sat and watched.

Grandpa had been clean-shaven at the funeral, but now he wore a stubbly white beard. He was dressed in faded jeans, work boots, and a flannel shirt.

Kendra studied the older woman. She was not Grandma Sorenson. Despite her white hair streaked with a few black strands, her face had an ageless quality. Her almond eyes were black as coffee, and her features suggested a hint of Asian ancestry. Short and slightly stooped, she retained an exotic beauty.

Dad and the lanky man opened the back of the SUV and began removing suitcases and duffel bags. “You coming, Kendra?” Dad asked.

Kendra opened the door and dropped to the gravel.

“Just place the things inside,” Grandpa was telling Dad. “Dale will take them up to the bedroom.”

“Where’s Mom?” Dad asked.

“Visiting your Aunt Edna.”

“In Missouri?”

“Edna’s dying.”

Kendra had barely ever heard of Aunt Edna, so the news did not mean much. She looked up at the house. She noticed that the windows had bubbly glass. Bird nests clung under the eaves.

They all migrated to the front door. Dad and Dale carried the larger bags. Seth held a smaller duffel bag and a cereal box. The cereal box was his emergency kit. It was full of odds and ends he thought would come in handy for an adventure—rubber bands, a compass, granola bars, coins, a squirt gun, a magnifying glass, plastic handcuffs, string, a whistle.

“This is Lena, our housekeeper,” Grandpa said. The older woman nodded and gave a little wave. “Dale helps me tend the grounds.”

“Aren’t you pretty?” Lena said to Kendra. “You must be around fourteen.” Lena had a faint accent that Kendra could not place.

“In October.”

An iron knocker hung on the front door, a squinting goblin with a ring in its mouth. The thick door had bulky hinges.

Kendra entered the house. Glossy wood floored the entry hall. A wilting arrangement of flowers rested on a low table in a white ceramic vase. A tall, brass coatrack stood off to one side beside a black bench with a high, carved back. On the wall hung a painting of a fox hunt.

Kendra could see into another room where a huge, embroidered throw rug covered most of the wooden floor. Like the house itself, the furnishings were antiquated but in good repair. The couches and chairs were mostly of the sort you would expect to see while visiting a historical site.

Dale was heading up the stairs with some of the bags. Lena excused herself and went to another room.

“Your home is beautiful,” Mom gushed. “I wish we had time for a tour.”

“Maybe when you get back,” Grandpa said.

“Thanks for letting the kids stay with you,” Dad said.

“Our pleasure. Don’t let me keep you.”

“We’re on a pretty tight schedule,” Dad apologized.

“You kids be good and do whatever Grandpa Sorenson tells you,” Mom said. She hugged Kendra and Seth.

Kendra felt tears seeping into her eyes. She fought them back. “Have a fun cruise.”

“We’ll be back before you know it,” Dad said, putting an arm around Kendra and tousling Seth’s hair.

Waving, Mom and Dad walked out the door. Kendra went to the doorway and watched them climb into the SUV. Dad honked as they drove off. Kendra fought back tears again as the SUV vanished into the trees.

Mom and Dad were probably laughing, relieved to be off by themselves for the longest vacation of their married lives. She could practically hear their crystal goblets clinking. And here she stood, abandoned. Kendra closed the door. Seth, oblivious as ever, was examining the intricate pieces of a decorative chess set.

Grandpa stood in the entry hall, watching Seth and looking politely uncomfortable.

“Leave the chess pieces alone,” Kendra said. “They look expensive.”

“Oh, he’s all right,” Grandpa said. By the way he said it, Kendra could tell he was relieved to see Seth setting the pieces down. “Shall I show you to your room?”

They followed Grandpa up the stairs and down a carpeted hall to the foot of a narrow wooden staircase leading up to a white door. Grandpa continued on up the creaking steps.

“We don’t often have guests, especially children,” Grandpa said over his shoulder. “I think you’ll be most comfortable in the attic.”

He opened the door, and they entered after him. Braced for cobwebs and torture devices, Kendra was relieved to find that the attic was a cheerful playroom. Spacious, clean, and bright, the long room had a pair of beds, shelves crowded with children’s books, freestanding wardrobes, tidy dressers, a unicorn rocking horse, multiple toy chests, and a hen in a cage.

Seth went straight for the chicken. “Cool!” He poked a finger through the slender bars, trying to touch the orange-gold feathers.

“Careful, Seth,” Kendra warned.

“He’ll be fine,” Grandpa said. “Goldilocks is more a house pet than a barnyard hen. Your grandmother usually takes care of her. I figured you kids wouldn’t mind filling in while she’s gone. You’ll need to feed her, clean her cage, and collect her eggs.”

“She lays eggs!” Seth looked astonished and delighted.

“An egg or two a day if you keep her well fed,” Grandpa said. He pointed to a white plastic bucket full of kernels near the cage. “A scoop in the morning and another in the evening should take care of her. You’ll want to change the lining of her cage every couple days, and make sure she has plenty of water. Every morning, we give her a tiny bowl of milk.” Grandpa winked. “That’s the secret behind her egg production.”

“Can we ever take her out?” The hen had moved close enough for Seth to stroke her feathers with one finger.

“Just put her back afterwards.” Grandpa bent down to put a finger in the cage, and Goldilocks instantly pecked at it. Grandpa withdrew his hand. “Never liked me much.”

“Some of these toys look expensive,” Kendra said, standing beside an ornate Victorian dollhouse.

“Toys are meant to be played with,” Grandpa said. “Do your best to keep them in decent shape, and that will be good enough.”

Seth moved from the hen cage to a small piano in the corner of the room. He banged on the keys, and the notes that clanged sounded different from what Kendra would have expected. It was a little harpsichord.

“Consider this room your space,” Grandpa said. “Within reason, I’ll not bother you to pick things up in here, so long as you treat the rest of the house with respect.”

“Okay,” Kendra said.

“I also have some unfortunate news. We are in the height of tick season. You kids ever hear of Lyme disease?”

Seth shook his head.

“I think so,” Kendra said.

“It was originally discovered in the town of Lyme, Connecticut, not too far from here. You catch it from tick bites. The woods are full of ticks this year.”

“What does it do?” Seth asked.

Grandpa paused for a solemn moment. “Starts out as a rash. Before long it can lead to arthritis, paralysis, and heart failure. Besides, disease or no, you don’t want ticks burrowing into your skin to drink your blood. You try to pull them off and the head detaches. Hard to get out.”

“That’s disgusting!” Kendra exclaimed.

Grandpa nodded grimly. “They’re so small you can hardly see them, at least until they fill up on blood. Then they swell to the size of a grape. Anyhow, point is, you kids are not allowed to enter the woods under any circumstances. Stay on the lawn. Break that rule and your outdoor privileges will be revoked. We understand one another?”

Kendra and Seth nodded.

“You also need to keep out of the barn. Too many ladders and rusty old pieces of farm equipment. Same rules apply to the barn as apply to the woods. Set foot in there, and you will spend the rest of your stay in this room.”

“Okay,” Seth said, crossing the room to where a little easel stood on a paint-spattered tarp. A blank canvas rested on the easel. Additional blank canvases leaned against the wall nearby, beside shelves stocked with jars of paint. “Can I paint?”

“I’m telling you twice, you have the run of this room,” Grandpa said. “Just try not to destroy it. I have many chores to attend to, so I may not be around much. There should be plenty of toys and hobbies here to keep you busy.”

“What about a TV?” Seth asked.

“No TV or radio,” Grandpa replied. “Rules of the house. If you need anything, Lena will never be far.” He indicated a purple cord hanging against the wall near one of the beds. “Tug the cord if you need her. In fact, Lena will be up with your supper in a few minutes.”

“Won’t we eat together?” Kendra asked.

“Some days. Right now I need to visit the east hayfield. May not be back until late.”

“How much land do you own?” asked Seth.

Grandpa smiled. “More than my share. Let’s leave it at that. I’ll see you kids in the morning.” He turned to leave and then paused, reaching into his coat pocket. Turning back, he handed Kendra a tiny key ring holding three miniature keys of varying sizes. “Each of these keys fits something in this room. See if you can figure out what each unlocks.”

Grandpa Sorenson walked out of the room, closing the door behind him. Kendra listened as he descended the stairs. She stood at the door, waiting, and then gently tried the handle. It turned slowly. She eased the door open, peered down the empty stairway, and then closed it. At least he had not locked them in.

Seth had opened a toy chest and was examining the contents. The toys were old-fashioned but in excellent condition. Soldiers, dolls, puzzles, stuffed animals, wooden blocks.

Kendra wandered over to a telescope by a window. She peered into the eyepiece, positioned the telescope to look through a windowpane, and began twisting the focus knobs. She could improve the focus but couldn’t get it quite right.

She stopped fiddling with the knobs and examined the window. The panes were made of bubbly glass, like those in the front of the house. The

images were being distorted before they reached the telescope.

Unfastening a latch, Kendra pushed the window open. She had a good view of the forest east of the house, illuminated by the golden hues of the setting sun. Moving the telescope closer to the window, she spent some time mastering the knobs, bringing the leaves on the trees below into crisp focus.

“Let me see,” Seth said. He was standing beside her.

“Pick up those toys first.” A mess of toys lay piled near the open chest.

“Grandpa said we can do what we want in here.”

“Without making it a disaster. You’re already wrecking the place.”

“I’m playing. This is a playroom.”

“Remember how Mom and Dad said we need to pick up after ourselves?”

“Remember how Mom and Dad aren’t here?”

“I’ll tell.”

“How? Stick a note in a bottle? You won’t even remember by the time they get back.”

Kendra noticed a calendar on the wall. “I’ll write it on the calendar.”

“Good. And I’ll look through the telescope while you do that.”

“This is the one thing in the room I was doing. Why don’t you find something else?”

“I didn’t notice the telescope. Why don’t you share? Don’t Mom and Dad also tell us to share?”

“Fine,” Kendra said. “It’s all yours. But I’m closing the window. Bugs are coming in.”

“Whatever.”

She shut the window.

Seth looked into the eyepiece and started twisting the focus knobs. Kendra took a closer look at the calendar. It was from 1953. Each month was accompanied by an illustration of a fairyland palace.

She turned the calendar to June. Today was June 11. The days of the week did not match up, but she could still count down to when her parents would return. They would be back June 28.

“This stupid thing won’t even focus,” Seth complained.

Kendra smiled.

Chapter 2



Collecting Clues

The next morning, Kendra sat at breakfast across from her grandfather. A wooden clock on the wall above him read 8:43. Reflected sunlight flashed in the corner of her eye. Seth was using his butter knife to bounce sun rays. She was not seated close enough to the window to retaliate.

“Nobody likes the sun in their eyes, Seth,” Grandpa said.

Seth stopped. “Where’s Dale?” he asked.

“Dale and I got up a few hours ago. He’s out working. I’m just here to keep you company on your first morning.”

Lena set a bowl in front of Seth and another in front of Kendra.

“What’s this?” Seth asked.

“Cream of wheat,” Lena replied.

“Sticks to your ribs,” Grandpa added.

Seth probed the cream of wheat with his spoon. “What’s in it? Blood?”

“Berries from the garden and homemade raspberry preserves,” Lena said, placing a platter on the table containing toast, butter, a pitcher of milk,

a bowl of sugar, and a bowl of jam.

Kendra sampled the cream of wheat. It was delicious. The berries and raspberry preserves sweetened it to perfection.

“This is good!” Seth said. “Just think, Dad is eating snails.”

“You kids remember the rules about the woods,” Grandpa said.

“And to stay out of the barn,” Kendra said.

“Good girl. There’s a swimming pool out back that we got ready for you—all the chemicals are balanced and whatnot. There are gardens to explore. You can always play in your room. Just respect the rules and we’ll get along fine.”

“When is Grandma coming back?” Kendra asked.

Grandpa glanced down at his hands. “That depends on your Aunt Edna. Could be next week. Could be a couple months.”

“Good thing Grandma got over her illness,” Kendra said.

“Illness?”

“The one that kept her from going to the funeral.”

“Right. Yeah, she was still a little under the weather when she left for Missouri.”

Grandpa was acting a little peculiar. Kendra wondered if he was uncomfortable around children.

“I’m sad we missed her,” Kendra said.

“She’s sorry too. Well, I better be off.” Grandpa had not eaten anything. He pushed his chair back, stood up, and stepped away from the table, rubbing his palms against his jeans. “If you swim, don’t forget to wear sunblock. I’ll see you kids later.”

“At lunch?” Seth asked.

“Probably not until supper. Lena will help you with anything you need.”

He left the room.

* * *

Dressed in her swimsuit, a towel over one shoulder, Kendra stepped through the door onto the back porch. She carried a handheld mirror she had found in the nightstand by her bed. The handle was mother-of-pearl

studded with rhinestones. The day was a bit humid, but the temperature was pleasant.

She walked to the railing of the porch and gazed over the gorgeously manicured backyard. Paths of white stones meandered among flower beds, hedgerows, vegetable gardens, fruit trees, and flowering plants. Tangled grapevines curled along suspended lattices. All the flowers seemed to be in full bloom. Kendra had never seen such brilliant blossoms.

Seth was already swimming. The pool had a black bottom, and it was fringed with rocks to make it seem like a pond. Kendra hurried down the steps and started down a path toward the pool.

The garden teemed with life. Hummingbirds darted among the foliage, wings nearly invisible as they hovered. Huge bumblebees with fuzzy abdomens buzzed from one blossom to another. A stunning variety of butterflies fluttered about on tissue-paper wings.

Kendra passed a small, waterless fountain featuring a statue of a frog. She paused as a large butterfly alighted on the rim of an empty birdbath. It had huge wings—blue, black, and violet. She had never seen a butterfly with such vivid coloring. Of course, she had never visited a world-class garden. The house was not quite a mansion, but the grounds were fit for a king. No wonder Grandpa Sorenson had so many chores.

The path finally deposited Kendra at the pool. Variegated flagstones paved the poolside area. There were a few recliners and a circular table with a big umbrella.

Seth leaped from a stone outcropping into the swimming pool, legs curled up, and hit the water with a big splash. Kendra set her towel and mirror on the table and grabbed a bottle of sunblock. She smeared the white cream over her face, arms, and legs until it disappeared into her skin.

While Seth was swimming underwater, Kendra picked up the mirror. She angled the face so it reflected sunlight onto the water. When Seth surfaced, she made sure the bright splotch of sunlight covered his face.

“Hey!” he shouted, swimming away from her. She kept the glare from the mirror on the back of his head. Gripping the side of the pool, Seth turned to look at her again, throwing up a hand and squinting to ward off the light. He had to look away.

Kendra laughed.

“Cut it out,” Seth called.

“You don’t like that?”

“Quit it. I won’t do it anymore. Grandpa already yelled at me.”

Kendra set the mirror on the table. “That mirror is a lot brighter than a butter knife,” she said. “I bet it already did permanent damage to your retinas.”

“I hope so, then I’ll sue you for a billion dollars.”

“Good luck. I have about a hundred in the bank. It might be enough for you to buy some eye patches.”

He swam toward her angrily, and Kendra walked forward to the edge of the pool. As he started climbing out, she shoved him back in. She was almost a full head taller than Seth and could usually handle him in a fight, although if they ended up wrestling he was pretty squirmy.

Seth changed tactics and started splashing her, making quick scooping motions across the surface of the pool. The water felt cold, and Kendra recoiled at first, then leapt over Seth into the water. After the initial shock, she swiftly grew accustomed to the temperature, stroking over to the shallow end away from her brother.

He chased her, and they ended up in a splash fight. Locking his hands, Seth swung his arms in wide arcs, skimming the top of the water. Kendra pushed at the water with both hands, a churning motion that generated smaller but more focused splashes. Soon they grew tired. It was hard to win a water fight when both participants were already soaked.

“Let’s have a race,” Kendra suggested as the splashing subsided.

They raced back and forth across the pool. First they raced freestyle, then backstroke, breaststroke, and sidestroke. After that they created handicaps, like racing with no arms or hopping across the width of the shallow end on one foot. Kendra usually won, but Seth was faster at backstroke and some of the handicapped races.

When Kendra grew bored, she got out of the pool. Walking toward the table to retrieve her towel, she stroked her long hair, enjoying the rubbery texture as the wetness made the strands cling together.

Seth climbed on top of a big rock near the deep end. “Watch this can opener!” He jumped with one leg straight and the other bent.

“Good job,” Kendra said to placate him when he surfaced. Shifting her gaze to the table, Kendra froze. Hummingbirds, bumblebees, and butterflies

swirled in the air above the handheld mirror. Several other butterflies and a couple of large dragonflies actually rested on the face of the mirror itself.

“Seth, come look at this!” Kendra hissed in a loud whisper.

“What?”

“Just come here.”

Seth boosted himself out of the pool and padded over to Kendra, arms folded. He stared at the cloud of life whirling above the mirror. “What’s their deal?”

“I don’t know,” she replied. “Do insects like mirrors?”

“These ones do.”

“Look at the red and white butterfly. It’s enormous.”

“Same with that dragonfly,” Seth pointed out.

“I wish I had a camera. I dare you to go get the mirror.”

Seth shrugged. “Sure.”

He trotted over to the table, grabbed the mirror by the handle, dashed to the pool, and dove in. Some of the insects scattered instantly. The majority drifted in the direction Seth had gone but dispersed before reaching the pool.

Seth surfaced. “Any bees after me?”

“Get the mirror out of the water. You’ll ruin it!”

“Settle down, it’s fine,” he said, stroking over to the side.

“Give it to me.” She took the mirror from him and wiped it dry with her towel. It looked undamaged. “Let’s try an experiment.”

Kendra placed the mirror face up on a lounge chair and backed away. “Think they’ll come back?”

“We’ll see.”

Kendra and Seth sat down at the table, not far from the lounge chair. After less than a minute, a hummingbird glided over to the mirror and hovered above it. Soon it was joined by a few butterflies. A bumblebee alighted on the face. Before long another swarm of small winged creatures crowded the mirror.

“Go turn the mirror face down,” Kendra said. “I want to see whether they like the reflection or the mirror itself.”

Seth crept toward the mirror. The little animals took no apparent notice of his approach. He reached forward slowly, flipped the mirror over, and then retreated to the table.

The butterflies and bees that had landed on the mirror took flight when it was overturned, but only a few of the winged creatures flew away. Most of the swarm lingered. A pair of butterflies and a dragonfly landed on the lounge chair at the edge of the mirror. Taking flight, they flipped the mirror over, nearly sliding it off the chair in the process.

With the reflective surface showing again, the swarm pressed close. Several of the creatures landed on the face.

“Did you see that?” Kendra asked.

“That was weird,” Seth said.

“How could they be strong enough to lift it?”

“There were a few of them. Want me to flip it again?”

“No, I’m scared the mirror will fall off and break.”

“Okay.” He draped his towel over his shoulder. “I’m going to go change.”

“Would you take the mirror?”

“Fine, but I’m running. I don’t want to get stung.”

Seth moved toward the mirror slowly, snatched it, and ran off into the garden toward the house. Part of the swarm gave lazy pursuit before scattering.

Kendra wrapped the towel around her waist, picked up the sunblock Seth had left behind, and started toward the house.

When Kendra reached the attic playroom, Seth was dressed in jeans and a long-sleeved camouflage shirt. He picked up the cereal box that served as his emergency survival kit and headed for the door.

“Where are you going?”

“None of your business, unless you want to come.”

“How will I know whether I want to come if you don’t tell me where you’re going?”

Seth gave her a measuring stare. “Promise to keep it a secret?”

“Let me guess. Into the woods.”

“Want to come?”

“You’ll get Lyme disease,” Kendra warned.

“Whatever. Ticks are everywhere. Same with poison ivy. If people let that stop them, nobody would ever go anywhere.”

“But Grandpa Sorenson doesn’t want us in the woods,” she protested.

“Grandpa isn’t going to be around all day. Nobody will know unless you blab.”

“Don’t do this. Grandpa has been nice to us. We should obey him.”

“You’re about as brave as a bucket of sand.”

“What’s so brave about disobeying Grandpa?”

“So you’re not coming?”

Kendra hesitated. “No.”

“Will you tell on me?”

“If they ask where you are.”

“I won’t be long.”

Seth walked out the door. She heard him tromp down the stairs.

Kendra crossed to the nightstand. The handheld mirror rested on it beside the ring with the three tiny keys. She had spent a long time the night before trying to find what the keys fit. The biggest key opened a jewelry box on the dresser that was full of costume jewelry—fake diamond necklaces, pearl earrings, emerald pendants, sapphire rings, and ruby bracelets. She had not yet discovered what the other two opened.

She picked up the keys. They were all small. The smallest was no longer than a thumbtack. Where could she find such a miniscule keyhole?

The night before, she had spent most of her time on drawers and toy chests. Some of the drawers had keyholes, but they were already unlocked, and the keys did not fit. Same with the toy chests.

The Victorian dollhouse caught her attention. What better place to find tiny keyholes than inside a little house? She unlatched the clasps and opened it, revealing two floors and several rooms full of miniature furniture. Five doll people lived in the house—a father, a mother, a son, a daughter, and a baby.

The detail was extraordinary. The beds had quilts, blankets, sheets, and pillows. The couches had removable cushions. The knobs in the bathtub really turned. Closets had clothes hanging inside.

The armoire in the dollhouse's master bedroom made Kendra suspicious. It had a disproportionately large keyhole in the center. Kendra inserted the tiniest key and turned it. The doors of the armoire sprung open.

Inside was something wrapped in gold foil—opening it, she saw it was a piece of chocolate shaped like a rosebud. Behind the chocolate she found a small golden key. She added it to the key ring. The golden key was larger than the key that opened the armoire, but smaller than the key that opened the jewelry box.

Kendra took a bite of the chocolate rosebud. It was soft and melted in her mouth. It was the richest, creamiest chocolate she had ever tasted. She finished it in three more bites, savoring each mouthful.

Kendra continued scouring the tiny house, investigating every piece of furniture, searching every closet, checking behind every miniature painting on the walls. Finding no more keyholes, she closed the dollhouse and fastened the clasps.

Scanning the room, Kendra tried to decide where to look next. One key left, maybe two if the golden key also opened something. She had been through most of the items in the toy chests, but she could always double-check. She had searched through the drawers in the nightstands, dressers, and wardrobes thoroughly, as well as the knickknacks on the bookshelves. There could be keyholes in unlikely places, like under the clothes of a doll or behind a bedpost.

Kendra ended up beside the telescope. Improbable as it seemed, she checked it for keyholes. Nothing.

Maybe she could use the telescope to locate Seth. Opening the window, she noticed Dale walking along the lawn at the outskirts of the woods. He was carrying something in both hands, but his back was to her, impeding a view of what he held. He stooped and set it down behind a low hedge, which continued to prevent her from seeing the object. Dale walked off at a brisk pace, glancing around as if to ensure nobody was spying, and soon passed out of view.

Curious, Kendra rushed downstairs and out the back door. Dale was nowhere in sight. She trotted across the lawn to the low hedge beneath the attic window. Grass continued for about six feet beyond the hedge before stopping abruptly at the perimeter of the forest. On the grass behind the hedge rested a large pie tin full of milk.

An iridescent hummingbird hung suspended over the pie tin, wings a faint blur. Several butterflies flitted around the hummingbird. Occasionally one would descend and splash in the milk. The hummingbird flew away, and a dragonfly approached. It was a smaller crowd than the mirror had attracted, but there was much more activity than Kendra would have expected around a small pool of milk.

She watched as a variety of tiny winged animals came and went, feeding from the pie tin. Did butterflies drink milk? Did dragonflies? Apparently so. It was not long before the level of milk in the pie tin had markedly fallen.

Kendra looked up at the attic. It had only two windows, both facing the same side of the house. She visualized the room behind those gabled windows and suddenly realized that the playroom consumed only half the space the attic should fill.

Abandoning the tin of milk, she walked around to the opposite side of the house. On the far side was a second pair of attic windows. She was right. There was another half to the attic. But she knew of no other stairway granting access to the uppermost story. Which meant there might be some sort of secret passage in the playroom! Maybe the final key unlocked it!

Just as she decided to return to the attic and search for a hidden door, Kendra noticed Dale coming from the direction of the barn with another pie tin. She hurried toward him. When he saw her coming, he looked temporarily uncomfortable, then put on a big smile.

“What are you doing?” Kendra asked.

“Just taking some milk to the house,” he replied, changing direction a bit. He had been heading toward the woods.

“Really? Why’d you leave that other milk behind the hedge?”

“Other milk?” He could not have looked more guilty.

“Yeah. The butterflies were drinking it.”

Dale was no longer walking. He regarded Kendra shrewdly. “Can you keep a secret?”

“Sure.”

Dale looked around as if someone might be watching. “We have a few milking cows. They make plenty of milk, so I put out some of the excess for the insects. Keeps the garden lively.”

“Why’s that a secret?”

“I’m not sure your grandfather would approve. Never asked permission. He might consider it wasteful.”

“Seems like a good idea to me. I noticed all the different kinds of butterflies in your garden. More than I’ve ever seen. Plus all the hummingbirds.”

He nodded. “I like it. Adds to the atmosphere.”

“So you weren’t taking that milk to the house.”

“No, no. This milk hasn’t been pasteurized. Full of bacteria. You could catch all sorts of diseases. Not fit for people. Insects, on the other hand, they seem to like it best this way. You won’t spoil my secret?”

“I’ll keep quiet.”

“Good girl,” he said with a conspiratorial wink.

“Where are you putting that one?”

“Over there.” He jerked his head toward the woods. “I set a few on the border of the yard every day.”

“Does it spoil?”

“I don’t leave it out long enough. Some days the insects consume all the milk before I collect the pans. Thirsty critters.”

“See you later, Dale.”

“You seen your brother hereabout?”

“I think he’s in the house.”

“That so?”

She shrugged. “Maybe.”

Kendra turned and started toward the house. She glanced back as she mounted the stairs to the rear porch. Dale was placing the milk behind a small, round bush.

Chapter 3



The Ivy Shack

Seth pressed through dense undergrowth until he reached a faint, crooked path, the kind made by animals. Nearby stood a squat, gnarled tree with thorny leaves and black bark. Seth examined his sleeves for ticks, scrutinizing the camouflage pattern. So far he had not seen a single tick. Of course, it would probably be the ticks he failed to see that would get him. He hoped the insect repellent he had sprayed on was helping.

Stooping, he collected rocks and built a small pyramid to mark the point where he had intersected the path. Finding his way back would probably be no problem, but better safe than sorry. If he took too long, Grandpa might figure out he had disobeyed orders.

Rummaging in his cereal box, Seth withdrew a compass. The animal track ran northeast. He had set off on an easterly course, but the undergrowth had grown denser as he progressed. A faint trail was a good excuse to veer slightly off course. It would be much easier going than trying to hack his way through shrubbery with a pocketknife. He wished he owned a machete.

Seth followed the trail. The tall trees stood fairly close together, diffusing the sunlight into a greenish glow laced with shadows. Seth imagined that the forest would be black as a cave after nightfall.

Something rustled in the bushes. He paused, removing a small pair of plastic binoculars from his cereal box. Scanning the area, he spotted nothing of interest.

He proceeded along the trail until an animal emerged from the undergrowth onto the path not twenty feet ahead. It was a round, bristly creature no taller than his knees. A porcupine. The animal started down the path in his direction with complete confidence. Seth froze. The porcupine was close enough that he could discern the individual quills, slender and sharp.

As the animal trundled toward him, Seth backed away. Weren't animals supposed to flee from humans? Maybe it had rabies. Or maybe it just hadn't seen him. After all, he was wearing a camouflage shirt.

Seth spread his arms wide, stomped a foot, and growled. The porcupine looked up, twitched its nose, and then turned from the path. Seth listened as it pushed through foliage away from the trail.

He took a deep breath. He had been really scared for a minute there. He could almost feel the quills pricking through his jeans into his leg. It would be pretty hard to conceal his excursion into the woods if he came home looking like a pincushion.

Though he dreaded admitting it, he wished Kendra had come. The porcupine probably would have made her scream, and her fear would have increased his bravery. He could have made fun of her instead of feeling frightened himself. He had never seen a porcupine in the wild before. He was surprised how exposed he felt staring at all those pointy quills. What if he stepped on one in the undergrowth?

He looked around. He had come a long way. Of course, finding his way back would be no trick. He just needed to backtrack along the trail and then head west. But if he turned for home now, he might never make it back this way again.

Seth continued along the trail. Some of the trees had moss and lichen growing on them. A few had ivy twisting around their bases. The path forked. Checking his compass, Seth saw that one path went northwest, the other due east. Staying with his theme, Seth turned east.

There began to be more space between the trees, and the shrubs grew closer to the ground. Soon he could see much farther in all directions, and the forest became a little brighter. To one side of the path, at the limit of his sight, he noticed something abnormal. It looked like a large square of ivy hidden among the trees. The whole point of exploring the woods was to find strange things, so he left the path and walked toward the ivy square.

The dense undergrowth came up to his shins, grasping at his ankles with every step. As he tromped toward the square, he realized it was a structure completely overgrown with ivy. It appeared to be a big shed.

He stopped and looked more closely. The ivy was thick enough that he could not tell what the shed was made of—he could see only leafy vines. He walked around the structure. On the far side a door stood open. Seth almost cried out when he peered inside.

The shed was actually a shack constructed around a large tree stump. Beside the stump, dressed in crude rags, sat a wiry old woman gnawing at a knot in a bristly rope. Shriveled with age, she clutched the rope in bony hands with knobby knuckles. Her long, white hair was matted and had a sickly yellowish tint. One of her filmy eyes was terribly bloodshot. She was missing teeth, and there was blood on the knot she was chewing, apparently from her gums. Her pale arms, bare almost to the shoulder, were thin and wrinkled, with faint blue veins and a few purple scabs.

When the woman saw Seth, she dropped the rope immediately, wiping pink saliva from the corners of her meager lips. Supporting herself against the stump, she stood up. He noticed her long feet, the color of ivory, peppered with insect bites. Her gray toenails looked thick with fungus.

“Hail, young master, what brings you to my home?” Her voice was incongruently melodious and smooth.

For a moment, Seth could only stare. Even as bent and crooked as she was, the woman was tall. She smelled bad. “You live out here?” he finally said.

“I do. Care to come inside?”

“Probably not. I’m just out for a walk.”

The woman narrowed her eyes. “Strange place for a boy to walk alone.”

“I like exploring. My grandpa owns this land.”

“Owns it, you say?”

“Does he know you’re here?” asked Seth.

“Depends who he is.”

“Stan Sorenson.”

She grinned. “He knows.”

The rope she had chewed lay on the dirt floor. It had one other knot besides the one she had been gnawing.

“Why were you biting the rope?” Seth asked.

She eyed him suspiciously. “I don’t care for knots.”

“Are you a hermit?”

“You could say that. Come inside and I will brew some tea.”

“I better not.”

She looked down at her hands. “I must look frightful. Let me show you something.” She turned and crouched behind the stump. A rat ventured a few steps out of a hole in a corner of the shack. When she came back from behind the stump, the rat hid.

The old woman sat with her back to the stump. She held a little wooden puppet about nine inches high. It looked primitive, made entirely of dark wood, with no clothes or painted features. Just a basic human figure with tiny gold hooks serving as joints. The puppet had a stick in its back. The woman set a paddle on her lap. She began making the puppet dance by bobbing the stick and tapping the paddle. There was a musical regularity to the rhythm.

“What is that thing?” Seth asked.

“A limberjack,” she replied.

“Where’s his ax?”

“Not a *lumberjack*, a *limberjack*. A clog doll. A jigger. Dancing Dan. Shuffling Sam. I call him Mendigo. He keeps me company. Come inside and I’ll let you give it a try.”

“I better not,” he said again. “I don’t see how you could live out here like this and not be crazy.”

“Sometimes good people grow weary of society.” She sounded a little annoyed. “You happened upon me by accident? Out exploring?”

“Actually, I’m selling candy bars for my soccer team. It’s a good cause.”

She stared at him.

“I have my best luck in the rich neighborhoods.”

She kept staring.

“That was a joke. I’m kidding.”

Her voice became stern. “You are an impudent young man.”

“And you live with a tree stump.”

She gave him a measuring glare. “Very well, my arrogant young adventurer. Why not test your courage? Every explorer deserves a chance to prove his mettle.” The old woman withdrew into the shack and crouched behind the stump again. She returned to the doorway holding a crude, narrow box made of splintered wood, wire, and long, jutting nails.

“What’s that?”

“Place your hand inside the box to prove your valor and earn a reward.”

“I’d rather play with the creepy puppet.”

“Just reach inside and touch the back of the box.” She shook it, and it rattled a bit. The box was long enough that he would have to reach in to his elbow in order to touch the back.

“Are you a witch?”

“A man with a brave tongue should support his words with courageous actions.”

“This seems like something a witch would do.”

“Stand by your loose words, young man, or you may not have a pleasant journey home.”

Seth backed away, watching her closely. “I better get going. Have fun eating your rope.”

She clucked her tongue. “Such insolence.” Her voice remained soothing and calm, but now held a menacing undertone. “Why not step inside and have some tea?”

“Next time.” Seth moved around the shack, not taking his eyes from the ragged woman in the doorway. She made no move to pursue him. Before he moved out of her sight, the woman raised an arthritic hand with the middle fingers crossed and the others bent awkwardly. Eyes half-shut, she appeared to be murmuring something. Then she was out of view.

On the far side of the shack, Seth plunged through the tangled undergrowth back to the path, glancing over his shoulder all the way. The

woman was not chasing him. Just looking back at the ivy-covered shack made him shiver. The old hag looked so wretched and smelled so foul. There was no way he was sticking his hand in her weird box. After she had offered the challenge, all he could think about was learning in school how shark teeth angled inward so fish could swim in but not out. He imagined the homemade box was probably full of nails or broken glass set at cruel angles for a similar purpose.

Even though the woman was not following him, Seth felt unsafe. Compass in hand, he hurried along the path toward home. Without warning, something struck him on the ear, barely hard enough to sting. A pebble the size of a thimble dropped to the path at his feet.

Seth whirled. Somebody had thrown the little stone at him, but he saw nobody. Could the old woman be stealthily following him? She probably knew the woods really well.

Another small object bounced off the back of his neck. It was not as hard or heavy as a stone. Turning, he saw another acorn whistling toward him, and he ducked. The acorns and the pebble had come at him from opposite sides of the path. What was going on?

From above came the sound of wood splitting, and a huge limb fell across the path behind him, a few leaves and twigs swishing against him as it passed. If Seth had been standing two or three yards back along the path, a branch thicker than his leg would have clubbed him on the head.

One look at the heavy limb, and Seth took off down the path at a full sprint. He seemed to hear rustling sounds coming from the shrubbery on either side of the scant trail, but did not slow down to investigate.

Something caught a firm hold on his ankle, sending him tumbling to the ground. Sprawled on his belly, a cut on one hand, dirt in his mouth, he heard something rustling through the foliage behind him, and a strange sound that was either laughter or running water. A dry branch snapped like a gunshot. Not looking back for fear of what he might see, Seth scrambled to his feet and dashed along the path.

Whatever had tripped him had not been a root or a stone. It had felt like a strong cord stretched across the trail. A tripwire. He had noticed no such trap previously on the path. But there was no way the old woman could have done it, even if she had started running the moment he passed out of her view.

Seth raced past the place where the trail forked and sprinted back the way he had come. He scanned the trail ahead for wires or other traps. His breathing became labored, but he did not slow down. The air felt hotter and more humid than it had all day. Sweat began to dampen his forehead and drip down the sides of his face.

Seth remained alert for the little pyramid of rocks that would mark where he should leave the path. When he reached a gnarled little tree with black bark and thorny leaves, he halted. He remembered the tree. He had noticed it when he intersected the path. Using the tree as a reference, he found the spot where he had built the pyramid of rocks, but the rocks were gone.

Leaves crunched behind him off to one side of the trail. Seth glanced at his compass to confirm that he was heading west and ran into the woods. He had walked this way at a leisurely pace, examining toadstools and unusual rocks as he went. Now he tore through the forest at full speed, undergrowth clawing at his legs, branches whipping against his face and chest.

Finally, panting, the energy of his panic wearing thin, he glimpsed the house up ahead through the trees. The sounds of pursuit had dwindled to nothing. As he stepped out into the yard under the sun, Seth wondered how much of what he had heard had actually been something chasing him, and how much had been invented by his flustered imagination.

* * *

The wall opposite the windows in the playroom held several rows of bookshelves. The door to the stairs was built into that wall. And one of the bulky, freestanding wardrobes was backed up against it.

Kendra held a blue book with golden letters. The title was *Journal of Secrets*. The book was held shut by three sturdy clasps, each with a keyhole. The remaining key Grandpa Sorenson had given her fit none of the keyholes, but the gold key she had found in the dollhouse armoire fit the bottom one. So one of the clasps was unlocked.

She had found the book while searching the bookshelves for a trigger to a secret passage. Using a stool, Kendra had reached even the higher shelves, but so far the search had been in vain. There was no sign of a secret

door. When she noticed a locked book with an intriguing title, she had quit the search in order to test her keys.

With the bottom clasp unlocked, Kendra tried to pry up the corner of the book and get a peek. But the cover was solid and the binding firm. She needed to find the other keys.

She heard somebody stampeding up the stairs and knew it could be only one person. Hurriedly she shelved the book and pocketed the keys. She did not want her nosy brother interfering with her puzzle.

Seth charged through the door and slammed it behind him. He was flushed and breathing hard. Dirt smeared the knees of his jeans. His face was smudged with sweat and grime. "You should have come," he sighed, flopping onto his bed.

"You're getting the bedspread filthy."

"It was freaky," he said. "It was so cool."

"What happened?"

"I found this path in the woods and met this weird old lady who lived in a shack. I think she's a witch. A real one."

"Whatever."

He rolled over and looked at her. "I'm serious. You should have seen her. She was a mess."

"So are you."

"No, like all scabby and gross. She was biting an old rope. She tried to make me stick my hand in some box."

"Did you?"

"No way. I took off. But she chased me or something. She threw rocks at me and knocked down this big branch. It could have killed me!"

"You must be pretty bored."

"I'm not lying!"

"I'll ask Grandpa Sorenson if he has homeless people living in his woods," Kendra said.

"No! He'll know I broke the rules."

"Don't you think he would want to know a witch built a shack on his property?"

"She acted like she knew him. I went pretty far. Maybe I was off his property."

“I doubt it. I think he owns everything for a long ways.”

Seth leaned back, lacing his fingers behind his head. “You should come visit her with me. I could find my way back.”

“Are you nuts? You said she tried to kill you.”

“We should spy on her. Find out what she’s up to.”

“If there really is a weird old lady living in the woods, you should tell Grandpa so he can call the police.”

Seth sat up. “Okay. Never mind. I made it up. Feel better?”

Kendra narrowed her eyes.

“I found something else cool,” Seth said. “Have you seen the tree house?”

“No.”

“Want me to show you?”

“Is it in the yard?”

“Yes, on the edge.”

“Okay.”

Kendra followed Seth outside and across the lawn. Sure enough, in the corner of the yard opposite the barn, there was a light blue playhouse up in a thick tree. It was situated on the back side of the tree, making it hard to see from most of the yard. The paint was peeling a little, but the little house had shingles on the roof and curtains in the window. Boards had been nailed into the tree to form a ladder.

Seth went up first. The rungs led up to a trapdoor, which he pushed open. Kendra climbed up after him.

Inside, the tree house felt bigger than it looked from the ground. There was a little table with four chairs. The pieces to a jigsaw puzzle were spread out on the table. Only a couple had been fit together.

“See, not bad,” Seth said. “I started that puzzle.”

“It’s beautiful. You must be gifted.”

“I didn’t work on it long.”

“Did you even find the corners?”

“No.”

“That’s the first thing you do.” She sat down and started looking for corner pieces. Seth took a seat and helped. “You never like puzzles,”

Kendra said.

“It’s more fun doing them in a tree house.”

“If you say so.”

Seth found a corner piece and set it aside. “Think Grandpa would let me move in here?”

“You’re a weirdo.”

“I’d only need a sleeping bag,” he said.

“You’d get freaked out once it was late.”

“No way.”

“The witch might come get you.”

Instead of responding, he started looking more intently for the other corner pieces. Kendra could tell the comment had gotten to him. She decided not to tease him any further. The fact that he seemed scared of the lady he had met in the woods legitimized his story a lot. Seth had never scared easily. This was the kid who had jumped off the roof under the misguided assumption that a garbage bag would work like a parachute. The kid who had put the head of a live snake in his mouth on a dare.

They found the corners and finished most of the perimeter of the puzzle by the time they heard Lena calling them for dinner.

Chapter 4



The Hidden Pond

Rain pattered endlessly against the roof. Kendra had never heard such a noisy downpour. Then again, she had never been in an attic during a rainstorm. There was something relaxing about the steady drumming, so constant that it almost became inaudible without ever decreasing in volume.

Standing at the window beside the telescope, she watched the deluge. The rain fell straight and hard. There was no wind, just layer upon layer of streaking droplets, blurring into a gray haze in the distance. The gutter below her was about to overflow.

Seth sat on a stool in the corner, painting. Lena had been creating paint-by-numbers canvases for him, sketching them with expert speed, customizing each image to his specifications. The current project was a dragon battling a knight on horseback amid a fuming wasteland. Lena had outlined the images in considerable detail, including subtleties of light and shade, so that the finished products looked quite accomplished. She had taught Seth how to mix paint and given him samples of which hue

corresponded to each number. For the current painting, she had incorporated more than ninety different shades.

Kendra had rarely seen Seth demonstrate as much diligence as he did on the paintings. After a few brief lessons on how to apply the paint, including the purposes of different brushes and tools, he had already finished a large canvas of pirates sacking a town and a smaller one of a snake charmer diving away from a striking cobra. Two impressive paintings in three days. He was an addict! And he was almost done with his latest project.

Crossing to the bookshelf, Kendra ran a hand along the spines of the volumes. She had searched the room thoroughly and had yet to find the last keyhole, let alone a secret passage to the other side of the attic. Seth could be a pest, but now that he had become immersed in his painting, she was starting to miss him.

Maybe Lena would outline a painting for her. Kendra had turned down her initial offer, since it sounded childish, like coloring. But the finished products looked much less juvenile than Kendra had anticipated.

Kendra opened the door and descended the stairs. The house was dim and quiet, the rainfall more distant as she left the attic behind. She walked along the hall and down the stairs to the main floor.

The house seemed too quiet. All the lights were out despite the gloom. “Lena?”

There was no answer.

Kendra went through the living room, the dining room, and into the kitchen. No sign of the housekeeper. Had she left?

Opening the door to the basement, Kendra peered down the steps into the darkness. The stairs were made of stone, as if leading to a dungeon. “Lena?” she called uncertainly. Surely the woman wasn’t down there without any light.

Kendra went back down the hall and slid open the door to the study. Having not yet entered this particular room, she first noticed the huge desk cluttered with books and papers. The massive head of a hairy boar with jutting tusks hung mounted on the wall. A collection of grotesque wooden masks rested on a shelf. Golfing trophies lined another. Plaques decorated the wood-paneled walls, along with a framed display of military medals and ribbons. There was a black-and-white picture of a much younger Grandpa

Sorenson showing off an enormous marlin. On the desk, inside a crystal sphere with a flat bottom, was an eerie replica of a human skull no bigger than her thumb. Kendra slid the study door closed.

She tried the garage, the parlor, and the family room. Maybe Lena had run to the store.

Kendra walked out to the back porch, shielded from the rain by the overhang. She loved the fresh, damp scent of rainfall. It continued to come down hard, puddling around the garden. Where did the butterflies hide from such a downpour?

Then she saw Lena. The housekeeper knelt in the mud beside a bush blossoming with large blue and white roses, absolutely soaked, apparently weeding. Her white hair was plastered to her head, and her housecoat was drenched.

“Lena?”

The housekeeper looked up, smiled, and waved.

Kendra retrieved an umbrella from the hall closet and joined Lena in the garden. “You’re sopping,” Kendra said.

Lena rooted out a weed. “It’s a warm rain. I like being out in the weather.” She stuffed the weed into a bulging garbage bag.

“You’re going to catch a cold.”

“I don’t often take ill.” She paused to stare up at the clouds. “It won’t last much longer.”

Kendra tilted her umbrella back and gazed heavenward. Leaden skies in all directions. “You think?”

“Wait and see. The rain will pass within the hour.”

“Your knees are all muddy.”

“You think I’ve lost my marbles.” The diminutive woman stood up and spread her arms wide, tilting her head back. “Do you ever look up at the rain, Kendra? It feels like the sky is falling.”

Kendra tilted the umbrella back again. Millions of raindrops rushed toward her, some pelting her face and making her blink. “Or like you’re soaring up to the clouds,” she said.

“I suppose I should get you inside before my unusual habits rub off.”

“No, I didn’t mean to disturb you.” Back under the protection of the umbrella, Kendra wiped droplets from her forehead. “I guess you don’t

want the umbrella.”

“That would defeat the purpose. I’ll be in shortly.”

Kendra returned to the house. She stole glances at Lena through a window. It was just so peculiar, she couldn’t resist spying. Sometimes Lena was working. Sometimes she was smelling a blossom or stroking its petals. And the rain kept falling.

* * *

Kendra was sitting on her bed, reading poems by Shel Silverstein, when the room suddenly brightened. The sun was out.

Lena had been right about the rain. It had relented about forty minutes after her prediction. The housekeeper had come inside, changed out of her wet clothes, and made sandwiches.

Across the room, the painting of the knight charging the dragon was complete. Seth had gone outside an hour ago. Kendra was in a lazy mood.

Just as Kendra returned her attention to the latest poem, Seth burst into the room, breathing hard. He wore only socks on his feet. His clothes were streaked with mud. “You *have* to come see what I found in the woods.”

“Another witch?”

“No. Way cooler.”

“A hobo camp?”

“I’m not going to say; you have to come see.”

“Does it involve hermits or lunatics?”

“No people,” he said.

“How far from the yard?”

“Not far.”

“We could get in trouble. Besides, it’s muddy out.”

“Grandpa is hiding a beautiful park in the woods,” Seth blurted.

“What?” asked Kendra.

“You have to come see it. Put on galoshes or something.”

Kendra closed the book.

* * *

The sunlight came and went, depending on the shifting clouds. A soft breeze ruffled the foliage. The woods smelled mulchy. Scrambling over a damp, rotting log, Kendra shrieked when she saw a glistening white frog.

Seth turned around. "Awesome."

"Try *disgusting*."

"I've never seen a white frog," said Seth. He tried to grab it, but the frog took an enormous leap as he approached. "Whoa! That thing flew!"

He checked the underbrush where the frog had landed, but found nothing.

"Hurry up," Kendra said, glancing back the way they had come. The house was no longer in sight. She could not shake the sick, nervous feeling in her stomach.

Unlike her little brother, Kendra was not a natural rule breaker. She was in all the accelerated classes at school, got almost perfect grades, kept her room tidy, and always practiced for her piano lessons. Seth, on the other hand, settled for lousy grades, routinely skipped his homework, and earned frequent detentions. Of course, he was also the one with all the friends, so maybe there was a method to his madness.

"What's the rush?" He took the lead again, blazing a trail through the undergrowth.

"The longer we're gone, the more likely somebody will notice we're missing."

"It isn't much farther. See that hedge?"

It was not exactly a hedge. More like a tall barrier of unkempt bushes. "You call that a hedge?"

"The park is on the far side."

The wall of bushes extended as far as Kendra could see in either direction. "How do we get around it?"

"*Through* it. You'll see."

They reached the bushes and Seth turned left, studying the leafy barricade as he went, occasionally squatting and checking closer. The interlocked bushes ranged from ten to twelve feet tall, and they looked really thick.

"Okay, I think this is where I squirmed through." There was a deep indentation at the base of where two bushes overlapped. Seth dropped to all

fours and forced his way in.

“You’re going to have a billion ticks,” Kendra predicted.

“They’re all hiding from the rain,” he replied with perfect confidence.

Kendra got down and followed him.

“I don’t think this is the same way I got through last time,” Seth admitted. “It’s a little more cramped. But it should work.” He was now slithering on his belly.

“This better be good.” Kendra squirmed on her elbows, eyes squinted. The damp ground felt cold, and droplets fell from the bush as she jostled it. Seth reached the far side and stood up. She crawled through as well, her eyes widening as she got to her feet.

Before her lay a pristine pond, a couple of hundred yards across, with a small, verdant island at the center. A series of elaborate gazebos surrounded the pond, interconnected by a whitewashed boardwalk. Flowering vines wound along the latticework of the impressive promenade. Elegant swans glided on the water. Butterflies and hummingbirds wove and darted among the blossoms. On the far side of the pond, peacocks strutted and preened.

“What in the world?” Kendra gasped.

“Come on.” Seth started across the lush, neatly mown lawn toward the nearest gazebo. Kendra looked back, understanding why Seth had called the disheveled barrier of bushes a hedge. On this side, the bushes were neatly trimmed. The hedgerow encompassed the entire area, with a single arched entryway off to one side.

“Why didn’t we come through the entryway?” Kendra asked, trotting after her brother.

“Shortcut.” Seth paused at the white steps leading up to the gazebo to pluck a piece of fruit from an espalier. “Try one.”

“You should wash it,” Kendra said.

“It just rained.” He took a bite. “It’s so good.”

Kendra tried one. It was the sweetest nectarine she had ever tasted. “Delicious.”

Together they mounted the steps of the extravagant pavilion. The wood railing was perfectly smooth. Although unshielded from the elements, all the woodwork appeared to be in flawless condition: no peeling paint, no cracks, no splinters.

The gazebo was furnished with white wicker love seats and chairs. In some places the ubiquitous vines had been woven into living wreaths and other fanciful patterns. A bright parrot sat on a high perch staring down at them.

“Look at the parrot!” Kendra exclaimed.

“Last time I saw some monkeys,” Seth said. “Little guys with long arms. They were swinging all over the place. And there was a goat. It ran away as soon as it saw me.”



Seth took off, clomping down one of the boardwalks. Kendra followed more slowly, absorbing the scene. It looked like the setting of a fairy-tale wedding. She counted twelve pavilions, each unique. One had a small white

quay projecting into the pond. The little pier was connected to a floating shed that had to be a boathouse.

Kendra strolled after Seth, whose ruckus was sending the swans drifting toward the far side of the lake, leaving V-shaped ripples in their wake. The sun broke through the clouds and gleamed upon the water.

Why would Grandpa Sorenson keep a place like this a secret? It was magnificent! Why go through all the trouble of maintaining it if not to enjoy it? Hundreds of people could gather here with room to spare.

Kendra went to the gazebo with the pier and found that the boathouse was locked. It was not large; she guessed it held a few canoes or rowboats. Maybe Grandpa Sorenson would give them permission to paddle around the pond. No, she could not even tell him she knew about this place! Was that why he had told them about the ticks and made rules against venturing into the woods? To keep his little Eden hidden? Could he be so selfish and secretive?

Kendra finished a complete lap around the pond, walking on clean wooden planks the entire way. Across the pond Seth yelled, and a small flock of cockatoos took flight. The sun retreated behind clouds. They needed to get back. Kendra told herself she could return later.

* * *

Kendra was concerned when she cut into her steak. The middle was pink, almost red at the center. Grandpa Sorenson and Dale were already taking bites.

“Is my steak cooked?” Kendra ventured.

“‘Course it’s cooked,” Dale said around a mouthful.

“It’s pretty red in the middle.”

“Only way to eat a steak,” Grandpa said, dabbing his mouth with a linen napkin. “Medium rare. Keeps it juicy and tender. If you cook it all the way through, you might as well eat shoe leather.”

Kendra glanced at Lena.

“Go ahead, dear,” the woman urged. “You won’t get sick; I cooked it plenty.”

“I like it,” Seth said, chewing on a bite. “We have any ketchup?”

“Why would you go and ruin a perfectly good steak with ketchup?” Dale moaned.

“You put it on your eggs,” Lena reminded him, placing a bottle in front of Seth.

“That’s different. Ketchup and onions on eggs is a necessity.”

“That’s sickening,” Seth said, upending the bottle over his steak.

Kendra took a bite of the garlic potatoes. They were tasty. Mustering her courage, she sampled the steak. Bursting with flavorful seasoning, it was much easier to chew than other steak she had eaten. “The steak is wonderful,” she said.

“Thank you, dear,” said Lena.

They ate in silence for a few moments. Grandpa dabbed his mouth with his napkin again and cleared his throat.

“What do you suppose makes people so eager to break rules?”

Kendra felt a jolt of guilt. The question was addressed generally and hung there awaiting a response. When nobody answered, Grandpa continued.

“Is it simply the pleasure of disobedience? The thrill of rebellion?”

Kendra glanced at Seth. He stared at his plate, picking at his potatoes.

“Were the rules unfair, Kendra? Was I being unreasonable?”

“No.”

“Did I leave you with nothing to do, Seth? No pool? No tree house? No toys or hobbies?”

“We had things to do.”

“Then why did you two go into the woods? I warned you there would be consequences.”

“Why are you hiding weird old ladies out in the forest?” Seth blurted.

“Weird old ladies?” Grandpa asked.

“Yeah, what about that?”

Grandpa nodded thoughtfully. “She has a rotten old rope. You didn’t blow on it?”

“I didn’t go near her. She was freaky.”

“She came to me and asked if she could build a shack on my property. She promised to keep to herself. I saw no harm in it. You shouldn’t go

bothering her.”

“Seth found your private retreat,” Kendra said. “He wanted me to see it. My curiosity got the better of me.”

“Private retreat?”

“Big pond? Fancy boardwalk? Parrots and swans and peacocks?”

Grandpa looked at Dale, speechless. Dale shrugged.

“I was hoping you’d take us out on a boat,” Kendra said.

“Who said anything about a boat?”

Kendra rolled her eyes. “I saw the boathouse, Grandpa.”

He tossed his hands up and shook his head.

Kendra set her fork down. “Why would you let such a nice place go to waste?”

“That is my business,” Grandpa said. “Yours was to obey my rules, for your own protection.”

“We’re not afraid of ticks,” Seth said.

Grandpa folded his hands and lowered his eyes. “I was not entirely honest about why you needed to stay out of the woods.” He lifted his gaze. “On my land, I provide refuge for some dangerous animals, many of them endangered. This includes poisonous snakes, toads, spiders, and scorpions, along with bigger game. Wolves, apes, panthers. I use chemicals and other controls to keep them away from the yard, but the woods are extremely hazardous. Particularly the island in the center of the lake. It is deliberately infested with inland taipans, also called ‘fierce snakes,’ the deadliest serpent known to man.”

“Why didn’t you warn us?” Kendra asked.

“My preserve is a secret. I have all the necessary licenses, but if my neighbors complained, those could be revoked. You must not tell a soul, not even your parents.”

“We saw a white frog,” Seth said breathlessly. “Was that poisonous?”

Grandpa nodded. “Quite lethal. In Central America the indigenous people use them to fashion poisoned darts.”

“Seth tried to catch it.”

“Had he succeeded,” Grandpa said gravely, “he would be dead.”

Seth swallowed. “I’ll never go into the woods again.”

“I trust you won’t,” Grandpa said. “All the same, a rule is of no value unless the punishment is enforced. You will have to stay in your room for the rest of your stay.”

“What?” Seth said. “But you lied to us! Being afraid of ticks is a lame reason to stay out of the woods! I just thought you were treating us like babies.”

“You should have brought those concerns to me,” Grandpa said. “Was I unclear about the rules or the consequences?”

“You were unclear about the reasons,” Seth said.

“That is my right. I am your grandfather. And this is my property.”

“I am your grandson. You should tell me the truth. You’re not setting a very good example.”

Kendra tried not to laugh. Seth was in lawyer mode. He always tried to maneuver out of trouble with their parents. Sometimes he made some pretty good points.

“What do you think, Kendra?” Grandpa asked.

She had not expected him to solicit her opinion. She tried to collect her thoughts. “Well, I agree that you didn’t tell us the whole truth. No way would I have gone into the woods if I knew there would be dangerous animals.”

“Me neither,” Seth said.

“I made two simple rules, you understood them, and you broke them. Just because I chose not to share all my reasons for making the rules, you think you should escape punishment?”

“Yes,” Seth said. “Just this once.”

“That doesn’t sound fair to me,” Grandpa said. “Unless the punishments are enforced, rules lose all their power.”

“But we won’t do it again,” Seth said. “We promise. Don’t lock us up in the house for two weeks!”

“Don’t blame me,” Grandpa said. “You locked yourself up by disregarding the rules. Kendra, what do you think would be fair?”

“Maybe you could give us a reduced punishment as a warning. Then the full punishment if we mess up again.”

“Reduced punishment,” Grandpa mused. “So you still pay a price for your disobedience, but you get one more chance. I might be able to live

with that. Seth?”

“Better than the whole punishment.”

“That settles it. I will reduce your sentence to a single day. You will spend tomorrow confined to the attic. You can come down for meals, and you can use the bathroom, but that is all. Break any of my rules again, and you will not leave the attic until your parents come for you. For your own safety. Understood?”

“Yes, sir,” Kendra said.

Seth nodded his agreement.

Chapter 5



Journal of Secrets

Did you ever notice the keyhole on the belly of the unicorn?” Seth asked. He was lying on the floor beside the fanciful rocking horse, hands laced behind his head.

Kendra looked up from her painting. She had asked Lena to create a paint-by-numbers to help her endure her incarceration. Kendra had wanted to paint the pavilions around the pond, and Lena had quickly sketched a scene with startling accuracy, as if the housekeeper had the place memorized. Seth declined to have another canvas prepped. Stuck in the attic or not, he was sick of painting.

“Keyhole?”

“Weren’t you looking for keyholes?”

Kendra got off her stool and crouched beside her brother. Sure enough, there was a tiny keyhole on the underside of the unicorn. She retrieved her keys from the nightstand drawer. The third key Grandpa Sorenson had given her did the trick. A small hatch swung open. Out fell several rose-

shaped chocolates wrapped in gold foil, identical to the one she had found in the miniature armoire.

“What are those?” Seth asked.

“Soap,” Kendra said.

Kendra reached up into the hatch and felt around inside the hollow rocking horse. She found a few more rosebud chocolates and a tiny golden key like the one from the armoire. The second key to the locked journal!

“They look like candy,” Seth said, snatching one of the ten chocolates.

“Have one. They’re perfumed. You’ll smell pretty.”

He unwrapped it. “Funny color for soap. Smells a lot like chocolate.” He popped the whole thing in his mouth. His eyebrows shot up. “Holy cow, this is good!”

“Since you found the keyhole, how about we split them fifty-fifty.” She was a little worried he would eat all of them otherwise.

“Sounds fair,” he said, grabbing four more.

Kendra placed her five chocolates in the nightstand drawer and retrieved the locked book. As she expected, the second gold key unlocked another clasp. Where could the third one be?

She slapped her forehead. The first two had been hidden inside things the other keys had opened. The other one must be in the jewelry box!

Opening the jewelry box, she rummaged through the compartments of glittering pendants, brooches, and rings. Sure enough, disguised on a charm bracelet, she found a tiny golden key matching the other two.

Kendra eagerly crossed the room and inserted the key into the final lock on the *Journal of Secrets*. The final clasp unlatched and she opened the book. The first page was blank. So was the second. She thumbed quickly through the pages. The whole book was blank. Just an empty journal. Was Grandpa Sorenson trying to encourage her to keep a diary?

But the whole game with the keys had been so sneaky. Maybe there was a trick to this as well. A hidden message. Disappearing ink or something. What was the trick with disappearing ink? Spray it with lemon juice and hold it up to a light? Something like that. And there was another trick where you rubbed gently with a pencil and a message appeared. Or maybe something even more devious.

Kendra surveyed the journal more carefully, hunting for clues. She held a few pages up against the window to see if the light would betray hidden watermarks or other mysterious evidence.

“What are you doing?” Seth asked. He had only one chocolate rosebud left. She would need to hide her chocolates someplace more secure than the nightstand drawer.

She held up a final page. The light revealed nothing. “Practicing for my audition at the insane asylum.”

“I bet you’ll win first prize,” he teased.

“Unless they see your face,” she retorted.

Seth went over and scooped some kernels for Goldilocks. “She laid another egg.” He opened the cage to retrieve it and stroked her soft feathers.

Kendra plopped down on the bed, leafing through the last pages. Suddenly she stopped. There was writing on one of the final pages. Not really hidden, just tucked away in an unlikely spot. Three words written near the binding, toward the bottom of an otherwise empty page.

Drink the milk.

Folding the corner, she flipped through the remaining pages. Then she skimmed the rest of the pages from the start to make sure she had missed no similar messages. There were no other cryptic clues.

Drink the milk.

Maybe soaking a page in milk would make words appear. She could soak one in the tins of milk Dale left out.

Or that could be the milk the message was talking about! A challenge to drink unprocessed cow’s milk—what purpose could that serve? To give her diarrhea? Dale had made a special point of warning her *not* to drink the milk. Of course, he had acted sort of peculiar about it. He could be hiding something.

Drink the milk.

All the hassle of finding holes for the keys Grandpa Sorenson gave her, in order to uncover extra keys that fit a locked journal, for that odd message? Was she missing something, or overanalyzing? The hunt might have simply been meant to occupy her time.

“Do you think Mom and Dad would let us get a pet chicken?” Seth asked, holding the hen.

“Probably right after they get us a pet buffalo.”

“Why don’t you ever hold Goldilocks? She’s really good.”

“Holding a live chicken sounds disgusting.”

“Better than holding a dead one.”

“I’m fine just petting her.”

“You’re missing out.” Seth held the hen up to his face. “You’re a good chicken, aren’t you, Goldilocks?” The hen clucked softly.

“She’s going to peck your eyes out,” Kendra warned.

“No way, she’s tame.”

Popping one of the rosebud chocolates in her mouth, Kendra replaced the *Journal of Secrets* in the nightstand drawer and returned to her painting. She scowled. Between the gazebos, pond, and swans, the picture required more than thirty shades of white, gray, and silver. Using the sample hues Lena had given her, she prepared her next color.

* * *

The sun was bright the next day. There was no evidence that it had ever rained or that it would ever rain again. Hummingbirds, butterflies, and bumblebees had returned to the yard. Lena gardened in the back beneath a large sun hat.

Kendra sat in the shade on the back porch. No longer a prisoner in the attic, she felt better able to enjoy the fine weather. She wondered if the diverse butterflies she saw in the yard were among the species Grandpa Sorenson had imported. How did you keep a butterfly from leaving your property? The milk, perhaps?

She passed the time with a game she had found on a shelf in the attic—a triangular board with fifteen holes and fourteen pegs. The object was to jump pegs like checkers until you had only one left, which sounded simple at first. The problem was that in the process of jumping, certain pegs ended up stranded, unable to jump or be jumped. The number of pegs you left stranded on the board determined your score.

Her best effort so far was three, which the directions labeled typical. Leaving two was good. One was genius. Five or more labeled you hopeless.

While resetting the pegs for a fresh attempt, Kendra saw what she had been waiting for. Dale was walking along the perimeter of the yard with a

pie tin. Setting the peg game on a table, she hurried to intercept him.

Dale looked mildly distressed at her approach. "I can't let Lena see you talking to me like this," he murmured in low tones. "I'm supposed to put the milk out on the sly."

"I thought nobody knew you put the milk out."

"Right. See, your grandfather doesn't know, but Lena does. We try to keep it our secret."

"I was wondering what the milk tastes like."

He looked nervous. "Didn't you hear me last time? You could get . . . shingles. Scabies. Scurvy."

"Scurvy?"

"This milk is a bacterial stew. That's why the insects like it so well."

"I have friends who have tried milk fresh from the cow. They survived."

"I'm sure those were healthy cows," Dale said. "These cows are . . . never you mind. Idea is, this ain't just any milk. It's highly contaminated. I wash my hands good after even handling the stuff."

"So you don't think I should taste it."

"Not unless you're aiming for a premature burial."

"Would you at least take me in the barn to see the cows?"

"See the cows? That would be breaking your grandfather's rules!"

"I thought the point was we might get hurt," Kendra said. "I'll be fine if you're with me."

"Your grandfather's rules are your grandfather's rules. He has his reasons. I'm not about to go breaking them. Or bending them either."

"No? Maybe if you let me see the cows, I'll keep your secret about putting out the milk."

"Now see, that's blackmail. I'll not stand for blackmail."

"I wonder what Grandpa will say when I tell him at dinner tonight."

"He'll likely say you ought to mind your own affairs. Now, with your leave, I have chores to do."

She watched him walk away with the tin of milk. He surely had acted defensive and strange. There was definitely some mystery surrounding the

milk. But all the talk about bacteria made her reluctant to try it. She needed a guinea pig.

* * *

Seth tried a flip off the boulder into the pool, but landed on his back. He never could quite make it all the way around. He surfaced and stroked to the side to try again.

“Nice back-flop,” Kendra said, standing beside the pool. “That was one for the blooper reel.”

Seth climbed out of the water. “I’d like to see you do a better one. Where have you been?”

“I found out a secret.”

“What?”

“I can’t explain. But I can show you.”

“Good as the lake?”

“Not quite. Hurry up.”

Putting a towel over his shoulders, Seth stepped into his sandals. Kendra led him away from the pool through the garden to some flowering shrubs on the outskirts of the yard. Behind the plants lay a large pie tin full of milk where a crowd of hummingbirds were feeding.

“They drink milk?” he asked.

“Yeah, but that isn’t the point. Taste it.”

“Why?”

“You’ll see.”

“Have you tried it?”

“Yes.”

“What’s the big deal?”

“I told you, try it and you’ll see.”

Kendra watched curiously as he knelt by the tin. The hummingbirds dispersed. Seth dipped a finger into the milk and put it on his tongue.

“Pretty good. Sweet.”

“Sweet?”

He lowered his head and puckered his lips against the surface of the milk. Pulling back, he wiped his mouth. “Yeah, sweet and creamy. A little

warm, though.” Looking beyond Kendra, his eyes bulged. Seth jumped to his feet, screaming and pointing. “What the heck are those?”

Kendra turned. All she saw was a butterfly and a couple of hummingbirds. She looked back at Seth. He was turning in circles, eyes darting around the garden, apparently perplexed and amazed.

“They’re everywhere,” he said in awe.

“What are?”

“Look around. The fairies.”

Kendra stared at her brother. Could the milk have totally fried his brain? Or was he messing around with her? He didn’t appear to be faking. He was over by a rosebush gazing at a butterfly in wonder. Tentatively he reached a hand toward it, but it fluttered out of reach.

He turned back to Kendra. “Was it the milk? This is way cooler than the lake!” His excitement seemed genuine.

Kendra eyed the tin of milk. *Drink the milk*. If Seth was playing a prank, his acting skills had suddenly improved tenfold. She dipped a finger and put it in her mouth. Seth was right. It was sweet and warm. For an instant the sun gleamed in her eyes, making her blink.

She glanced back at her brother, who was creeping up on a small group of hovering fairies. Three had wings like butterflies, one like a dragonfly. She could not suppress a shriek at the impossible sight.

Kendra looked back at the milk. A fairy with hummingbird wings was drinking from her cupped hand. Other than the wings, the fairy looked like a slender woman not quite two inches tall. She wore a glittering turquoise slip and had long, dark hair. When Kendra leaned closer, the fairy zipped away.

There was no way she was really seeing this, right? There had to be an explanation. But the fairies were everywhere, near and far, shimmering in vivid colors. How could she deny what was before her eyes?

As Kendra continued to survey the garden, startled disbelief melted into wonder. Fairies of all conceivable varieties flitted about, exploring blossoms, gliding on the breeze, and acrobatically avoiding her brother.

Roaming the pathways of the garden in a daze, Kendra saw that the fairy women appeared to represent all nationalities. Some looked Asian, some Indian, some African, some European. Several were less comparable

to mortal women, with blue skin or emerald green hair. A few had antennae. Their wings came in all varieties, mostly patterned after butterflies, but much more elegantly shaped and radiantly colored. All the fairies gleamed brilliantly, outshining the flowers of the garden like the sun outshines the moon.

Rounding a corner on a pathway, Kendra stopped short. There stood Grandpa Sorenson, wearing a flannel shirt and work boots, arms folded across his chest.

“We need to talk,” he said.

* * *

The grandfather clock tolled the hour, chiming three times after the introductory melody. Sitting in a high-backed leather armchair in Grandpa Sorenson’s study, Kendra wondered if grandfather clocks got their name because only grandparents owned them.

She looked over at Seth, seated in an identical chair. It looked too big for him. These were chairs for adults.

Why had Grandpa Sorenson left the room? Were they in trouble? After all, he had given her the keys that ended up leading her and the guinea pig to sample the milk.

Even so, she could not quit worrying that she had discovered something that was meant to stay hidden. Not only were fairies real, but Grandpa Sorenson had hundreds in his yard.

“Is that a fairy skull?” Seth asked, pointing to the flat-bottomed globe with the thumb-sized skull on Grandpa’s desk.

“Probably,” Kendra said.

“Are we busted?”

“We better not be. There were no rules against drinking milk.”

The study door slid open. Grandpa entered along with Lena, who carried three mugs on a tray. Lena offered Kendra a mug, then Seth and Grandpa. The mug contained hot chocolate. Lena left the room as Grandpa took a seat behind his desk.

“I am impressed how quickly you solved my puzzle,” he said, taking a sip from his mug.

“You *wanted* us to drink the milk?” Kendra said.

“Assuming you were the right kind of people. Frankly, I don’t know you that well. I hoped that the kind of person who would take the trouble to solve my little puzzle would be the kind of person who could handle the notion of a preserve full of magical creatures. Fablehaven would be too much to swallow for most people.”

“Fablehaven?” Seth repeated.

“The name the founders gave this preserve centuries ago. A refuge for mystical creatures, a stewardship passed down from caretaker to caretaker over the years.”

Kendra tried the hot chocolate. It was superb! The flavor made her think of the rosebud chocolates.

“What do you have besides fairies?” Seth asked.

“Many beings, great and small. Which is the true reason the woods are off-limits. There are creatures out there much more perilous than venomous snakes or wild apes. Only certain orders of magical life forms are generally permitted in the yard. Fairies, pixies, and such.” Grandpa took another sip from his mug. “You like the hot chocolate?”

“It’s wonderful,” Kendra said.

“Made from the same milk you sampled in the garden today. Same milk the fairies drink. Just about the only food they’ll eat. When mortals drink it, their eyes are opened to an unseen world. But the effects wear off after a day. Lena will prepare you a cup every morning so you can stop stealing from the fairies.”

“Where does it come from?” Kendra asked.

“We make it special in the barn. We have some dangerous creatures in there, too, so it’s still off-limits.”

“Why’s everything off-limits?” Seth complained. “I’ve been a long way into those woods four times and I’ve always been fine.”

“Four times?” Grandpa said.

“All before the warning,” Seth amended hastily.

“Yes, well, your eyes were not yet opened to what truly surrounded you. And you were fortunate. Even when you were blind to the enchanted creatures populating the forest, there are many places you could have ventured into from which you would not have returned. Of course, now that

you can see them, the creatures here can interact with you much more readily, so the danger is much greater.”

“No offense, Grandpa, but is this really the truth?” Kendra asked. “You’ve told us so many versions of why the woods are forbidden.”

“You saw the fairies,” he said.

Kendra leaned forward. “Maybe the milk made us hallucinate. Maybe they were holograms. Maybe you just keep telling us whatever you think we’ll believe.”

“I understand your concern,” Grandpa said. “I wanted to protect you from the truth about Fablehaven unless you sought it out for yourselves. It is not the kind of information I wanted to thrust upon you. That is the truth. What I’m telling you now is the truth. You’ll have ample opportunity to confirm my words.”

“So the animals we saw at the pond were actually other creatures, like how the butterflies were fairies,” Kendra clarified.

“Most assuredly. The pond can be a hazardous place. Return there now, and you would find friendly naiads beckoning you near the water in order to pull you under and drown you.”

“That’s so cruel!” Kendra said.

“Depends on your perspective,” Grandpa said, spreading his hands. “To them, your life is so ridiculously short that to kill you is seen as absurd and funny. No more tragic than squashing a moth. Besides, they have a right to punish trespassers. The island at the center of the pond is a shrine to the Fairy Queen. No mortal is permitted to tread there. I know of a groundskeeper who broke that rule. The moment he set foot on the sacred island, he transformed into a cloud of dandelion fluff, clothes and all. He scattered on the breeze and was never seen again.”

“Why would he go there?” Kendra asked.

“The Fairy Queen is widely considered the most powerful figure in all fairydom. The groundskeeper had a desperate need and went to plead for her assistance. Apparently she was not impressed.”

“In other words, he had no respect for what was off-limits,” Kendra said, giving Seth a meaningful look.

“Precisely,” Grandpa agreed.

“The queen of the fairies lives on that little island?” Seth asked.

“No. It is merely a shrine meant to honor her. Similar shrines abound on my property, and all can be dangerous.”

“If the pond is dangerous, why does it have a boathouse?” Kendra asked.

“A previous caretaker of this preserve had a fascination with naiads.”

“The dandelion guy?” Seth asked.

“A different guy,” Grandpa said. “It’s a long story. Ask Lena about it sometime; I believe she knows the tale.”

Kendra shifted in the oversized chair. “Why do you live in such a scary place?”

Grandpa folded his arms on the desk. “It’s only frightening if you go where you don’t belong. This entire sanctuary is consecrated ground, governed by laws that cannot be broken by the creatures who dwell here. Only on this hallowed soil could mortals interact with these beings with any measure of safety. As long as mortals remain within their boundaries, they are protected by the founding covenants of this preserve.”

“Covenants?” Seth asked.

“Agreements. Specifically, a treaty ratified by all the orders of whimsical life forms who dwell here that affords a measure of security for mortal caretakers. In a world where mortal man has become the dominant force, most creatures of enchantment have fled to refuges like this one.”

“What are the covenants?” Kendra asked.

“The specific details are complex, with many limitations and exceptions. Speaking broadly, they are based on the law of the harvest, the law of retribution. If you do not bother the creatures, they will not bother you. That is what affords you so much protection when you are unable to see them. You can’t interact with them, so they generally behave likewise.”

“But now we can see them,” Seth said.

“Which is why you must use caution. The fundamental premises of the law are mischief for mischief, magic for magic, violence for violence. They will not initiate trouble unless you break the rules. You have to open the door. If you harass them, you open the door for them to harass you. Hurt them, they can hurt you. Use magic on them, they will use magic on you.”

“Use magic?” Seth said eagerly.

“Mortals were never meant to use magic,” Grandpa said. “We are nonmagical beings. But I have learned a few practical principles that help me manage things. Nothing you would find very remarkable.”

“Can you turn Kendra into a toad?”

“No. But there are beings out there who could. And I would not be able to change her back. Which is why I need to finish this thought: Breaking the rules can include trespassing where you are not allowed. There are geographic boundaries set where certain creatures are allowed and certain creatures, including mortals, are not permitted. The boundaries function as a way to contain the darker creatures without causing an uproar. If you go where you do not belong, you could open the door to vicious retribution from powerful enemies.”

“So only good creatures can enter the yard,” Kendra said.

Grandpa became very serious. “None of these creatures are good. Not the way we think of good. None are safe. Much of morality is peculiar to mortality. The best creatures here are merely not evil.”

“The fairies aren’t safe?” Seth asked.

“They aren’t out to harm anyone, or I wouldn’t allow them in the yard. I suppose they are capable of good deeds, but they would not normally do them for what we would consider the right reasons. Take brownies, for instance. Brownies don’t fix things to help people. They fix things because they enjoy fixing things.”

“Do the fairies talk?” Kendra asked.

“Not much to humans. They have a language all their own, although they rarely speak to each other, except to trade insults. Most never condescend to use human speech. They consider everything beneath them. Fairies are vain, selfish creatures. You may have noticed I drained all the fountains and the birdbaths outside. When they are full, the fairies assemble to stare at their reflections all day.”

“Is Kendra a fairy?” Seth asked.

Grandpa bit his lip and stared at the floor, obviously trying to choke back a laugh. “We had a mirror outside once and they flocked around it,” Kendra said, studiously ignoring both the comment and the reaction. “I wondered what the heck was going on.”

Grandpa regained his composure. “Exactly the sort of display I was trying to avoid by draining the birdbaths. Fairies are remarkably conceited.

Outside of a sanctuary like this one, they won't even let a mortal glimpse them. Since they consider looking at themselves the ultimate delight, they deny the pleasure to others. Most of the nymphs have the same mentality."

"Why don't they care here?" Kendra asked.

"They still care. But they can't hide when you drink their milk, so they have reluctantly grown accustomed to mortals seeing them. I have to laugh sometimes. The fairies pretend not to care what mortals think about them, but try giving one a compliment. She'll blush, and the others will crowd in for their turn. You would think they'd be embarrassed."

"I think they're pretty," Seth said.

"They're gorgeous!" Grandpa agreed. "And they can be useful. They handle most of my gardening. But good? Safe? Not so much."

Kendra swallowed the last of her hot chocolate. "So if we don't go into the woods or the barn, and don't bother the fairies, we'll be fine?"

"Yes. This house and the yard around it is the most protected location in Fablehaven. Only the gentlest creatures are allowed here. Of course, there are a few nights a year when all the creatures run amuck, and one of those is coming up. But I'll tell you more about it when the time comes."

Seth scooted forward in his chair. "I want to hear about the evil creatures. What's out there?"

"For the sake of your ability to sleep at night, I'm going to keep that to myself."

"I met that weird old lady. Was she really something else?"

Grandpa gripped the edge of the desk. "That encounter is a frightening example of why the woods are forbidden. It could have been disastrous. You ventured toward a very hazardous area."

"Is she a witch?" Seth asked.

"She is. Her name is Muriel Taggart."

"How come I could see her?"

"Witches are mortal."

"Then why don't you get rid of her?" Seth suggested.

"The shack is not her home. It is her prison. She personifies the reasons why exploring the woods is unwise. Her husband was a caretaker here more than a hundred and sixty years ago. She was an intelligent, lovely woman. But she became a frequent visitor to some of the darker portions of the

forest, where she consorted with unsavory beings. They tutored her. Before long, she became enamored with the power of witchcraft, and they acquired considerable influence over her. She became unstable. Her husband tried to help her, but she was already too demented.

“When she tried to aid some of the foul denizens of the woods in a treacherous act of rebellion, her husband called in assistance and had her imprisoned. She has been trapped in that shack ever since, held captive by the knots in the rope you saw. Let her story serve as another warning—you have no business in those woods.”

“I get it,” Seth said. He looked solemn.

“Enough jabbering about rules and monsters,” Grandpa said, standing up. “I have chores. And you have a new world to explore. The day is fading, go make the most of it. But stay in the yard.”

“What do you do all day?” Kendra inquired, walking out of the study beside Grandpa.

“Oh, I have many chores to keep this place in order. Fablehaven is home to many extraordinary wonders and delights, but it requires a great deal of maintenance. You might be able to accompany me some of the time, now that you know the true nature of the place. Mundane work, mostly. I expect you’d have more fun playing in the garden.”

Kendra laid a hand on Grandpa’s arm. “I want to see as much as I can.”

Chapter 6



Maddox

Kendra snapped awake with her sheets tented over her head. She was supposed to be excited about something. It felt like Christmas morning. Or a day she was going to take off school so her family could visit an amusement park. No, she was at Grandpa Sorenson's. The fairies!

She pushed off the sheets. Seth lay in a contorted position, hair wildly disheveled, mouth open, legs tangled in his covers. Still out cold. They had stayed up late discussing the events of the day, almost like friends rather than siblings.

Kendra rolled out of bed and padded over to the window. The sun was peeking over the eastern horizon, streaming gilded highlights across the treetops. She grabbed some clothes, went down to the bathroom, took off her nightshirt, and got dressed for the day.

Downstairs, the kitchen was empty. Kendra found Lena out on the porch balancing atop a stool. Lena was hanging wind chimes. She had already hung several along the length of the porch. A butterfly flitted around one of the chimes, playing a sweet, simple melody.

“Good morning,” Lena said. “You’re up early.”

“I’m still so excited from yesterday.” Kendra looked out at the garden. The butterflies, bumblebees, and hummingbirds were already going about their business. Grandpa was right—many clustered around the newly refilled birdbaths and fountains, admiring their reflections.

“Just a bunch of bugs again,” Lena said.

“Can I have some hot chocolate?”

“Let me hang these last chimes,” she said, moving the stool and climbing fearlessly on top of it. She was so old! If she fell she would probably die!

“Be careful,” Kendra said.

Lena waved a dismissive hand. “The day I’m too old to climb on a stool will be the day I throw myself off the roof.” She hung the final chime. “We had to take these down for you kids. Might have made you suspicious to see hummingbirds playing music.”

Kendra followed Lena back into the house. “Years ago, there used to be a church within earshot that would play melodies on the bells,” Lena said. “It was so funny to watch the fairies imitate the music. They still play those old songs sometimes.”

Lena opened the refrigerator, removing an old-fashioned milk bottle. Kendra sat at the table. Lena poured some milk into a pot on the stove and began adding ingredients. Kendra noticed that she was not just scooping in chocolate powder—she was stirring in contents from multiple containers.

“Grandpa said to ask you about the story of the guy who built the boathouse,” Kendra said.

Lena paused in her stirring. “Did he? I suppose I am more familiar with that story than most.” She resumed stirring. “What did he tell you?”

“He said the guy had an obsession with naiads. What’s a naiad, anyhow?”

“A water nymph. What else did he say?”

“Just that you know the story.”

“The man was named Patton Burgess,” said Lena. “He became caretaker of this property in 1878, inheriting the position from his maternal grandfather. He was a young man at the time, quite good-looking, wore a

moustache—there are pictures upstairs. The pond was his favorite place on the property.”

“Mine too.”

“He would go and gaze at the naiads for hours. They would try to tease him down to the water’s edge, as was their custom, in order to drown him. He would draw near, sometimes even pretending he meant to jump in, but always stayed tantalizingly out of reach.”

Lena sampled the hot chocolate and stirred some more. “Unlike most of the visitors, who seemed to regard the naiads as interchangeable, he paid special attention to a particular nymph, asking for her by name. He began to pay little heed to the other naiads. On the days when his favorite would not show herself, he left early.”

Lena poured the milk from the pot into a pair of mugs. “He became fixated on her. When he built the boathouse, the nymphs wondered what he could be doing. He constructed a broad, sturdy rowboat so he could go out on the water and be closer to the object of his fascination.” Lena brought the mugs to the table and sat down. “The naiads tried to upset his craft every time he set forth, but it was too cleverly constructed. They succeeded only in pushing it around the pond.”

Kendra took a sip. The hot chocolate was perfection. Barely cool enough to sip comfortably.

“Patton began trying to coax his favorite naiad to leave the water, to come walk with him on the land. She responded by urging him to join her in the pond, for to leave the water would mean to enter mortality. The tug-of-war went on for more than three years. He would serenade her on his violin, and read her poetry, and make her promises about the joys their life together would hold. He showed such sincerity, and such perseverance, that on occasion she would gaze into his kind eyes and falter.”

Lena sipped the hot chocolate. “One day in March, Patton got careless. He leaned too close to the gunwale, and a naiad caught hold of his sleeve as he conversed with his favorite. A strong man, he resisted her, but the struggle pulled him to one side of the boat, upsetting his typical equilibrium. A pair of naiads heaved upward on the other side and it capsized.”

“He died?” Kendra was horrified.

“He would have died, yes. The naiads had their prize. In their domain he was no match for them. Giddy with the long-awaited victory, they rushed him toward the bottom of the pond to add him to their collection of mortal victims. But it was more than his favorite could bear. She had grown fond of Patton, seduced by his diligent attention, and, unlike the others, she did not consider his death an amusement. She fought off her sisters and returned him to the shore. That was the day I left the pond.”

Kendra spewed hot chocolate across the table. “You’re the naiad?”

“I was, once.”

“You became mortal?”

Lena absently blotted up the hot chocolate Kendra had sprayed, using a small towel. “If I could go back, I would make the same decision every time. We had a joyful life. Patton managed Fablehaven for fifty-one years before passing it off to a nephew. He lived twelve years after that—died at ninety-one. His mind was sharp to the end. Helps to have a young wife.”

“How are you still alive?”

“I became subject to the laws of mortality, but they have taken effect gradually. As I sat by his deathbed, I looked perhaps twenty years older than I had on the day when I carried him from the water. I felt guilty about looking so young as his frail body was shutting down. I wanted to be old like him. Of course, now that my age is finally catching up with me, I don’t care for it much.”

Kendra sipped more of her hot chocolate. She was so enthralled that she barely tasted it. “What did you do after he passed away?”

“I took advantage of my mortality. I had paid a steep price for it, so I traveled the world to see what it had to offer. Europe, the Middle East, India, Japan, South America, Africa, Australia, the Pacific Islands. I had many adventures. I set some swimming records in Britain, and could have set even more except I was holding back—no sense raising a lot of questions. I worked as a painter, a chef, a geisha, a trapeze artist, a nurse. Many men pursued me, but I never loved again. Eventually, there was a sameness to the traveling, so I returned home, to the place my heart never left.”

“Do you ever go back to the pond?”

“Only in memory. It would be unwise. They despise me there, all the more intensely because of their secret envy. How they would laugh at my

appearance! They have not aged a day. But I have experienced many things that they will never know. Some painful, some wonderful.”

Kendra finished the last of her hot chocolate and wiped her lips. “What was it like being a naiad?”

Lena gazed out the window. “Hard to say. I ask myself the same question. It wasn’t just my body that became mortal; my mind transformed as well. I think I prefer this life, but it might be because I have changed fundamentally. Mortality is a totally different state of being. You become more aware of time. I was absolutely content as a naiad. I lived in an unchanging state for what must have been many millennia, never thinking of the future or the past, always looking for amusement, always finding it. Almost no self-awareness. It feels like a blur now. No, like a blink. A single moment that lasted thousands of years.”

“You would have lived forever,” Kendra exclaimed.

“We weren’t quite immortal. We did not age, so I suppose some of our kind could endure forever, if lakes and rivers last forever. Difficult to say. We did not really live, not like mortals. We dreamed.”

“Wow.”

“At least that was the way of things until Patton,” Lena said, more to herself now. “I began looking forward to his visits, and back on them in memory. I suppose that was the beginning of the end.”

Kendra shook her head. “And I thought you were just the half-Chinese housekeeper.”

She smiled. “Patton always liked my eyes.” She batted them. “He said he was of the Asian persuasion.”

“What’s Dale’s story? Is he a pirate king or something?”

“Dale is a regular man. A second cousin of your grandfather. A man he trusts.”

Kendra looked into her empty mug. A ring of chocolate sediment circled the bottom. “I have a question,” she said, “and I want you to answer honestly.”

“If I can.”

“Is my Grandma Sorenson dead?”

“What makes you ask that?”

“I think Grandpa makes up phony excuses for her not being around. This is a dangerous place. He has lied about other things. I get the feeling he’s trying to protect us from the truth.”

“I often wonder if lies are ever a protection.”

“She’s dead, isn’t she.”

“No, she’s alive.”

“Is she the witch?”

“She’s not the witch.”

“Is she really visiting Aunt Whoever in Missouri?”

“That is for your grandfather to tell.”

* * *

Seth looked over his shoulder. Besides the fairies fluttering about, the garden looked still. Grandpa and Dale were long gone. Lena was in the house dusting. Kendra was off doing whatever boring things kept her occupied. He had his emergency kit in hand, along with a few strategic additions. Operation See Cool Monsters was about to begin.

He hesitantly stepped off the edge of the lawn into the woods, half-expecting werewolves to leap out at him. There were a few fairies up ahead, not as many as in the garden. Otherwise things looked pretty much the same.

He marched forward, setting a brisk pace.

“Where do you think you’re going?”

Seth whirled. Kendra was approaching from the garden. He walked back to meet her at the edge of the lawn. “I want to see what’s really at the pond. Those nai-thingies and stuff.”

“How brain-damaged are you? Didn’t you hear a word Grandpa told us yesterday?”

“I’m going to be careful! I won’t go near the water.”

“You could get killed! I mean really killed, not bitten by a tick. Grandpa made those rules for a reason!”

“Adults always underestimate kids,” Seth said. “They get all protective because they think we’re babies. Think about it. Mom used to complain all the time about me playing in the street. But I always did it. And what

happened? Nothing. I paid attention. I stayed out of the way when a car came.”

“This is so different!”

“Grandpa goes all over the place.”

Kendra clenched her hands into fists. “Grandpa knows the places to avoid! You don’t even know what you’re dealing with. Besides, when Grandpa finds out, you’ll be stuck in the attic the rest of our stay.”

“How’s he going to find out?”

“He knew we went into the woods last time! He knew we drank the milk!”

“Because you were there! Your bad luck rubbed off on me. How did you know where I was going?”

“Your secret agent skills need some work,” Kendra said. “A good start might be not wearing your camouflage shirt every time you go exploring.”

“I need to hide from the dragons!”

“Right. You’re practically invisible. Just a floating head.”

“I have my emergency kit. If anything attacks, I can scare it away with my gear.”

“With rubber bands?”

“I have a whistle. I have a mirror. I have a cigarette lighter. I have firecrackers. They’ll think I’m a wizard.”

“Do you really believe that?”

“And I have this.” He pulled out the little skull in the crystal globe from Grandpa’s desk. “That should make them think twice.”

“A skull the size of a peanut?”

“There probably aren’t even any monsters,” Seth said. “What makes you think Grandpa’s telling the truth this time?”

“I don’t know, maybe the fairies?”

“Well, good job. You blew it. Congratulate yourself. I can’t go now.”

“I’m going to blow it every time. Not to be a jerk, but because you could really get hurt.”

Seth kicked a stone, sending it skidding into the woods. “What am I supposed to do now?”

“How about exploring the enormous garden full of fairies?”

"I already did. I can't catch them."

"Not to catch them. To look at magical creatures that nobody else even knows exist. Come on."

He reluctantly joined her.

"Oh, look, another fairy," he mumbled. "Now I've seen a million."

"Don't forget to put the skull back."

* * *

When they responded to the call for dinner, a stranger sat at the table along with Grandpa and Dale. The stranger stood when they entered. He was taller than Grandpa and much broader, with curly brown hair. The layers of furry skins he wore made him look like a mountain man. He was missing the bottom of one earlobe.

"Kids, this is Maddox Fisk," Grandpa said. "Maddox, meet my grandchildren, Kendra and Seth." Kendra shook the man's calloused, thick-fingered hand.

"Do you work here too?" Seth asked.

"Maddox is a fairy broker," Grandpa said.

"Among other things," Maddox added. "Call fairies my specialty."

"You sell fairies?" Kendra asked, taking a seat.

"Trap them, buy them, trade them, sell them. All of the above."

"How do you trap them?" Seth asked.

"A man has to keep his trade secrets private," Maddox said, taking a bite of pork roast. "Let me tell you, apprehending a fairy is no easy task. Slippery critters. The trick usually involves appealing to their vanity. Even then, takes quite a bit of know-how."

"Could you use an apprentice?" Seth inquired.

"Hold that thought about six years." Maddox winked at Kendra.

"Who buys fairies?" Kendra asked.

"Folks who run preserves, like your granddad. A few private collectors. Other brokers."

"Are there lots of preserves?" Seth asked.

"Dozens," Maddox replied. "They're on all seven continents."

"Even Antarctica?" Kendra asked.

“Two in Antarctica, although one is underground. Harsh environment. Perfect for certain species, though.”

Kendra swallowed a bite of pork. “What keeps people from discovering the sanctuaries?”

“There has been a worldwide network of dedicated people keeping the preserves secret for thousands of years,” Grandpa said. “They are backed by ancient fortunes, held in trust. Bribes get paid. Locations are changed when necessary.”

“Helps that most folks are unable to see the little critters,” Maddox said. “With the right licenses, you can get butterflies through customs. When you can’t, there are other ways to cross borders.”

“The preserves are the final refuge for many ancient and wonderful species,” Grandpa said. “The goal is to prevent these wondrous beings from passing out of existence.”

“Amen,” Maddox said.

“You have a good haul this season?” Dale asked.

“Far as trapping goes, pickings are getting slimmer every year. I made a few exciting finds in the wild. One you won’t believe. I picked up several rare specimens from preserves in Southeast Asia and Indonesia. I’m sure we can do some trading. I’ll tell you more when we adjourn to the study.”

“You kids would be welcome to join us,” Grandpa said.

“All right!” Seth cheered.

Kendra took another bite of the succulent pork roast. Everything Lena cooked was outstanding. Always perfectly seasoned, typically served with delicious gravies or sauces. Kendra never had any complaints about her Mom’s cooking, but Lena was in a class all her own.

Grandpa and Maddox discussed people Kendra did not know, other individuals involved in the secretive world of fairy aficionados. She wondered if Maddox would ask about Grandma, but it never came up.

Maddox repeatedly mentioned the evening star. Grandpa seemed to focus on this news with particular interest. Rumors that the evening star was forming again. A woman who claimed the evening star tried to recruit her. Whispers of an attack by the evening star.

Kendra could not resist interjecting. “What’s the evening star? It sounds like you’re using it as a code word.”

Maddox glanced uncertainly at Grandpa. Grandpa gave him a nod.

“The Society of the Evening Star is an arcane organization that we all hoped had gone extinct decades ago,” Maddox explained. “Over the centuries, their relevance has waxed and waned. Seems like just when you think you’ve seen the last of them, you start hearing rumors again.”

“They are dedicated to overthrowing preserves in order to use them for their own misguided purposes,” Grandpa said. “Members of the Society consort with demons and practitioners of the black arts.”

“Are they going to attack us?” Seth asked.

“Not likely,” Grandpa said. “The preserves are protected by powerful magic. But I lend an ear to the news all the same. Rarely hurts to be cautious.”

“Why the evening star?” Kendra asked. “It’s such a pretty name.”

“The evening star ushers in the night,” Maddox said. They considered the statement in silence. Maddox wiped his lips with a napkin. “Sorry. Not a very cheery topic around the dinner table.”

After supper, Lena cleared the table and they all went to the study. On the way there, Maddox collected several cases and crates from the entry hall. Dale, Seth, and Kendra helped. The cases had perforations, evidently to allow the creatures inside to breathe, but Kendra was unable to see into them. All were locked.

Grandpa settled in behind his large desk, Dale and Maddox claimed the oversized armchairs, Lena leaned against the windowsill, and Kendra and Seth found seats on the floor.

“First off,” Maddox said, bending over and unlocking a large black crate, “we have some fairies from a preserve on Timor.” He opened the hatch, and eight fairies soared out. Two tiny ones, not even an inch tall, darted to the window. They were amber in color, with wings like flies. One banged the windowpane with a miniscule fist. A large fairy, more than four inches tall, hovered in front of Kendra. She looked like a miniature Pacific Islander with dragonfly wings across her back as well as tiny wings on her ankles.

Three of the fairies had elaborate butterfly wings with the appearance of stained glass. Another had oily black wings. The last had furry wings, and her body was coated with pale blue fuzz.

“Whoa!” Seth said. “That one’s all hairy.”

“A downy fountain sprite, found only on the island of Roti,” Maddox said.

“I like the little ones,” Kendra said.

“A more common variety—they haunt the Malaysian Peninsula,” Maddox said.

“They’re so fast,” Kendra said. “Why don’t they escape?”

“Catching a fairy renders her powerless,” Maddox said. “Keep her in a cage, or a sealed room, like this one, and her magic cannot be used to escape. While under confinement they become fairly docile and obedient.”

Kendra frowned. “How does Grandpa know they will stay in his garden if he buys them?”

Maddox winked at Grandpa. “Gets right to the point, this one.” He turned back to Kendra. “Fairies are highly territorial, nonmigratory creatures. Put them in a livable environment and they stay put. Especially an environment like Fablehaven, with gardens and plentiful food and other enchanted critters.”

“I’m sure I can find a trade for the fountain sprite,” Grandpa said. “The Banda Sea sunwings are beautiful as well. We can work out the particulars later.”

Maddox slapped the side of the crate and the fairies returned. The ones with the stained-glass wings took their time, drifting lazily. The little ones zoomed in. The fountain sprite floated up to a high corner of the room. Maddox patted the side of the crate again and spat a stern command in a language Kendra did not understand. The fuzzy fairy glided into the container.

“Next we have some albino nightgrifters from Borneo.” Out of a case flew three milky white fairies, their mothlike wings peppered with flecks of black.

Maddox proceeded to display several other groups of distinctive fairies. Then he began showing fairies one at a time. Kendra found a couple of them disgusting. One had thorny wings and a tail. Another was reptilian, covered in scales. Maddox displayed its chameleonic ability to match different backgrounds.

“Now for my big find,” Maddox said, rubbing his hands together. “I captured this little lady in an oasis deep in the Gobi Desert. I’ve only seen one other of her kind. Could we dim the lights?”

Dale jumped up and shut the lights off.

“What is she?” Grandpa asked.

In answer, Maddox opened the final case. Out soared a dazzling fairy with wings like shimmering veils of gold. Three gleaming feathers streamed beneath her, elegant ribbons of light. She hung gloriously in the center of the room with a regal air.

“A jinn harp?” Grandpa said in astonishment.

“Favor us with a song, I beg you,” Maddox said. He repeated the solicitation in another language.

The fairy gleamed even brighter, shedding sparks. The music that followed was mesmerizing. The voice made Kendra imagine a multitude of vibrating crystals. The wordless song had the power of an operatic aria mingled with the sweetness of a lullaby. It was longing, beckoning, hopeful, and heartbreaking.

They all sat transfixed until the song ended. When it was over, Kendra wanted to applaud, but the moment felt too sacred.

“Truly you are magnificent,” Maddox said, repeating the compliment again in a foreign tongue. Chinese? He tapped the side of her case, and with a radiant flourish the fairy was gone.

The room felt dim and bleak in her absence. Kendra tried to blink away the splotchy afterimages.

“How did you make such a find?” Grandpa asked in wonder.

“I caught wind of some local legends near the Mongolian border. Cost me nearly two months of brutal living to track her down.”

“The only other known jinn harp has her own shrine in a Tibetan sanctuary,” Grandpa explained. “She was thought to be unique. Fairy connoisseurs travel from all corners of the globe to behold her.”

“I can see why,” Kendra said.

“What a singular treat, Maddox! Thank you for bringing her into our home.”

“I’m touring her around the circuit before I take offers,” Maddox said.

“I don’t mean to pretend I can afford her, but send me word when she becomes available.” Standing up, Grandpa looked at the clock and clapped his hands together. “Looks like it’s about time for everyone under the age of thirty to head off to bed.”

“But it’s still early!” Seth said.

“No grousing. I have negotiations to conduct with Maddox tonight. We can’t have young people underfoot. You’ll need to stay in your room, no matter what commotion you hear downstairs. Our, ah, negotiations can be a bit spirited. Understood?”

“Yes,” Kendra said.

“I want to negotiate,” Seth said.

Grandpa shook his head. “It’s a dull business. You kids have a good sleep.”

“No matter what you might think you hear,” Maddox said as Kendra and Seth departed the study, “we aren’t having fun.”

Chapter 7



Prisoner in a Jar

The floorboards creaked gently as Kendra and Seth tiptoed down the stairs. Early morning light filtered through closed blinds and drawn curtains. The house was still. The opposite of last night.

Beneath their covers in the dark attic the night before, Kendra and Seth had found sleeping impossible as they listened to howling laughter, shattering glass, twittering flutes, slamming doors, and the constant din of shouted conversations. When they opened the door to sneak down and spy on the festivities, Lena was always seated at the foot of the attic stairs, reading a book.

“Go back to bed,” she said each time they attempted a reconnaissance mission. “Your grandfather is still negotiating.”

Eventually Kendra fell asleep. She believed it was the silence that had finally awakened her in the morning. When she rolled out of bed, Seth arose as well. Now they were creeping down the stairs in hopes of glimpsing the aftermath of the night’s revelry.

The brass coatrack had toppled in the entry hall, surrounded by hooked triangles of broken glass. A painting lay facedown on the floor, frame cracked. A primitive symbol was scrawled on the wall in orange chalk.

They passed quietly into the living room. Tables and chairs had been overturned. Lampshades hung crooked and torn. Empty glasses, bottles, and plates lay scattered about, several of them cracked or broken. A ceramic pot lay in pieces around a pile of soil and the remnants of a plant. Food stains appeared at every turn—melted cheese caked into the carpeting, tomato sauce drying on the arm of a love seat, a squashed éclair oozing custard all over an ottoman.

Grandpa Sorenson was snoring on the couch, using a curtain for a blanket. The curtain rod was still attached. He clutched a wooden scepter like a teddy bear. The strange staff was carved with vines twisting around the shaft and topped by a large pinecone. Despite all the commotion they had heard the night before, Grandpa was the only sign of life.

Seth roamed off toward the study. Kendra was about to follow when she noticed an envelope on a table near her grandfather. A thick seal of crimson wax had been broken, and part of a folded paper protruded invitingly.

Kendra glanced at Grandpa Sorenson. He was facing away from the letter, and showed no sign of stirring.

If he didn't want a letter read, he shouldn't leave it out in the open, right? It wasn't as if she were stealing it unopened from his mailbox. And she had several unanswered questions about Fablehaven, not the least of which concerned what was actually going on with her grandma.

Kendra eased over to the table, a queasy feeling in her stomach. Maybe she should have Seth read it. Invading privacy wasn't really her forte.

But it would be so simple. The letter was right in front of her, conveniently sticking out of the open envelope. Nobody would know. She tipped the envelope up and found there was no address or return address. The envelope was blank. Hand-delivered. Had Maddox brought it? Probably.

After a final glance to ensure Grandpa still looked comatose, Kendra slid the cream-colored paper out of the envelope and unfolded it. The message was written in bold script.

Stanley,

I trust this missive finds you in good health.

It has come to our attention that the SES has been exhibiting unusual activity in the northeast of the United States. We remain uncertain whether they have pinpointed the location of Fablehaven, but one unconfirmed report suggests they are in communication with an individual(s) on your preserve. Mounting evidence implies the secret is out.

I need not remind you about the attempted infiltration of a certain preserve in the interior of Brazil last year. Nor the significance of that preserve in connection with the significance of yours.

As you well know, we have not detected such aggressive activity from the SES in decades. We are preparing to reassign additional resources to your vicinity. As always, secrecy and misdirection remain top priorities. Be vigilant.

I continue to search diligently for a resolution to the situation with Ruth. Do not lose hope.

With everlasting fidelity,

S

Kendra reread the letter. Ruth was her grandma's name. What situation? SES had to be the Society of the Evening Star. What did the "S" at the end of the letter stand for? The entire message seemed a bit vague, probably deliberately.

"Look at this," Seth whispered from the kitchen.

Kendra jumped, every muscle in her body tensing. Grandpa smacked his lips and shifted on the couch. Kendra stood temporarily immobilized by

guilty panic. Seth was not looking at her. He was stooping over something in the kitchen. Grandpa became still again.

Kendra folded the letter and slipped it back into the envelope, trying to situate it as she had found it. Moving stealthily, she joined Seth, who crouched over muddy hoofprints.

“Were they riding horses in here?” he asked.

“It would explain the racket,” she murmured, trying to sound casual.

Lena appeared in the doorway, dressed in a bathrobe, hair awry. “Look at you early risers,” she said softly. “You caught us before cleanup.”

Kendra stared at Lena, trying to keep her expression unreadable. The housekeeper showed no indication of having seen her spying at the letter.

Seth pointed at the hoofprints. “What the heck happened?”

“The negotiations went well.”

“Is Maddox still here?” Seth asked hopefully.

Lena shook her head. “He left in a taxi about an hour ago.”

Grandpa Sorenson shuffled into the kitchen wearing boxers, socks, and an undershirt stained with brown mustard. He squinted at them. “What are you all doing up at this ungodly hour?”

“It’s after seven,” Seth said.

Grandpa covered a yawn with his fist. He held the envelope in his other hand. “I’m feeling a little under the weather today—might go lie down for a spell. As you were.” He shambled off, scratching his thigh.

“You kids may want to play outside this morning,” Lena said. “Your grandfather was up until forty minutes ago. He had a long night.”

“I’m going to have a tough time taking Grandpa seriously when he tells us to show respect for the furniture,” Kendra said. “It looks like he drove a tractor through here.”

“Pulled by horses!” Seth added.

“Maddox enjoys a celebration, and your grandfather is an accommodating host,” Lena said. “Without your grandmother here to rein in the merriment, things got a little too festive. Didn’t help that they invited the satyrs.” She nodded at the muddy hoofprints.

“Satyrs?” Kendra asked. “Like goatmen?”

Lena nodded. “Some would say they liven up a party too much.”

“Those are goat prints?” Seth asked.

“Satyr prints, yes.”

“I wish I could have seen them,” Seth mourned.

“Your parents would be glad you didn’t. Satyrs would only teach you bad manners. I think they invented them.”

“I’m sad we missed the party,” Kendra said.

“Don’t be. It was not a party for young people. As caretaker, your grandfather would never drink, but I can’t vouch for the satyrs. We’ll have a proper party before you leave us.”

“Will you invite satyrs?” Seth asked.

“We’ll see what your grandfather says,” Lena said doubtfully. “Maybe one.” Lena opened the refrigerator and poured two glasses of milk. “Drink your milk and then run along. I have some heavy cleaning ahead of me.”

Kendra and Seth took their glasses. Lena opened the pantry, removing a broom and dustpan, and left the room. Kendra drank her milk in several deep swallows and set her empty glass on the counter. “Want to go for a swim?” she asked.

“I’ll catch up,” Seth said. He still had milk in his cup.

Kendra walked away.

After finishing his milk, Seth peeked into the pantry. So many shelves packed with so much food! One shelf featured nothing but large jars of homemade preserves. Closer investigation revealed that the jars were lined up three deep.

Seth backed out of the pantry and looked around. Reentering the pantry, he removed a large jar of boysenberry preserves, pulling another jar forward from the second row to disguise the absence. They might miss a half-empty jar from the fridge. But one of many unopened jars from an overstuffed pantry? Not likely.

He could be sneakier than Kendra knew.

* * *

The fairy balanced on a twig protruding from a low hedge beside the pool. Arms extended to either side, she walked along the tiny limb, adjusting as it wobbled. The further out she got, the less stable she became. The miniature beauty queen had platinum hair, a silver dress, and glittering, translucent wings.

Seth sprang forward, slashing downward with the pool skimmer. The blue mesh struck the twig, but the fairy darted away at the last instant. She hovered, shaking a scolding finger at Seth. He swung the skimmer again, and the nimble fairy evaded capture a second time, soaring well out of range.

“You shouldn’t do that,” Kendra said from the pool.

“Why not? Maddox catches them.”

“Out in the wild,” Kendra corrected. “These already belong to Grandpa. It’s like hunting lions at the zoo.”

“Maybe hunting lions at the zoo would be good practice.”

“You’re going to end up making the fairies mad at you.”

“They don’t mind,” he said, creeping up on a fairy with wide, gauzy wings fluttering inches above a flowerbed. “They just fly away.” He slowly moved the pool skimmer into position. The fairy was directly beneath the mesh, less than two feet away from captivity. With a flick of his wrists, he slapped the skimmer down sharply. The fairy dodged around it and glided off.

“What are you going to do if you catch one?”

“Probably let it go.”

“So what’s the point?”

“To see if I can do it.”

Kendra boosted herself out of the water. “Well, obviously you can’t. They’re too fast.” Dripping, she walked over to her towel. “Oh my gosh, look at that one.” She pointed at the base of a blossoming bush.

“Where?”

“Right there. Wait until she moves. She’s practically invisible.”

He stared at the bush, unsure whether she was teasing him. A bobbing distortion began warping the leaves and blossoms. “Whoa!”

“See! She’s clear like glass.”

Seth edged forward, clutching the pool skimmer.

“Seth, don’t.”

Suddenly he charged, opting for a rapid assault this time. The transparent fairy flew away, vanishing against the sky. “Why won’t they hold still!”

“They’re magic,” Kendra said. “The fun is just looking at them, seeing all the variety.”

“Real fun. Kind of like when Mom makes us go on drives to look at the leaves changing color.”

“I want to grab some breakfast. I’m starving.”

“Then go. Maybe I’ll have better luck without you squawking.”

Kendra walked to the house wrapped in her towel. She entered the back door and found Lena dragging a broken coffee table into the kitchen. Much of the surface of the table had been made of glass. Most of it was broken.

“Need a hand?” Kendra asked.

“Mine are plenty.”

Kendra went and grabbed the other end of the table. They set it in a corner of the spacious kitchen. Other broken objects rested there as well, including the jagged fragments of the ceramic pot Kendra had noticed earlier.

“Why pile everything here?”

“This is where the brownies come.”

“Brownies?”

“Come look.” Lena led Kendra to the basement door, pointing out a second little door at the base, about the size a cat would use. “The brownies have a special hatch that admits them to the basement, and they can use this door to enter the kitchen. They are the only magical creatures with permission to enter the house at will. The brownie portals are guarded by magic against all other creatures of the forest.”

“Why let them in?”

“Brownies are useful. They repair things. They make things. They are remarkable craftsmen.”

“They’ll fix the broken furniture?”

“Improve it if they can.”

“Why?”

“It is their nature. They will accept no reward.”

“How nice of them,” Kendra said.

“In fact, tonight, remind me to leave out some cooking ingredients. By morning, they will have baked us a treat.”

“What will they cook?”

“You never know. You don’t make requests. You just leave out ingredients and see how they combine them.”

“How fun!”

“I’ll leave out a bunch. No matter what strange combinations you leave, they always invent something delicious.”

“There is so much I don’t know about Fablehaven,” Kendra declared. “How big is it?”

“The preserve stretches for many miles in some directions. Much bigger than you would suppose.”

“And there are creatures throughout?”

“Through most of it,” Lena said. “But as your grandfather has warned you, some of those creatures can be deadly. There are many places on the property where even he does not dare venture.”

“I want to know more. All the details.”

“Be patient. Let it unfold.” She turned to the refrigerator and changed the subject. “You must be hungry.”

“A little.”

“I’ll whip up some eggs. Will Seth want some?”

“Probably,” Kendra said, leaning against the counter. “I’ve been wondering: Is everything from mythology true?”

“Explain what you mean.”

“I’ve seen fairies, and evidence of satyrs. Is it all real?”

“No mythology or religion that I know of holds all the answers. Most religions are based on truths, but they are also polluted by the philosophies and imaginations of men. I take it your question refers to Greek mythology. Is there a pantheon of petty gods who constantly bicker and interfere in the lives of mortals? I know of no such beings. Are there some true elements to those ancient stories and beliefs? Obviously. You’re talking to a former naiad. Scrambled?”

“What?”

“The eggs.”

“Sure.”

Lena began cracking eggs into a pan. “Many of the beings who dwell here existed gracefully when primitive man foraged in ragged tribes. We

taught man the secrets of bread and clay and fire. But man became blind to us over time. Interaction with mortals became rare. And then mankind began to crowd us. Explosions in population and technology stole many of our ancient homes. Mankind held no particular malice toward us. We had simply faded into colorful caricatures inhabiting myths and fables.

“There are quiet corners of the world where our kind continue to thrive in the wild. And yet the day will inevitably come when the only space remaining to us will be these sanctuaries, a precious gift from enlightened mortals.”

“It’s so sad,” Kendra said.

“Do not frown. My kind do not dwell on these concerns. They forget the fences enclosing these preserves. I should not speak of what used to be. With my fallen mind, I see the changes much more clearly than they do. I feel the loss more keenly.”

“Grandpa said a night is coming when all the creatures here will run wild.”

“Midsummer Eve. The festival night.”

“What’s it like?”

“I’d better not say. I don’t think your grandfather wants you kids worrying about it until the time comes. He would rather have scheduled your visit to avoid the festival night.”

Kendra tried to sound nonchalant. “Will we be in danger?”

“Now I’ve got you worried. You will be fine if you follow the instructions your grandfather gives you.”

“What about the Society of the Evening Star? Maddox sounded worried about them.”

“The Society of the Evening Star has always been a threat,” Lena admitted. “But these preserves have endured for centuries, some for millennia. Fablehaven is well protected, and your grandfather is no fool. You needn’t worry about speculative rumors. I’ll not say more on the subject. Cheese in your eggs?”

“Yes, please.”

* * *

With Kendra gone, Seth got out the equipment he had bundled in his towel, including his emergency kit and the jar he had smuggled from the pantry. The jar was now empty, washed clean in the bathroom sink. Taking out his pocket knife, Seth used the awl to punch holes in the lid.

Unscrewing the top, he gathered bits of grass, flower petals, a twig, and a pebble, and placed them in the jar. Then he wandered across the garden from the pool, leaving the skimmer behind. If skill failed, he would resort to cunning.

He found a good spot not far from a fountain, then took the small mirror from his cereal box and placed it in the jar. Setting the jar on a stone bench, he settled in the grass nearby, lid in hand.

It did not take the fairies long. Several flitted around the fountain. A few drifted over, lazily orbiting the jar. After a couple of minutes, a small one with wings like a bee landed on the edge of the jar, staring into it. Apparently satisfied, she dropped inside and began admiring herself in the mirror. Soon she was joined by another. And another.

Seth moved slowly closer until he was within reach of the jar. All the fairies exited it. He waited. Some flew off. New ones came. One entered the jar, followed quickly by two more.

Seth pounced, slapping the lid onto the jar. The fairies were so quick! He expected to catch all three, but two whizzed out just before the lid covered the opening. The remaining fairy pushed against the lid with surprising force. He screwed it shut.

The fairy inside stood no taller than his little finger. She had fiery red hair and iridescent dragonfly wings. The incensed fairy pounded her tiny fists noiselessly against the wall of the jar. All around him, Seth heard the tinkling of miniature bells. The other fairies were pointing and laughing. The fairy in the jar beat against the glass even harder, but to no avail.

Seth had captured his prize.

* * *

Grandpa dipped the wand into the bottle and raised it to his lips. As he blew gently, several bubbles streamed from the plastic circle. The bubbles floated across the porch.

“You never know what will fascinate them,” he said. “But bubbles usually do the trick.”

Grandpa sat in a large wicker rocker. Kendra, Seth, and Dale sat nearby. The setting sun streaked the horizon with red and purple.

“I try not to bring unnecessary technology onto the property,” he continued, dipping the wand again. “I just can’t resist with bubbles.” He blew, and more bubbles took shape.

A fairy, glowing softly in the fading light, approached one of the bubbles. After considering it for a moment, she touched it, and the bubble turned bright green. Another touch and it was an inky blue. Another and it was gold.

Grandpa kept the bubbles coming, and more fairies came to the porch. Soon all the bubbles were changing colors. The hues became more luminous as the fairies competed against one another. Bubbles ruptured with flashes of light.

One fairy gathered bubbles until she had assembled a bouquet that resembled a bunch of multicolored grapes. Another fairy entered a bubble and inflated it from the inside until it tripled in size and burst with a violet flash. A bubble near Kendra appeared to be full of winking fireflies. One near Grandpa turned to ice, fell to the porch, and shattered.

The fairies flocked near Grandpa, eager for the next bubbles. He kept them coming, and the fairies continued to display their creativity. They filled bubbles with shimmering mist. They linked them in chains. They transformed them into balls of fire. The surface of one reflected like a mirror. Another took on the shape of a pyramid. Another crackled with electricity.

When Grandpa put the bubble solution away, the fairies gradually dispersed. The dwindling sunset was almost gone. A few fairies played among the chimes, making soft music. “Unbeknownst to most of the family,” Grandpa said, “a few of your cousins have visited me here. None of them came close to figuring out what is really going on.”

“Didn’t you give them clues?” Kendra asked.

“No more or less than I gave you. They were not of the proper mindset.”

“Was it Erin?” Seth asked. “She’s a goober.”

“You be kind,” Grandpa scolded. “What I want to say is that I admire how you children have taken all of this in stride. You have adapted impressively to this unusual place.”

“Lena said we could have a party with goat people,” Seth said.

“I wouldn’t hold my breath if I were you. Why was she talking about satyrs?”

“We found hoofprints in the kitchen,” Kendra said.

“Things got a bit out of hand last night,” Grandpa admitted. “Trust me, Seth, consorting with satyrs is the last thing a boy your age needs.”

“Then why did you do it?” Seth asked.

“A visit from a fairy broker is a significant event, and carries certain expectations. I’ll concede that the merriment borders on foolishness.”

“Can I try blowing bubbles?” Seth asked.

“Another night. I’m planning a special excursion for you tomorrow. In the afternoon I need to visit the granary, and I mean to take you with me, let you see more of the property.”

“Will we get to see something besides fairies?” Seth asked.

“Probably.”

“I’m glad,” Kendra said. “I want to see everything you’re willing to show us.”

“All in due time, my dear.”

* * *

From her breathing, Seth was pretty sure Kendra was asleep. He sat up slowly. She did not move. He coughed weakly. She did not twitch.

He eased out of bed and crossed the attic floor to his dresser. Quietly he opened the third drawer down. There she was. Twig, grass, pebble, flower petals, mirror, and all. In the dark room, her inherent glimmer illuminated the entire drawer.



Her tiny hands were splayed against the wall of the jar, and she looked up at him desperately. She chirped something in a twittering language, motioning for him to open the lid.

Seth glanced over his shoulder. Kendra had not budged.

“Goodnight, little fairy,” he whispered. “Don’t worry. I’ll feed you some milk in the morning.”

He began shutting the drawer. The panicked fairy redoubled her frantic protestations. It looked like she was about to cry, which made Seth pause. Maybe he would let her go tomorrow.

“It’s okay, little fairy,” he said gently. “Go to sleep. I’ll see you in the morning.”

She clasped her hands together and shook them in a pleading motion, begging with her eyes. She was so pretty, that fiery red hair against her creamy skin. The perfect pet. Way better than a hen. What chicken could set bubbles on fire?

Closing the drawer, he returned to his bed.

Chapter 8



Retaliation

Seth wiped sleep from the corner of his eye and stared at the ceiling for a moment. Rolling over, he saw that Kendra was not in her bed. Daylight streamed through the window. He stretched, arching his back with a groan. The mattress felt inviting. Maybe he could get up later.

No, he wanted to check on the fairy. He hoped some sleep had calmed her. Kicking off the tangled covers, Seth hurried over to the dresser. Pulling it open, he gasped.

The fairy was gone. In her place was a hairy tarantula with striped legs and shiny black eyes. Had it eaten her? He checked the lid. It was still on tight. Then it registered that he had not consumed any milk yet. This could be the other form the fairy appeared in. He would have expected a dragonfly, but supposed a tarantula was possible.

He also noticed that the mirror in the jar was broken. Had she smashed it with the pebble? It seemed like a good way to cut herself. “No roughhousing,” he scolded. “I’ll be right back.”

* * *

A round loaf of bread sat on the table, a mottled mixture of white, black, brown, and orange. While Lena sliced it, Kendra took another sip of hot chocolate.

“Considering all the ingredients I left out, I thought they might make a jumble pie,” Lena said. “But calico loaves are equally delicious. Try a piece.” She handed Kendra a slice.

“They did a great job on the pot,” Kendra said. “And the table looks perfect.”

“Better than before,” Lena agreed. “I like the new beveling. Brownies know their business.”

Kendra inspected the slice of bread. The strange coloring continued all the way through, not just on the crust. She took a bite. Cinnamon and sugar dominated the flavoring. Eagerly she took another. It tasted like blackberry jam. The next tasted like chocolate with a hint of peanut butter. The following bite seemed saturated with vanilla pudding. “It has so many flavors!”

“And they never clash like they should,” Lena said, taking a bite herself.

Feet bare, hair sticking up, Seth trotted into the room. “Good morning,” he said. “Having breakfast?”

“You have to try this calico bread,” Kendra said.

“In a minute,” he replied. “Can I have a cup of hot chocolate?”

Lena filled a mug.

“Thank you,” he said as she handed it to him. “I’ll be right back. I forgot something upstairs.” He hurried off, drinking from the mug.

“He’s so weird,” Kendra said, taking a bite of what now tasted like banana nut bread.

“Up to some mischief, if you ask me,” Lena replied.

* * *

Seth set the mug on the dresser. Taking a calming breath, he silently prayed that the tarantula would be gone and the fairy would be there. He slid the drawer open.

A hideous little creature glared up from inside the jar. Baring pointy teeth, it hissed at him. Covered in brown, leathery skin, it stood taller than his middle finger. It was bald, with tattered ears, a narrow chest, a pot belly, and shriveled, spindly limbs. The lips were froglike, the eyes a glossy black, the nose a pair of slits above the mouth.

“What did you do to the fairy?” Seth asked.

The ugly creature hissed again, turning around. It had a pair of nubs above the bony shoulder blades. The nubs wiggled like the remnants of amputated wings.

“Oh, no! What happened to you?”

The creature stuck out a long black tongue and slapped the glass with calloused hands. It jabbered something in a foul, raspy language.

What had happened? Why had the beautiful fairy mutated into a revolting little devil? Maybe some milk would help.

Seth snatched the jar from the drawer, grabbed the mug from the dresser, and bolted down the stairs from the attic to the hall. He dashed into the bathroom, locking the door behind him.

The mug was still a third full. Holding the jar over the sink, he poured some of the hot chocolate onto the lid. Most ran down the side of the jar, but a little dripped through the holes in the top.

One drop plopped on the creature’s shoulder. It angrily motioned for Seth to unscrew the lid, and then pointed at the cup. Apparently it wanted to drink straight from the mug.

Seth examined the room. The window was shut, the door locked. He wadded a towel against the space at the bottom of the door. Inside the jar, the creature made pleading motions and pantomimed drinking from a cup.

Seth unscrewed the lid. With a powerful leap, the creature jumped out, landing on the counter. Crouching, snarling, it glared at Seth.

“I’m sorry your wings fell off,” he said. “This might help.”

He held the mug out toward the creature, wondering if it would sip the flavored milk or just climb inside the cup. Instead, it snapped at him, barely missing his finger. Seth jerked his hand away, sloshing hot chocolate onto the counter. Hissing, the agile creature dropped to the floor, raced over to the bathtub, and vaulted inside.

Before Seth could react, the creature squirmed down the drain. A final garbled burst of complaints issued from the dark hole, and then the creature was gone. Seth poured the remnants of the hot chocolate into the drain in case it could be of use to the deformed fairy.

He looked back at the jar, empty now except for a few wilting flower petals. He was not sure what he had done wrong, but he doubted Maddox would be very proud.

* * *

Later that morning, Seth sat in the tree house trying to find puzzle pieces that fit together. Now that the perimeter was finished, adding pieces was a challenge. They all looked the same.

He had avoided Kendra all morning. He did not feel like talking to anybody. He could not get over how foul the fairy had become. He was not sure what he had done, but he knew it was somehow his fault, some accidental consequence of catching the fairy. That was why she had been so frightened the night before. She knew he had doomed her to change into an ugly little monster.

The puzzle pieces started to vibrate. Soon the whole tree house was trembling. Were they having an earthquake? He had never been in an earthquake before.

Seth ran to the window. Fairies hovered everywhere, gathered in the air all around the tree house. Their arms were raised, and they seemed to be chanting.

One of the fairies pointed at Seth. Several glided closer to the window. One held her palm out in his direction; with a flash of light, the windowpane shattered. Seth jumped away from the window as several fairies flew in.

He ran to the hatch, but the tree house lurched so violently that he fell to the floor. The shaking was becoming intense. The floor was no longer level. A chair tipped over. The door to the hatch had slammed shut. He crawled toward it. Something hot stung the back of his neck. Multicolored lights began flashing.

Seth grabbed the door to the hatch, but it would not open. He tugged hard. Something seared the back of his hand.

Panicked, he returned to the window, struggling to keep his balance as the floor quaked beneath him. The flock of fairies continued to chant. He could hear their little voices. With a loud crack, the tree house suddenly tilted sideways. The view out the window switched from the fairies to the rapidly approaching ground.

Seth experienced a momentary sensation of weightlessness. Every object in the tree house was floating as everything plummeted together. Puzzle pieces filled the air. And then the tree house imploded.

* * *

Kendra smeared sunblock across her arms, disliking the greasy feel of the lotion against her skin. She was tanner than when she had first arrived, but the sun was hot today, and she did not want to take any chances.

Her shadow was a small puddle at her feet. It was almost noon. Lunch was not far off, and then Grandpa Sorenson would take them to the granary. Kendra quietly hoped she would see a unicorn.

Suddenly she heard a tremendous crash from the corner of the yard. Then she heard Seth screaming.

What could have made such a huge noise? She did not have to run far in order to see the broken pile of rubble at the base of the tree.

Seth was sprinting toward her. His shirt was torn. He had blood on his face. Scores of fairies appeared to be in pursuit. Her initial thought was to make a joke about the fairies wanting revenge for him trying to catch them, until she realized it was probably true. Had the fairies thrown down the tree house?

“They’re after me!” he yelled.

“Jump in the pool!” Kendra called.

Seth swerved in the direction of the pool and began pulling off his shirt. The ominous cloud of fairies had no trouble keeping up with him. They hurled sparkling streams of glitter. Casting his shirt aside, Seth sprang into the water.

“The fairies are after Seth!” Kendra cried, watching in horrified dismay.

The fairies hovered over the pool. After a few moments Seth surfaced. In flawless synchronization, the cloud of fairies swooped, diving toward

him. He yelled as blazing rays of light began flaring around him, and ducked underwater again. The fairies plunged in after him.

He came to the surface gasping. The water churned. Seth floundered at the center of an underwater pyrotechnics display. Kendra rushed to the edge of the pool.

“Help!” he cried, raising a hand out of the water. The fingers were fused together like a flipper.

Kendra screamed. “They’re attacking Seth! Help! Somebody! They’re attacking Seth!”

He flailed toward the side of the pool. The roiling mass of fairies converged on Seth again, hauling him to the bottom of the pool amid eerie bursts of light. Kendra ran and seized the pool skimmer, swinging it at the relentless horde of fairies, never touching any of them no matter how dense the swarm appeared.

Seth resurfaced at the edge of the pool and threw his arms up onto the flagstones, trying to drag himself out of the water. Kendra stooped to assist him but shrieked instead. One arm was broad, flat, and rubbery. No elbow, no hand. A flipper coated in human skin. The other was long and boneless, a fleshy tentacle with limp fingers at the end.

She looked at his face. Long tusks curved down from a wide, lipless mouth. Patches of hair were missing. His eyes were glazed with terror.

The frenzied fairies mobbed him again, and he lost his grip on the side, vanishing in another pulsing succession of colored flashes. Steam sizzled up from the seething water.

“What is the meaning of this?” Grandpa Sorenson hollered, hustling to the edge of the pool. Lena followed behind him. The water in the pool flickered a few more times. Many of the fairies whizzed away. A few flew over to Grandpa.

One fairy in particular chirped angrily. She had short blue hair and silvery wings.

“He did what?” Grandpa said.

An unrecognizable monstrosity heaved itself out of the water and lay panting on the flagstones. The deformed creature had no clothes. Lena crouched beside him, placing a hand on his side.

“He had no idea that would happen,” Grandpa complained. “It was innocent!”

The fairy twittered her disapproval.

Kendra gaped at the freakish form of her brother. Most of his hair had fallen out, revealing a lumpy scalp stippled with moles. His face was broader and flatter, with sunken eyes and tusks the size of bananas protruding from his mouth. A misshapen hump swelled high above his shoulders. On his back below the hump, four blowholes puckered for air. His legs had united into a single crude tail. He slapped the ground with his flipper arm. The tentacle writhed like a snake.

“An unlucky coincidence,” Grandpa said consolingly. “Most unfortunate. Can’t you have mercy on the boy?”

The fairy chirped vehemently.

“I’m sorry you feel that way. I feel terrible about what happened. I assure you the atrocity was unintentional.”

After a final outburst of squealing sounds, the fairy zoomed away.

“Are you okay?” Kendra said, squatting beside Seth.

He made a garbled moan, then a second, more distressed complaint that sounded like a donkey gargling mouthwash.

“Hush, Seth,” Grandpa said. “You’ve lost the ability of speech.”

“I’ll fetch Dale,” Lena said, hurrying off.

“What have they done to him?” Kendra asked.

“An act of vengeance,” Grandpa said grimly.

“For trying to catch fairies?”

“For succeeding.”

“He caught one?”

“He did.”

“So they turned him into a deformed walrus? I thought they couldn’t use magic against us!”

“He used potent magic to transform the captured fairy into an imp, unwittingly opening the door for magical retribution.”

“Seth doesn’t know any magic!”

“I’m sure it was accidental,” Grandpa said. “Can you understand me, Seth? Slap your flipper three times if you grasp what I am saying.”

The flipper flapped against the flagstones three times.

"It was very foolish to catch a fairy, Seth," Grandpa said. "I warned you they were unsafe. But I share some of the blame. I'm sure you were inspired by Maddox and wanted to begin a career as a fairy broker."

Seth nodded awkwardly, his entire bloated torso bobbing up and down.

"I should have specifically forbidden it. I forget how curious and daring children can be. And how resourceful. I would never have supposed you were capable of actually trapping one."

"What magic did he use?" Kendra asked, on the verge of hysterics.

"If a captured fairy is kept indoors from sunset to sunrise, it changes into an imp."

"What's an imp?"

"A fallen fairy. Nasty little creatures. Imps despise themselves as much as fairies adore themselves. Just as fairies are drawn to beauty, imps are drawn to ugliness."

"Their personalities change so quickly?"

"Their personalities remain the same," Grandpa said. "Shallow and self-absorbed. The change in appearance reveals the tragic side of that mind-set. Vanity curdles into misery. They become spiteful and jealous, wallowing in wretchedness."

"What about the fairies Maddox caught? Why don't they change?"

"He avoids leaving the cages indoors overnight. His captured fairies spend at least part of every night outdoors."

"Just putting the container outside prevents them from becoming imps?"

"Sometimes powerful magic is accomplished by simple means."

"Why did the other fairies attack Seth? Why would they care, if they're so selfish?"

"They care because they are selfish. Each fairy worries she could be next. I am told Seth even left a mirror with the fairy, so she could behold herself after she fell. The fairies considered that act particularly cruel."

Grandpa answered every question with great calm, no matter how accusingly or angrily Kendra asked it. His peaceful demeanor was helping her calm down a bit. "I'm sure it was an accident," she said.

Seth nodded vigorously, blubber jiggling.

“I suspect no malice. It was an unfortunate mishap. But the fairies have little interest in his motives. They were within their rights to exact retribution.”

“You can switch him back.”

“Restoring Seth to his original form is well beyond my abilities.”

Seth let out a long, mournful bellow. Kendra patted his hump. “We have to do something!”

“Yes,” Grandpa said. He placed his hands over his eyes and then dragged them down his face. “This would be very complicated to explain to your parents.”

“Who can fix him? Maddox?”

“Maddox is no magician. Besides, he is long gone. Though I hesitate, I can think of only one person who might be able to undo the enchantments placed on your brother.”

“Who?”

“Seth has met her.”

“The witch?”

Grandpa nodded. “Under the circumstances, our only hope is Muriel Taggart.”

* * *

The wheelbarrow swayed as it bumped over a root. Dale managed to steady it. Seth groaned. He was naked except for a white towel wrapped around his middle.

“Sorry, Seth,” Dale said. “This is a tricky path.”

“Are we almost there?” Kendra asked.

“Not much farther,” Grandpa replied.

They walked single file, Grandpa in the lead, followed by Dale pushing the wheelbarrow, and then Kendra in the rear. What had begun as a nearly indiscernible trail near the barn had broadened into a well-trodden path. Later they branched off onto a smaller track. They had crossed no new paths since then.

“The woods seem so quiet,” Kendra said.

“They are quietest when you stay on the paths,” Grandpa said.

“It seems too quiet.”

“There is a tension in the air. Your brother committed a serious offense. The fall of a fairy is a woeful tragedy. The retribution of the fairies was equally brutal. Eager eyes await to see if the conflict will escalate.”

“It won’t, right?”

“I hope not. If Muriel cures your brother, the fairies could interpret it as an insult.”

“Would they attack him again?”

“Probably not. At least not directly. The punishment has been administered.”

“Can we heal the fairy?”

Grandpa shook his head. “No.”

“Could the witch?”

“Seth was altered by magic imposed upon him. But the potential to fall and become an imp is a fundamental aspect of being a fairy. She transformed in accordance to a law that has existed as long as fairies have had wings. Muriel might be able to undo the enchantments forced upon Seth. Reversing the fall of a fairy would be far beyond her capacity.”

“Poor fairy.”

They reached a fork in the path. Grandpa turned left. “Almost there,” he said. “Keep silent as we converse with her.”

Kendra stared at the bushes and trees, expecting to find spiteful eyes glaring back at her. What creatures would come into view if all the greenery were removed? What would happen if she raced off the path? How long before some gruesome monster devoured her?

Grandpa stopped, pointing away into the trees. “Here we are.”

Kendra saw the leafy shack in the distance, off the path through the trees.

“Too much undergrowth for the wheelbarrow,” Dale said, scooping Seth into his arms. Although Seth was much more blubbery, he had not increased in size. As they waded through the undergrowth, Dale carried him without much difficulty.

The ivy-shrouded shack drew near. They walked around to the front. The filthy witch sat inside, her back against the tree stump, chewing on a

knot in a bristly rope. A pair of imps sat on the tree stump. One was skinny, with prominent ribs and long, flat feet. The other was compact and plump.

“Hello, Muriel,” Grandpa said.

The imps sprang from the trunk and scurried out of sight. Muriel looked up, a slow grin revealing decayed teeth. “Could that be Stan Sorenson?” She rubbed her eyes theatrically and squinted at him. “No, I must be dreaming. Stan Sorenson said he would never visit me again!”

“I need your help,” Grandpa said.

“And you brought company. I remember Dale. Who is this fine young lady?”

“My granddaughter.”

“She got none of your looks, lucky for her. My name is Muriel, dear, pleased to meet you.”

“I’m Kendra.”

“Yes, of course. You have that lovely pink nightgown with the bow on the bosom.”

Kendra shot a look at Grandpa. How could this crazy witch know about her pajamas?

“I know a thing or two,” Muriel continued, tapping her temple. “Telescopes are for stars, dear, not for trees.”

“Pay her no heed,” Grandpa said. “She wants to give you the impression that she has power to spy on you in your bedroom. Witches prey on fear. Her influence does not extend beyond the walls of this shack.”

“Won’t you step inside for some tea?” she offered.

“What news she has comes from imps,” Grandpa continued. “And since imps are banned from the yard, her news came from a particular imp.”

Muriel let out a shrieking laugh. The crazed cackle suited her haggard appearance much better than her speaking voice did.

“The imp saw your room, and heard conversations from wherever Seth stashed it,” Grandpa concluded. “Nothing to fret about.”

Muriel raised a finger in objection. “Nothing to fret about, you say?”

“Nothing the imp saw or heard could be harmful,” Grandpa clarified.

“Except, perhaps, her own reflection,” Muriel suggested. “Who is our final visitor? This poor, lumpy abomination? Could it be?” She clapped her

hands and giggled. “Did our stalwart adventurer have a mishap? Did his clever tongue finally betray him?”

“You know what happened,” Grandpa said.

“I do, I do,” she cackled. “I knew he was insolent, but never suspected such cruelty! Lock him in a shed, I say. For the sake of the fairies. Lock him up tight.”

“Can you restore him?” Grandpa asked.

“Restore him?” the witch exclaimed. “After what he did?”

“It was an accident, as you are aware.”

“Why not ask me to rescue a killer from the noose? To spare a traitor from his shame?”

“Can you do it?”

“Shall I conjure up a medal for him to wear as well? A badge of honor for his crime?”

“Can you?”

Muriel dropped the act. She regarded her visitors with a sly expression. “You know the price.”

“I can’t loosen a knot,” Grandpa said.

Muriel tossed up her gnarled hands. “You know I need the energy from the knot for the spell,” she said. “He has more than seventy separate hexes operating on him. You ought to untie seventy knots.”

“What about—”

“No dickering. One knot, and your beastly grandson will be restored to his original form. Without the knot, I would never be able to counter the enchantment. This is fairy magic. You knew the price before you came. No dickering.”

Grandpa sagged. “Show me the rope.”

“Lay the boy at my threshold.”

Dale placed Seth in front of the door. Standing in the doorway, Muriel held the rope out to Grandpa. There were two knots. Both had dried blood on them. One was still moist with saliva. “Take your pick,” she said.

“Of my own free will, I sever this knot,” Grandpa said. Leaning forward, he blew gently on the higher of the two knots. It unraveled.

The air trembled. On hot days, Kendra had seen the air shimmer in the distance. This was similar, but right in front of her. She felt pulsing

vibrations, like she was standing in front of a powerful stereo speaker during a song with lots of bass. The ground seemed to be tipping.

Muriel extended a hand over Seth. She mumbled an unintelligible incantation. His blubber rippled as if he were boiling inside. It looked like thousands of worms were under his skin, squirming to find a way out. Putrid vapor fumed up from his flesh. His fat appeared to be evaporating. His misshapen body convulsed.

Kendra extended her arms and swayed as the ground teetered even more. There was a burst of darkness, an anti-flash, and Kendra stumbled, barely catching herself.

The odd sensation ended. The air cleared and balance returned. Seth sat up. He looked exactly like his old self. No tusks. No flippers. No blowholes. Just an eleven-year-old kid with a towel wrapped around his waist. He scrambled away from the shack and got to his feet.

“Satisfied?” Muriel asked.

“How do you feel, Seth?” Grandpa inquired.

Seth patted his bare chest. “I feel better.”

Muriel grinned. “Thank you, little adventurer. You did me a great service today. I am indebted.”

“You shouldn’t have done it, Grandpa,” Seth said.

“Had to be done,” he said. “We best be going.”

“Stay a while,” Muriel offered.

“No thanks,” Grandpa said.

“Very well. Spurn my hospitality. Kendra, nice to meet you, may you find less happiness than you deserve. Dale, you are as mute as your brother, and nearly as pale. Seth, please have another mishap soon. Stan, you lack the wit of an orangutan, bless your soul. Do not be strangers.”

Kendra gave Seth socks, shoes, shorts, and a shirt. Once he put them on, they returned to the path.

“Can I ride in the wheelbarrow on the way back?” Seth asked.

“You ought to push me,” Dale grumbled.

“How did it feel being a walrus?” Kendra asked.

“Is that what I was?”

“A mutant humpbacked walrus with a deformed tail,” she clarified.

“I wish we had a camera! It was weird breathing through my back. And it was hard to move. Nothing felt right.”

“Might be safer not to converse so loudly,” Grandpa said.

“I couldn’t talk,” Seth said more quietly. “I felt like I still knew how, but the words came out all tangled. My mouth and tongue were different.”

“What about Muriel?” Kendra asked. “If she unties that last knot, will she be free?”

“She was originally bound by thirteen knots,” Grandpa said. “She can loosen none on her own, though it doesn’t seem to stop her from trying. But other mortals can undo the knots by asking a favor and blowing on them. Powerful magic holds the knot in place. When released, Muriel can channel that magic into granting the favor.”

“So if you ever need her help again . . .”

“I will look elsewhere,” Grandpa said. “I never wanted her to get down to a single knot. Freeing her is not an option.”

“I’m sorry I ended up helping her,” Seth said.

“Did you learn anything from the ordeal?” Grandpa asked.

Seth lowered his head. “I feel really bad about the fairy. She didn’t deserve what happened to her.” Grandpa made no response, and Seth kept studying his shoes. “I shouldn’t have messed around with magical creatures,” he finally admitted.

Grandpa placed a hand on his shoulder. “I know you meant no harm. Around here, what you don’t know can hurt you. And others. If you have learned to be more careful and compassionate in the future, and to show greater respect for the inhabitants of this preserve, then at least some good came of all this.”

“I learned something too,” Kendra said. “Humans and walruses should never mix.”

Chapter 9



Hugo

The triangular wooden board rested on Kendra's lap. She studied the pegs, planning her next jump. Beside her, Lena gently tilted back and forth on a rocker, watching the moon rise. From the porch, only a few fairies could be seen gliding around the garden. Fireflies twinkled among them in the silver moonlight.

"Not many fairies out tonight," Kendra said.

"It may be some time before the fairies return in force to our gardens," Lena said.

"Can't you explain everything to them?"

Lena chuckled. "They would listen to your grandfather before they would ever heed me."

"Weren't you sort of one of them?"

"That is the problem. Watch." Lena closed her eyes and began to sing softly. Her high, trilling voice gave life to a wistful melody. Several fairies darted over from the garden, hovering around her in a loose semicircle, interrupting the warbling tune with fervent chirping.

Lena quit singing and said something in an unintelligible language. The fairies chirped back. Lena made a final remark, and the fairies flew away.

“What were they saying?” Kendra asked.

“They told me I should be ashamed to sing a naiadic tune,” Lena replied. “They detest reminders that I was once a nymph, especially if those reminders imply that I am at peace with my decision.”

“They acted pretty upset.”

“Much of their time is spent mocking mortals. Any time one of us crosses over to mortality, it makes the others wonder what they might be missing. Especially if we appear content. They ridicule me mercilessly.”

“You don’t let it get to you?”

“Not really. They do know how to needle me. They tease me about growing old—my hair, my wrinkles. They ask how I will enjoy being buried in a box.” Lena frowned, gazing thoughtfully into the night. “I felt my age today when you called for help.”

“What do you mean?” Kendra jumped a peg on the triangular wooden board.

“I tried to rush to your aid, but ended up sprawled on the kitchen floor. Your grandfather reached your side before I did, and he is no athlete.”

“It wasn’t your fault.”

“In my youth I would have been there in a flash. I used to be handy in an emergency. Now I come hobbling to the rescue.”

“You still get around great.” Kendra was running out of moves. She had already stranded a peg.

Lena shook her head. “I would not last a minute on the trapeze or the tightrope. Once I played on them with facile agility. The curse of mortality. You spend the first portion of your life learning, growing stronger, more capable. And then, through no fault of your own, your body begins to fail. You regress. Strong limbs become feeble, keen senses grow dull, hardy constitutions deteriorate. Beauty withers. Organs quit. You remember yourself in your prime, and wonder where that person went. As your wisdom and experience are peaking, your traitorous body becomes a prison.”

Kendra had no moves left on her perforated board. Three pegs remained. “I never thought of it that way.”

Lena took the board from Kendra and began setting up the pegs. “In their youth, mortals behave more like nymphs. Adulthood seems impossibly distant, let alone the enfeeblement of old age. But ponderously, inevitably, it overtakes you. I find it a frustrating, humbling, infuriating experience.”

“When we talked before, you said you would not change your decision,” Kendra reminded her.

“True, given the opportunity, I would choose Patton every time. And now that I have experienced mortality, I do not imagine I could be content with my former life. But the pleasures of mortality, the thrills of living, come with a price. Pain, illness, the decline of age, the loss of loved ones—those things I could do without.”

The pegs were set up. Lena began jumping them. “I am impressed by how glibly most mortals confront the debilitation of the body. Patton. Your grandparents. Many others. They just accept it. I have always feared aging. The inevitability of it haunts me. Ever since I abandoned the pond, the prospect of death has been a menacing shadow in the back of my mind.”

She jumped the final peg, leaving only one. Kendra had seen her do it before, but had not yet succeeded in copying her moves.

Lena sighed softly. “Because of my nature, I may have to endure old age for decades longer than regular human beings. The humiliating finale to the mortal condition.”

“At least you’re a peg-jumping genius,” Kendra said.

Lena smiled. “The solace of my winter years.”

“You can still paint, and cook, and do all sorts of things.”

“I do not mean to complain. These are not problems to share with young minds.”

“It’s okay. You aren’t scaring me. You’re right, I can’t really picture being grown up. Part of me wonders if high school will ever really happen. Sometimes I think maybe I’ll die young.”

The door to the house opened, and Grandpa’s head poked out. “Kendra, I need to have some words with you and Seth.”

“Okay, Grandpa.”

“Come to the study.”

Lena stood, motioning for Kendra to hurry along. Kendra entered the house and followed Grandpa into the study. Seth was already seated in one

of the oversized chairs, drumming his fingers on the armrest. Kendra claimed the other one while Grandpa settled in behind his desk.

“The day after tomorrow is June twenty-first,” Grandpa said. “Do either of you know the significance of that date?”

Kendra and Seth shared a glance. “Your birthday?” Seth attempted.

“The summer solstice,” Grandpa said. “The longest day of the year. The night before is a holiday of riotous abandon for the whimsical creatures of Fablehaven. Four nights a year, the boundaries that define where different entities can venture dissolve. These nights of revelry are essential to maintaining the segregation that normally prevails here. On Midsummer Eve, the only limits to where any creature can roam and work mischief are the walls of this house. Unless invited, they cannot enter.”

“Midsummer Eve is tomorrow night?” Seth said.

“I did not want to leave you time to fret over it. As long as you obey my instructions, the night will pass without incident. It will be loud, but you will be safe.”

“What other days do they run wild?” Kendra asked.

“The winter solstice and the two equinoxes. Midsummer Eve tends to be the rowdiest of them all.”

“Can we watch out the windows?” Seth asked eagerly.

“No,” Grandpa said. “Nor would you enjoy what you saw. On the festival nights, nightmares take shape and prowl the yard. Ancient entities of supreme evil patrol the darkness in search of prey. You will be in bed at sundown. You will wear earplugs. And you will not arise until sunrise dispels the horrors of the night.”

“Should we sleep in your room?” Kendra asked.

“The attic playroom is the safest place in the house. Extra protections have been placed on it as a sanctuary for children. Even if, by some misfortune, unsavory creatures entered the house, your room would remain secure.”

“Has anything ever gotten into the house?” Kendra asked.

“Nothing unwanted has breached these homestead walls,” Grandpa said. “Still, we can never be too careful. Tomorrow you will help prepare some defenses to afford us an extra layer of protection. Because of the

recent uproar with the fairies, I fear this could be a particularly chaotic Midsummer Eve.”

“Has anyone ever died here?” Seth asked. “On this property, I mean?”

“We should save that topic for another time,” Grandpa said, standing up.

“That one guy changed into dandelion seeds,” Kendra said.

“Anybody else?” Seth insisted.

Grandpa regarded them soberly for a moment. “As you are learning, these preserves are hazardous places. Accidents have occurred in the past. Those accidents generally happen to people who venture where they do not belong or tamper with matters beyond their understanding. If you adhere to my rules, you should have nothing to worry about.”

* * *

The sun had not yet risen far above the horizon as Seth and Dale walked along the rutted lane that ran away from the barn. Seth had never particularly noticed the weedy cart track. The lane began on the far side of the barn and led into the woods. After meandering for some time beneath the trees, the track continued across an expansive meadow.

Overhead, only a few wispy clouds interrupted the bright blue sky. Dale walked briskly, forcing Seth to hustle in order to keep up. Seth was already getting sweaty. The warm day promised to be hot by noon.

Seth kept watch for interesting creatures. He spotted birds, squirrels, and rabbits in the meadow, but saw nothing supernatural.

“Where are all the magical animals?” Seth asked.

“This is the calm before the storm,” Dale said. “I expect most of them are resting up for tonight.”

“What sort of monsters will be out tonight?”

“Stan warned that you might try to pry information out of me. Best not to be so curious about those kinds of things.”

“Not telling me is what makes me curious!”

“It’s for your own good,” Dale said. “Part of the idea is that telling you might make you scared. The other part is that telling you might make you even more curious.”

“If you tell me, I promise I’ll stop being curious.”

Dale shook his head. “What makes you think you can keep that promise?”

“I can’t possibly get more curious than I already am. Not knowing anything is the hardest.”

“Well, fact of the matter is, I can’t give a very satisfying answer to your question. Have I seen strange things, frightening things, in my time here? You bet. Not just on festival nights. Have I stolen a peek out the window on a festival night? A time or two, sure. But I learned to quit looking. People aren’t meant to have things like that in their minds. Makes it hard to sleep. I don’t look anymore. Neither does Lena, neither does your grandfather, neither does your grandmother. And we’re adults.”

“What did you see?”

“How about we change the subject?”

“You’re killing me. I have to know!”

Dale stopped and faced him. “Seth, you only think you want to know. It seems harmless to know, walking under a clear blue sky on a fine morning with a friend. But what about tonight, alone in your room, in the dark, when the night outside is full of unnatural sounds? You might regret me putting a face to what is wailing outside the window.”

Seth swallowed. He looked up at Dale, eyes wide. “What kind of face?”

“Let’s leave it at this. To this day, when I’m out and about after dark, I am sorry I looked. When you’re a few years older, a day will come when your grandfather will give you an opportunity to look out the window on a festival night. If you start feeling inquisitive, postpone your curiosity until that moment. If it were me, if I could go back, I’d skip looking altogether.”

“Easy to say after you looked.”

“Not easy to say. I paid a heavy price to say it. Many sleepless nights.”

“What can be so bad? I can imagine some scary things.”

“I thought the same thing. I failed to appreciate that imagining and seeing are two very different things.”

“If you already looked, why not look again?”

“I don’t want to see anything else. I’d rather just guess at the rest.”
Dale started walking again.

“I still want to know,” Seth said.

“Smart people learn from their mistakes. But the real sharp ones learn from the mistakes of others. Don’t pout; you’re about to see something impressive. And it won’t even give you nightmares.”

“What?”

“See where the road goes over that rise?”

“Yeah.”

“The surprise is on the far side.”

“You’re sure?”

“Positive.”

“It better not be another fairy,” Seth said.

“What’s the matter with fairies?”

“I’ve already seen about a billion of them and also they turned me into a walrus.”

“It’s not a fairy.”

“It’s not like a waterfall or something?” Seth asked suspiciously.

“No, you’ll like it.”

“Good, because you’re getting my hopes up. Is it dangerous?”

“It could be, but we should be safe.”

“Let’s hurry.” Seth dashed up the rise. He glanced back at Dale, who continued walking. Not a great sign. If the surprise were dangerous, Dale would not want him running ahead.

At the top of the rise Seth halted, staring down the gentle slope on the far side. Not a hundred yards away, a huge creature was wading through a hayfield wielding a pair of gigantic scythes. The hulking figure slashed down wide swaths of alfalfa at a relentless pace, both scythes hissing and chiming without pause.

Dale joined Seth atop the rise. “What is it?” Seth asked.

“Our golem, Hugo. Come see.”

Dale left the cart track and started across the field toward the toiling goliath. “What’s a golem?” Seth asked, trailing after him.

“Watch.” Dale raised his voice. “Hugo, halt!”

The scythes stopped cutting in mid-stroke.

“Hugo, come!”

The herculean mower turned and jogged toward them with long, loping strides. Seth could feel the ground vibrate as Hugo approached. Still clutching the scythes, the massive golem came to a halt in front of Dale, looming over him.

“He’s made of dirt?” Seth asked.

“Soil, clay, and stone,” Dale said. “Granted the semblance of life by a powerful enchanter. Hugo was donated to the preserve a couple hundred years ago.”

“How tall is he?”

“Over nine feet when he stands up straight. Mostly he slouches closer to eight.”

Seth gawked at the behemoth. In form he looked more apelike than human. Aside from his impressive height, Hugo was broad, with thick limbs and disproportionately large hands and feet. Tufts of grass and the occasional dandelion sprouted from his earthen body. He had an oblong head with a square jaw. Crude features resembled nose, mouth, and ears. The eyes were a pair of vacant hollows beneath a jutting brow.

“Can he talk?”

“No. He tries to sing. Hugo, sing us a song!”

The wide mouth began to open and close, and out rumbled a series of gravelly roars, some long, some short, none of them bearing much resemblance to music. Hugo cocked his head back and forth, as if swaying to the melody. Seth tried to stifle his laughter.

“Hugo, stop singing.”

The golem fell silent.

“He isn’t very good,” Seth said.

“About as musical as a landslide.”

“Does it embarrass him?”

“He doesn’t think like we do. Doesn’t get happy or sad or angry or bored. He’s like a robot. Hugo just obeys commands.”

“Can I tell him to do stuff?”

“If I order him to obey you,” Dale said. “Otherwise he just listens to me, Lena, and your grandparents.”

“What else can he do?”

“He understands a lot. He performs all sorts of manual labor. It would take quite a team to match all the work he does around here. Hugo never sleeps. If you leave him with a list of chores, he’ll labor through the night.”

“I want to tell him to do something.”

“Hugo, put down the scythes,” said Dale.

The golem set the scythes on the ground.

“Hugo, this is Seth. Hugo will obey Seth’s next command.”

“Now?” asked Seth.

“Say his name first, so he knows you’re addressing him.”

“Hugo, do a cartwheel.”

Hugo held out his palms and shrugged.

“He doesn’t know what you mean,” Dale said. “Can you do a cartwheel?”

“Yeah.”

“Hugo, Seth is going to show you a cartwheel.”

Seth put up his hands, lunged sideways, and did a cartwheel with sloppy form. “Hugo,” Dale said, “obey Seth’s next command.”

“Hugo, do a cartwheel.”

The golem raised his arms, lurched to one side, and completed an awkward cartwheel. The ground trembled.

“Pretty good for a first try,” Seth said.

“He duplicated yours. Hugo, when you do a cartwheel, keep your body straighter and aligned on a single plane, like a wheel turning. Hugo, do a cartwheel!”

This time Hugo executed a nearly perfect cartwheel. His hands left prints in the field. “He learns fast,” Seth exclaimed.

“Anything physical, leastways.” Dale put his hands on his hips. “I’m sick of walking. What do you say we let Hugo take us to our next stop?”

“Really?”

“If you’d rather walk we can always—”

“No way!”

* * *

Kendra used a hacksaw to separate another pumpkin from the vine. Further down the long trough of soil, Lena was cutting a large red one. Nearly half the greenhouse was devoted to pumpkins, big and small, white, yellow, orange, red, and green.

They had arrived at the greenhouse by a faint trail through the woods. Aside from the pumpkins and plants, the glass structure contained a generator to power the lights and the climate control.

“We really have to cut three hundred?” Kendra asked.

“Just be glad you don’t have to load them,” Lena said.

“Who does?”

“It’s a surprise.”

“Are jack-o-lanterns really such a big deal?”

“Do they work? Quite well. Especially if we can convince fairies to fill them.”

“With magic?”

“To dwell in them for the night,” explained Lena. “Fairy lanterns have long been among the surest protections from creatures with dubious intentions.”

“But I thought the house was already safe.” Kendra began sawing the stem of a tall orange pumpkin.

“Redundancies in security are wise on festival nights. Particularly on a Midsummer Eve after all the recent commotion.”

“How will we ever carve all of them before tonight?”

“Leave that to Dale. He could carve them all himself with time to spare. Not always the most artful renderings, but the man can mass produce. You carve only for fun; he knows how to carve for need.”

“I’ve never liked pulling out the guts,” said Kendra.

“Really?” Lena said. “I love the slimy texture, getting greasy up to my elbows. Like playing in the mud. We’ll have delicious pies afterwards.”

“Is this white one too small?”

“Maybe save it for autumn.”

“Do you think the fairies will come?”

“Hard to say,” Lena admitted. “Some, for sure. Normally we have no trouble filling as many lanterns as we care to carve, but tonight might be an exception.”

“What if they don’t show up?” Kendra asked.

“We’ll be fine. Artificial lighting works, just not as well as fairies. With the fairy lanterns, the commotion stays farther from the house. In addition, Stan will be putting out tribal masks, herbs, and other safeguards.”

“Is the night really so awful?”

“You’ll hear plenty of disturbing sounds.”

“Maybe we should have skipped the milk this morning.”

Lena shook her head, not lifting her eyes from her work. “Some of the most insidious tricks employed tonight will involve artifice and illusion. Without the milk you could be even more susceptible. It would only broaden their ability to mask their true appearance.”

Kendra severed another pumpkin. “Either way, I won’t be looking.”

“I wish we could transplant some of your common sense to your brother.”

“After all that’s happened, I’m sure he’ll behave tonight.”

The door to the greenhouse opened, and Dale poked his head in. “Kendra, come here, I want you to meet somebody.”

Kendra walked to the door with Lena behind her. In the doorway, Kendra paused and let out a small shriek. A bulky creature with a simian build was marching toward the greenhouse pulling a rickshaw-type contraption the size of a wagon. “What is it?”

“He’s Hugo,” Seth crowed from inside the handcart. “He’s a robot made of dirt!” He jumped out of the cart and ran over to Kendra.

“I ran ahead so you could see him approach,” Dale said.

“Hugo can run really fast when you tell him to,” Seth gushed. “Dale let me give him orders and he obeyed everything I said. See? He’s waiting for instructions.”

Hugo stood motionless beside the greenhouse, still holding the rickshaw. Had she not just seen Hugo moving, Kendra would have assumed he was a crude statue. Seth shouldered past Kendra into the greenhouse.

“What is he?” Kendra asked Lena.

“A golem,” she replied. “Animated matter granted rudimentary intelligence. He does most of the heavy labor around here.”

“He’s loading the pumpkins.”

“And rolling them to the house in his cart.”

Seth exited the greenhouse toting a fairly large pumpkin. “Can I show her a command?” he asked.

“Sure,” Dale said. “Hugo, obey the next command from Seth.”

Holding the pumpkin at his waist with both hands, leaning back a bit to stay balanced, Seth approached the golem. “Hugo, take this pumpkin and throw it as far as you can into the woods.”

The inert golem sprang to life. Grasping the pumpkin in one massive hand, he twisted and then fiercely uncoiled, hurling the pumpkin into the sky like a discus. Dale whistled softly as the pumpkin shrank into the distance, finally dropping out of sight, an orange speck vanishing behind far-off treetops.

“Did you see that?” Seth cried. “He’s better than a water balloon launcher!”

“Regular catapult,” Dale murmured.

“Very impressive,” Lena agreed dryly. “Forgive me if I hope to put a few of our pumpkins to more practical use. You boys come help us cut the rest of our harvest so we can get them loaded.”

“Can’t Hugo do a few more tricks?” Seth begged. “He knows cartwheels.”

“There will be time for nonsense later,” Lena assured him. “We need to finish our preparations for this evening.”



Midsummer Eve

Grandpa prodded the logs in the fireplace with a poker. A shower of sparks swirled up the chimney as one log split open, revealing an interior of glowing embers. Dale poured himself a cup of steaming coffee, adding three spoonfuls of sugar. Lena peered out the window through the blinds.

“The sun will reach the horizon in moments,” she announced.

Kendra sat beside Seth on the sofa, watching Grandpa stoke the fire. The preparations were all in place. The entrances to the house were crowded with jack-o-lanterns. Lena had been right—Dale had carved more than two hundred of them. Not quite thirty fairies had reported for duty, many fewer than Grandpa had expected, even given the recently strained relations.

Eight of the fairy lanterns were placed on the roof outside the attic, four at each window. Glow sticks illuminated most of the pumpkins, two in each. Grandpa Sorenson apparently ordered them in bulk.

“Will it start right when the sun goes down?” Seth asked.

“Things won’t really get going until twilight fades,” Grandpa said, setting the poker beside the other fire irons. “But the hour has come for you children to retire to your room.”

“I want to stay up with you,” Seth said.

“The attic bedroom is the safest place in the house,” Grandpa said.

“Why don’t we all stay in the attic?” Kendra asked.

Grandpa shook his head. “The spells that make the attic impenetrable function only if it is occupied by children. Without children, or with adults in the room, the barriers become ineffectual.”

“Isn’t the whole house supposed to be safe?” Kendra asked.

“I believe so, but on an enchanted preserve, nothing is ever certain. I am concerned by the scant number of fairies who reported this afternoon. I worry this could be a particularly uproarious Midsummer Eve. Perhaps the worst since I’ve lived here.”

A long, mournful howl underscored his statement. The disturbing call was answered by a stronger howl, closer, that ended with a cackle. Chills tingled behind Kendra’s shoulders.

“The sun is gone,” Lena reported from the window. She squinted, then put a hand to her mouth. Closing the slat, she stepped away from the blinds. “They’re already entering the yard.”

Kendra leaned forward. Lena really looked upset. She had paled visibly. Her dark eyes were unsettled.

Grandpa scowled. “Real trouble?”

She nodded.

Grandpa clapped his hands together. “Up to the attic.”

The tension in the room prevented Kendra from uttering any protest. Apparently Seth sensed the same urgency. Grandpa Sorenson followed them up the stairs, down the hall, and up into their bedroom.

“Get under your covers,” Grandpa said.

“What’s around the beds?” Seth asked, examining the floor.

“Circles of special salt,” Grandpa said. “An extra protection.”

Kendra stepped carefully over the salt, pulled back the covers, and climbed into bed. The sheets felt cool. Grandpa handed her a pair of small, spongy cylinders.

“Earplugs,” he said, passing a pair to Seth as well. “I suggest you wear them. They should help mute the tumult so you can sleep.”

“Just cram them in our ears?” Seth said, eyeing one suspiciously.

“That’s the idea,” Grandpa said.

An eruption of high-pitched laughter blared up from the yard. Kendra and Seth exchanged a concerned glance. Grandpa took a seat at the edge of Kendra’s bed.

“I need you kids to be brave and responsible for me tonight,” he said.

They nodded silently.

“You should know,” he went on, “I didn’t let you come here merely as a favor to your parents. Your grandmother and I are getting on in years. The day will come when somebody else will need to care for this preserve. We need to find heirs. Dale is a good man, but he has no interest in running things here. You kids have impressed me so far. You are bright, adventurous, and courageous.

“There are some unpleasant aspects to living here. Festival nights are a good example. Perhaps you wonder why we don’t just all go spend the night in a hotel. If we did, we would return to find the house in ruins. Our presence is essential to the magic that protects these walls. If you are ever going to be involved with the work on this preserve, you will need to learn to cope with certain unpleasant realities. Look at tonight as a test. If the chaotic clamor outside is too much for you, then you do not belong here. There is no shame in this. People who belong here are rare.”

“We’ll be fine,” Seth said.

“I believe you will. Listen carefully to my final instructions. Once I leave the room, no matter what you hear, no matter what happens, do not leave your beds. We will not come to check on you until morning. You may think you hear me, or Dale, or Lena, asking to come in. Be forewarned. It will not be us.

“This room is invulnerable unless you open a window or the door. Remain in your beds and that will not happen. With the fairy lanterns at your window, odds are that nothing will come near this part of the house. Try to ignore the tumult of the night, and we’ll all share a special breakfast in the morning. Any questions?”

“I’m scared,” Kendra said. “Don’t go.”

“You’ll be safer without me. We’ll be keeping watch downstairs all night. Everything will be fine. Just go to sleep.”

“It’s okay, Grandpa,” Seth said. “I’ll keep an eye on her.”

“Keep the other on yourself,” Grandpa said sternly. “You mind me tonight. This is no game.”

“I will.”

Outside the wind began to whistle through the trees. The day had been calm, but now a groaning gust shook the house. Overhead the shingles rattled and the timbers creaked.

Grandpa crossed to the door. “Strange winds are blowing. I better get downstairs. Goodnight, sleep tight, I’ll greet you at sunrise.” He closed the door. The wind subsided. Goldilocks clucked softly.

“You’ve got to be kidding,” Kendra said.

“I know,” Seth said. “I’m practically wetting the bed.”

“I don’t think I’ll sleep all night.”

“I know I won’t.”

“We better try,” said Kendra.

“Okay.”

Kendra inserted the earplugs. Closing her eyes, she curled up and snuggled into her covers. All she had to do was fall asleep, and she could escape the frightening sounds of the night. She forced herself to relax, letting her body go limp, and tried to clear her mind.

It was hard not to fantasize about inheriting the estate. No way would they give it to Seth! He would blow the whole place up in five minutes! What would it be like to know all the mysterious secrets of Fablehaven? It might be scary if she were alone. She would have to share the secret with her parents so they could live with her.

After a couple of minutes she rolled over to face the other direction. She always had a tough time falling asleep when she was too deliberate about it. She tried to think of nothing, tried to focus on calm, regular breathing. Seth was saying something, but the earplugs muffled it. She pulled them out.

“What?”

“I said, the suspense is killing me. Are you actually using the earplugs?”

“Of course. You’re not?”

“I don’t want to miss anything.”

“Are you crazy?”

“I’m not tired at all,” he said. “Are you?”

“Not much.”

“Dare me to look out the window?”

“Don’t be stupid!”

“It’s barely sunset. What better time to look?”

“How about never.”

“You’re a bigger chicken than Goldilocks.”

“You’ve got less brains than Hugo.”

The wind rose again, steadily gaining force. Warbling moans echoed on the breeze, groaning in different pitches, forming eerie, discordant harmonies. A long, birdlike scream overpowered the ghostly chorus of moans, starting at one side of the house, passing overhead, and finally fading. In the distance, a bell began to toll.

Seth no longer looked quite so brave. “Maybe we should try to get some sleep,” he said, putting in the earplugs.

Kendra did likewise. The sounds were muffled, but continued: the haunted wind lamenting, the house shuddering, an increasing assortment of shrieks, screams, howls, and wild bursts of gibbering laughter. The pillow grew warm, so Kendra flipped it over to the cold side.

The only light in the room had been filtering through the curtains. As twilight dimmed, the room darkened. Kendra pressed her hands over her ears, trying to augment the dampening power of the earplugs. She told herself the sounds were just a storm.

A deep, throbbing beat joined the cacophony, keeping a steady rhythm. As the pulsing percussion increased in volume and tempo, it was accompanied by chanting in a wailing language. Kendra resisted otherworldly images of vicious demons on the hunt.

A pair of hands closed around her throat. She jumped and flailed, smacking Seth across the cheek with the back of her hand.

“Jeez!” Seth complained, stumbling away.

“You asked for it! What’s the matter with you?”

“You should have seen your face,” he laughed, recovering from the slap.

“Get back in bed.”

He sat on the side of her bed. “You should take out your earplugs. The noise isn’t so bad after a while. It reminds me of that CD Dad plays on Halloween.”

She removed them. “Except it’s shaking the house. And it isn’t make-believe.”

“Don’t you want to look out the window?”

“No! Stop talking about it!”

Seth leaned over and turned on the nightlight—a glowing statuette of Snoopy. “I don’t see the big deal. I mean, there are all sorts of cool things out there right now. What’s wrong with just taking a little peek?”

“Grandpa said not to get out of your bed!”

“Grandpa lets people look when they get older,” Seth said. “Dale told me. So it can’t be that dangerous. Grandpa just thinks I’m an idiot.”

“Yeah, and he’s right!”

“Think about it. You wouldn’t want to run across a tiger out in the wilderness. You’d be scared to death. But at a zoo, who cares? It can’t get you. This room is safe. Peeking out the window will be like looking at a zoo full of monsters.”

“More like looking out of a shark cage.”

A sudden, staccato flurry of pounding shook the roof, as if a team of horses were galloping across the shingles. Seth flinched, raising his arms protectively. Kendra heard the creak and rattle of wagon wheels.

“Don’t you want to see what that was?” Seth asked.

“Are you trying to tell me that didn’t scare you?”

“I expect to be scared. That’s the whole point!”

“If you don’t get back in bed,” warned Kendra, “I’m telling Grandpa in the morning.”

“Don’t you want to see who’s playing the drums?”

“Seth, I’m not kidding. You probably won’t even be able to see anything.”

“We have a telescope.”

Something outside roared, a thunderous bellow of bestial ferocity. It was enough to silence the conversation. The night continued to rage. The roar came again, if anything with greater intensity, momentarily drowning out all the other commotion.

Kendra and Seth eyed one another. “I bet it’s a dragon,” he said breathlessly, running over to the window.

“Seth, no!”

Seth pulled aside the curtain. The four jack-o-lanterns shed a mellow illumination across the portion of the roof directly beyond the window. For a moment Seth thought he saw something swirling in the darkness at the edge of the light, a whirling mass of silky black fabric. Then he saw only blackness.

“No stars,” he reported.

“Seth, get away from there.” Kendra had her sheets pulled up to her eyes.

He squinted through the window a moment longer. “Too dark; I can’t see anything.” A glimmering fairy floated up from one of the jack-o-lanterns, peering at Seth through the slightly warped windowpane. “Hey, a fairy came out.” The tiny fairy waved an arm and was joined by three others. One made a face at Seth, and then all four streaked away into the night.

Now he could see nothing. Seth closed the curtain and backed away from the window. “You had your look,” Kendra said. “Are you satisfied?”

“The fairies in the jack-o-lanterns flew away,” he said.

“Nice work. They probably saw who they were guarding.”

“Actually, I think you’re right. One made a face at me.”

“Get back in bed,” Kendra ordered.

The drumming ceased, along with the chanting. The ghostly wind grew quiet. The howls and screams and laughter diminished in volume and frequency. Something pattered across the roof. Then . . . silence.

“Something’s wrong,” Seth whispered.

“They probably saw you; get back in bed.”

“I have a flashlight in my emergency kit.” He went to the nightstand by his bed and withdrew a small flashlight from the cereal box.

Kendra kicked off her sheets and lunged at Seth, tackling him onto his bed. She wrenched the flashlight from his grasp and pushed off him to regain her feet. He charged her. Twisting, she used his momentum to shove him onto her bed.

“Quit it, Seth, or I’ll go get Grandpa right now!”

“I’m not the one starting a fight!” His expression was a portrait of wounded resentment. She hated when he tried to act like the victim after initiating trouble.

“Neither am I.”

“First you hit me, then you jump on me?”

“You stop breaking the rules or I’m going straight downstairs.”

“You’re worse than the witch. Grandpa should build you a shack.”

“Get in your bed.”

“Give me my light. I bought it with my own money.”

They were interrupted by the sound of a baby crying. There was nothing desperate about it, just the bawling of an upset infant. The crying seemed to emanate from outside the darkened window.

“A little baby,” Seth said.

“No, it’s some trick.”

“Maaamaaaaaaa,” the baby whined.

“Sounds pretty real,” Seth said. “Let me take a look.”

“It’s going to be a skeleton or something.”

Seth grabbed the flashlight from Kendra. She neither gave it to him nor prevented him from taking it. He jogged over to the window. Holding the front of flashlight against the windowpane, and cupping a hand around it to minimize reflection, he switched it on.

“Oh my gosh,” he said. “It really is a baby!”

“Anything else?”

“Just a crying baby.” The crying stopped. “Now he’s looking at me.”

Kendra could no longer resist. She went and stood behind Seth. There on the roof just beyond the window stood a tear-streaked toddler who looked barely old enough to stand. The baby wore cloth diapers and nothing else. He had wispy blonde curls and a little round tummy with an outie bellybutton. Eyes brimming with tears, the child held out its pudgy arms toward the window.

“It has to be a trick,” Kendra said. “An illusion.”

Spotlighted by the flashlight, the toddler took a step toward the window and fell to all fours. He pouted, on the verge of crying again. Standing up, the baby tried another wobbly step. Goose bumps stood out on his chest and arms.

“He looks real,” said Seth. “What if he’s real?”

“Why would a baby be on the roof?”

The baby toddled to the window, pressing a chubby palm against the glass. Something glinted in the light behind him. Seth shifted the beam onto a pair of green-eyed wolves approaching stealthily from the edge of the roof. The animals paused as the light fell on them. Both looked mangy and lean. One of the wolves bared sharp teeth, foam frothing from its mouth. The other was missing an eye.

“They’re using him as bait!” Seth yelled.

The baby looked back at the wolves, then turned back toward Seth and Kendra, bawling with renewed vigor, fresh tears streaming, tiny hands slapping the windowpanes. The wolves charged. The toddler wailed.

In her cage, Goldilocks clucked wildly.

Seth threw open the window.

“No!” Kendra shouted, although she reflexively wanted to do the same thing.

The instant the window opened, wind gushed into the room, as if the air itself had been waiting to pounce. The baby dove into the room, transforming grotesquely as it landed on the floor in a deft somersault. The child was replaced by a leering goblin with yellow slits for eyes, a puckered nose, and a face like a dried cantaloupe. Bald and scabrous on top, the head was fringed by long, weblike hair. The sinuous arms were gangly, the hands long and leathery, tipped with hooked claws. Ribs, collarbones, and pelvis jutted hideously. Spidery networks of veins bulged against maroon flesh.

With supernatural haste, the wolves also sailed through the window before Seth could move to close it. Kendra shoved past Seth and jerked the window shut in time to impede the entrance of a coldly beautiful woman swathed in writhing black garments. The apparition’s dark hair undulated like vapor in a breeze. Her pallid face was slightly translucent. Gazing into those empty, searing eyes froze Kendra where she stood. Babbling whispers filled her mind. Her mouth felt dry. She could not swallow.

Seth yanked the curtains shut and tugged Kendra toward the bed. Whatever trance had momentarily gorgonized her dissolved. Disoriented, she ran alongside Seth to the bed, sensing something in pursuit. When they leaped onto the mattress, a brilliant light flared behind them, accompanied by a crisp stutter like firecrackers.

Kendra twisted to get a look. The maroon goblin stood near the bed, coddling its bony shoulder. The scowling creature stood about as tall as Dale. Hesitantly it reached a knobby hand toward her, and another bright flash sent it staggering away.

The circle of salt! At first she had not grasped why Seth was dragging her to the bed. At least one of them was thinking! Glancing down, Kendra saw that the two-inch dune of salt surrounding the bed indeed marked the line the goblin could not cross.

A twelve-foot centipede with three sets of wings and three pairs of taloned feet corkscrewed around the room in a complex aerial display. A brutish monster with a pronounced underbite and plates down its spine hurled a wardrobe across the room. The wolves had shed their disguises as well.

The maroon goblin cavorted around the room in a feral tantrum, tearing down bookshelves, upsetting toy chests, and snapping the horn off the rocking horse. It picked up Goldilocks's cage and flung it against the wall. The slender bars crumpled and the door sprang open. The terrified chicken took to ungainly flight in a flurry of golden feathers.

Goldilocks was coming toward the bed. The winged centipede struck at the flustered hen but missed. The maroon demon made an acrobatic leap and caught the chicken by both legs. Goldilocks clucked and squirmed in mortal panic.

Seth jumped off the bed. Crouching, he scooped up two handfuls from the circle of salt and charged the wiry goblin. Now holding the chicken in one hand, the sneering goblin rushed to meet him. An instant before the outstretched hand of the demon reached him, Seth flung a handful of salt. Releasing Goldilocks, the demon reeled back, scorched by a blinding blaze.

The chicken made straight for the bed, and Seth tossed his other handful of salt in a wide arc to cover their retreat, scalding the flying centipede in the process. The bulky creature with the underbite tried to beat Seth to the bed, arriving too late and receiving a violent shock as it collided

with the invisible salt barrier. Back on the bed, Seth clung to Goldilocks, arms quivering convulsively.



The maroon demon growled. His face and chest were charred from the salt. Tendrils of smoke curled up from the burns. Turning, the demon pulled a book from the shelf and tore it in half.

The door flew open, and Dale leveled a shotgun at the monster with the underbite. “You kids stay put no matter what!” he called. All three monsters converged on the doorway. Dale retreated down the stairs, gun silent. The winged centipede spiraled out the door above the other scrambling creatures.

They heard a shotgun blast from down in the hall. “Shut the door and stay put!” Dale hollered.

Kendra ran and slammed the door, then sprinted back to her bed. Seth held Goldilocks, tears streaming down his cheeks. “I didn’t mean for this to happen,” he whimpered.

“It’ll be okay.”

From downstairs came repeated gunshots. Growls, roars, shrieks, glass shattering, wood splintering. Outside, the cacophonous uproar resumed louder than ever. Pagan drums, ethereal choirs, tribal chanting, wailing lamentations, guttural snarls, unnatural howls, and piercing screams united in relentless disharmony.

Kendra, Seth, and Goldilocks sat on the bed awaiting dawn. Kendra had to constantly fight images of the woman with the swirling black garments. She could not get the apparition out of her mind. When she had looked into those soulless eyes, even though the lady was outside, Kendra had felt certain there would be no escape.

Late in the night, the furor finally began to relent, replaced by more unnerving sounds. Babies began to cry beyond the window again, calling for mama. When that failed to elicit a response, the voices of young children pleaded for help.

“Kendra, please hurry, they’re coming!”

“Seth, Seth, open up, help us! Seth, don’t leave us out here!”

After the cries went ignored for a while, snarls and screams would simulate the demise of the young supplicants. Then a new batch of solicitors began begging for admittance.

Perhaps most disconcerting was when Grandpa was inviting them down to breakfast. “We made it, kids, the sun is rising! Come on, Lena cooked hotcakes.”

“How do we know you’re our Grandpa?” Kendra asked, more than a little suspicious.

“Because I love you. Hurry, the food’s getting cold.”

“I don’t think the sun is up yet,” Seth replied.

“It’s just a little cloudy this morning.”

“Go away,” Kendra said.

“Just let me in; I want to kiss you good morning.”

“Our Grandpa never kisses us, you sicko,” Seth yelled. “Get out of our house!”

The exchange was followed by vicious banging on the door for a solid five minutes. The hinges shook, but the door held.

The night wore on. Kendra leaned against the headboard as Seth dozed at her side. Despite the noise, her eyelids began to feel heavy.

Suddenly she jerked awake. Gray light was seeping through the curtains. Goldilocks wandered the floor, pecking at kernels from her spilled bucket of feed.

When the curtains were masking unmistakable sunlight, Kendra nudged Seth. He looked around, blinking, then crept to the window and peeked out.

“The sun is officially up,” he announced. “We made it.”

“I’m scared to go downstairs,” whispered Kendra.

“Everybody’s fine,” Seth said nonchalantly.

“Then why haven’t they come to get us?”

Seth had no response. Kendra had gone easy on him during the night. The consequences for opening the window were brutal enough without placing blame and starting arguments. And Seth had really acted remorseful. But now he was reverting to his idiot self.

Kendra glared at him. “You realize you might have killed them all.”

His face fell and he turned away, shoulders shaking with sobs. He buried his face in his hands. “They’re probably fine,” he squeaked. “Dale had a gun and everything. They know how to handle themselves.”

Kendra felt bad, seeing that Seth clearly was worried too. She went to him and tried to give him a hug. He shoved her away. “Leave me alone.”

“Seth, whatever happened isn’t your fault.”

“Of course it’s my fault!” His nose was getting congested.

“I mean, they tricked us. I sort of wanted to open the window too, when I saw those wolves charging. You know, in case it wasn’t fake.”

“I knew it might be a trick,” he sobbed. “But that baby looked so real. I thought they might have kidnapped him to use him as bait. I thought I could save him.”

“You were trying to do the right thing.” She attempted to hug him once more, but he pushed her away again.

“Don’t,” he snapped.

“I didn’t mean to blame you,” said Kendra. “You were acting like you didn’t even care.”

“Of course I care! You don’t think I’m terrified to go down there and find out what I did?”

“You didn’t do it. They tricked you. I would have opened the window if you hadn’t.”

“If I would have stayed in bed none of it would have happened,” Seth lamented.

“Maybe they’re fine.”

“Right. And they let a monster come in the house and up to our door pretending to be Grandpa.”

“Maybe they had to hide down in the basement or someplace.”

Seth was no longer crying. He picked up a doll and used her dress to wipe his nose. “I hope so.”

“Just in case something bad did happen, you can’t blame yourself. All you did was open a window. If those monsters did something bad, it’s their fault.”

“Partly.”

“Grandpa and Lena and Dale all know that living here is risky. I’m sure they’re fine, but if they aren’t, you mustn’t blame yourself.”

“Whatever.”

“I’m serious.”

“I like it better when you’re funny.”

“You know what I liked?” Kendra said.

“What?”

“When you saved Goldilocks.”

He laughed, snorting a little through his stuffy nostrils. “Did you see how bad the salt burned that guy?” He retrieved the doll and wiped his nose again on the dress.

“It was really brave.”

“I’m just glad it worked.”

“It was quick thinking.”

Seth glanced at the door and then back at Kendra. “We should probably go check out the damage.”

“If you say so.”



Aftermath

Kendra knew it would be bad the moment she opened the door. Ragged gouges furrowed the walls of the stairwell. Crude pictograms defaced the far side of the door, along with an abundance of less orderly nicks and scratches. Near the base of the stairs, a crusty brown substance was smeared on the wall.

“I’m grabbing some salt,” Seth said. He returned to the ring around the bed and filled his hands and pockets with the salt that had scorched the intruder the night before.

When Seth rejoined her, Kendra started down the stairs. The steps creaked loudly in the quiet house. The hall at the bottom was worse than the stairway. Again the walls had been savagely raked by claws. The bathroom door was off its hinges and had three splintery holes of different sizes. Patches of carpeting were burned and stained.

Kendra moved down the hall, appalled by the aftermath of the violent night. A smashed mirror. A broken light fixture. A table reduced to kindling. And at the end of the hall, a gaping rectangle instead of a window.

“Looks like they let others in,” Kendra said, pointing down the hall.

Seth was examining singed hairs in a damp stain on the floor.

“Grandpa?” he yelled. “Anybody!”

The silence was an ominous answer.

Kendra descended the stairs to the entry hall. Sections of the banister were gone. The front door hung askew, an arrow protruding from the frame. Primitive drawings marred the walls, some scored, others scrawled.

In a trance, Kendra roamed the lower rooms of the house. The place had been gutted. Almost all the windows were destroyed. Battered doors lay far from their frames. Mutilated furniture bled stuffing onto mangled carpeting. Shredded drapes dangled in tattered ribbons. Chandeliers lay in shattered ruins. Half of one charred sofa was entirely missing.

Kendra wandered to the back porch. Wind chimes lay in tangles. The furniture was scattered around the garden. A broken rocking chair balanced atop a fountain. A wicker love seat protruded from a hedge.

Back in the house, Kendra found Seth in Grandpa’s office. It looked as if an anvil had fallen on the desk. Pulverized memorabilia littered the floor.

“Everything’s trashed,” Seth said.

“It looks like a demolition team came through here with sledgehammers.”

“Or hand grenades.” Seth indicated where tar appeared to have been slopped against the wall. “Is that blood?”

“It looks too dark to be human.”

Seth picked his way around the splintered desk to the empty window. “Maybe they got out.”

“I hope so.”

“Out on the lawn,” Seth said. “Is that a person?”

Kendra approached the window. “Dale?” she shouted.

The prone figure did not move. “Come on,” Seth said, hurrying through the wreckage.

Kendra followed him out the front door and around to the side of the house. They dashed over to the figure lying supine near an overturned birdbath.

“Oh, no,” Seth said.

It was a painted statue of Dale. A faithful replica, except the paint was more simplified than his actual coloring would have been. His head was turned to one side, eyes squinted shut, arms raised protectively. The proportions were exact. He was wearing the same outfit he had worn the previous night.

Kendra touched the figure. It was made of metal, clothes and all. Bronze, maybe? Lead? Steel? She rapped her knuckles against the forearm. Sounded solid. No hollow ringing.

“They turned him into a statue,” Seth said.

“You think it’s really him?”

“It has to be!”

“Help me flip him over.”

Both of them strained, but Dale did not budge. He was way too heavy.

“I really blew it,” Seth said, palms pressed against his temples. “What have I done?”

“Maybe we can change him back.”

Seth knelt down and put his mouth to Dale’s ear. “If you can hear me, give us a sign!” he yelled.

The metallic figure made no response.

“Do you think Grandpa and Lena are around here too?” Kendra asked.

“We’ll have to look.”

Kendra cupped her hands around her mouth. “Grandpa! Grandpa Sorenson! Lena! Can you hear me?”

“Look at this,” Seth said, crouching beside the overturned birdbath. The birdbath had tipped over toward a flowerbed. In the flowerbed was a clear footprint—three large toes and a narrow heel. The print was big enough to suggest that it came from a creature at least the size of a grown man.

“Giant bird?”

“Check out the hole behind the heel.” He stuck a finger into a nickel-sized hole. “A couple inches deep.”

“Weird.”

Seth acted excited. “It has a pointy thing on the back of its heel, a spur or something.”

“Which means what?”

“We can probably track it.”

“Track it?”

Seth moved forward in the direction the toes pointed, scanning the ground. “See!” He crouched, pointing at a hole in the lawn. “That spur digs deep. It should leave a clear trail.”

“And what happens if you catch up to whatever made the tracks?”

He patted his pockets. “I throw some salt and rescue Grandpa.”

“How do you know it took Grandpa?”

“I don’t,” he admitted. “But it’s a start.”

“What if it turns you into a painted statue?”

“I won’t look directly at it. Just in mirrors.”

“Where’d you get *that* from?”

“History.”

“You don’t even know what you’re talking about,” Kendra said.

“We’ll see about that. I better get my camo shirt.”

“First let’s make sure there aren’t any other statues in the yard.”

“Fine, then I’m out of here. I don’t want the trail getting cold.”

After scouring the yard for half an hour, Kendra and Seth had come across various articles of furniture from the house or porch in unexpected locations, but they had found no other life-sized painted statues. They ended up by the swimming pool.

“Have you noticed the butterflies?” Kendra asked.

“Yeah.”

“Anything special about them?”

Seth slapped his forehead with the heel of his hand. “We haven’t had milk today!”

“Yep. No fairies, just bugs.”

“If those fairies are smart, they won’t show their faces around here,” growled Seth.

“Yeah, you’ll show them. What do you want to be this time? A giraffe?”

“None of this would have happened if they had kept guarding the window.”

“You did torture one of them,” Kendra pointed out.

“They tortured me back! We’re even.”

“Whatever we do, we should drink some milk first.”

They went into the house. The refrigerator was lying on its side. Together they pried the door open. Some of the milk bottles had broken, but a few were intact. Kendra grabbed one, uncapped it, and took a sip. Seth drank next.

“I need my stuff,” he said, bolting for the stairs.

Kendra started searching for clues. Wouldn’t Grandpa have tried to leave them a message? Maybe there hadn’t been time. She walked through the rooms, but encountered no hints to explain the fate of either Lena or Grandpa.

Seth showed up in his camouflage shirt, carrying the cereal box. “I was trying to find that shotgun. You haven’t seen it?”

“Nope. There’s an arrow by the front door. You could toss that at the monster.”

“I think I’ll stick with the salt.”

“We never checked the basement,” Kendra said.

“Worth a try.”

They opened the door by the kitchen and stared down into the gloom. Kendra realized it was just about the only undamaged door in the house. Stone steps led into the darkness.

“How about that flashlight?” Kendra said.

“No light switch?” he asked. They couldn’t find one. He rummaged in the cereal box and withdrew the flashlight.

With some salt from his pocket clutched in one hand and the flashlight in the other, Seth led the way. It was a longer flight than would ordinarily lead to a basement—more than twenty steep stairs. At the bottom the flashlight beam illuminated a short, barren hallway ending at an iron door.

They walked to the door. It had a keyhole below the handle. Seth tugged the handle, but the door was locked. There was a small hatch at the base of the door.

“What’s this?” he asked.

“It’s for brownies, so they can come in and fix stuff.”

He pushed open the hatch. “Grandpa! Lena! Anybody!”

They waited in vain for a reply. He called once more before standing and shining his light into the keyhole.

“None of your keys would fit this?” he asked.

“They’re way too small.”

“There might be a key stashed in Grandpa’s bedroom.”

“If they were down here, I think they’d answer.”

Kendra and Seth started back up the stairs. At the top, they heard a loud, deep groan that lasted at least ten seconds. The penetrating sound came from outside. It was much too powerful to have been made by a human. They raced to the back porch. The groan had ended. It was difficult to say from which direction it had originated.

They waited, looking around, expecting a recurrence of the unusual sound. After a tense minute or two, Kendra broke the silence. “What was it?”

“I bet it was whatever has Grandpa and Lena,” Seth said. “And it didn’t sound too far off.”

“It sounded big.”

“Yeah.”

“Like whale big.”

“We have the salt,” Seth reminded her. “We need to follow that trail.”

“Are you sure that’s a good idea?”

“You have a better one?”

“I don’t know. Wait and see if they show up? Maybe they’ll escape.”

“If that hasn’t happened by now, it isn’t going to. We’ll be careful, and we’ll make sure to get back before dark. We’ll be fine. We have the salt. That stuff works like acid.”

“If something goes wrong, who saves us?” Kendra asked.

“You don’t have to come. But I’m going.”

Seth hurried down the porch steps and started across the yard. Kendra reluctantly followed. She wasn’t sure how they would pull off a rescue if scalding the monster with salt failed, but Seth was right about one thing—they couldn’t just abandon Grandpa.

Kendra caught up with Seth at the flowerbed where they had originally found the prints. Combing through the grass together, they followed a series of nickel-sized holes across the lawn. The holes were spaced roughly five

feet apart and followed a generally straight line, passing the barn and eventually leaving the yard along a narrow path into the woods.

No longer obscured by grass, the tracks were even easier to follow. They passed a couple of intersecting paths, but the way was always certain. The prints of whatever creature had left the holes were unmistakable. They made rapid progress. Kendra remained alert, searching the trees for mythical beasts, but spotted nothing more spectacular than a goldfinch and some chipmunks.

“I’m starving,” Seth announced.

“I’m okay. I’m getting sleepy, though.”

“Just don’t think about it.”

“My throat is getting sore,” Kendra went on. “You know, we’ve been up almost thirty hours.”

“I’m not that tired,” Seth said. “Just hungry. We should have foraged for food in the pantry. It can’t all be smashed.”

“We must not be too hungry if we didn’t think about it at the time.”

Suddenly Seth stopped short. “Uh-oh.”

“What?”

Seth went several paces forward. Leaning close to the ground, he worked his way back past Kendra. He went forward again more slowly, kicking aside any leaves or branches on the trail. Kendra realized the problem before Seth vocalized it. “No more holes.”

She helped scan the ground. They both scrutinized the same segment of the path multiple times before Seth began to search off the trail. “This could be bad,” he said.

“There’s a lot of undergrowth,” Kendra agreed.

“If we could even find one hole, we’d know which direction it went.”

“If it left the path, we’ll never be able to follow it.”

Seth crawled on hands and knees along the edge of the path, sifting through the mulch beneath the undergrowth. Kendra picked up a stick and used it to poke around.

“Don’t make any holes,” Seth cautioned.

“I’m just moving leaves.”

“You could do it with your hands.”

“If I wanted bug bites and a rash.”

“Hey, this is it.” He showed Kendra a hole about five feet from the last one on the path. “It turned left.”

“Diagonally.” She made a line with her hand connecting the two dots and continuing into the woods.

“But it might have turned more,” Seth said. “We should find another one.”

Finding the next hole took almost fifteen minutes. It proved that the creature had indeed turned almost directly to the left, perpendicular to the path.

“What if it kept turning?” Kendra said.

“It would sort of be backtracking if it turned more.”

“Maybe it wanted to throw off pursuit.”

Seth went forward five feet and found the next hole almost instantly. It confirmed that the new course was perpendicular to the trail.

“The undergrowth isn’t as bad here,” Seth said.

“Seth, it would take all day to track it twenty paces.”

“I don’t mean to track it. Just to walk in this direction for a while. Maybe it will intersect a trail and we can pick up tracks again. Or maybe it lives not much farther ahead.”

Kendra put a hand in her pocket, feeling for salt. “I don’t like the idea of leaving the trail.”

“Me neither. We won’t go far. But this thing seems to like trails. It followed one all this way. We may be close to a discovery. It’s worth going a little ways just to check.”

Kendra stared at her brother. “Okay, and what if we run into a cave?”

“We take a look.”

“What if we hear breathing coming from the cave?”

“You don’t have to go in. I’ll look myself. The point is finding Grandpa.”

Kendra bit her tongue. She almost said that if they found him out here, it would probably be in pieces. “Okay, just a little ways.”

They walked in a straight line away from the path. They kept scanning the ground, but noticed no more holes. Before long they crossed a dry, rocky streambed. Not far beyond, they wandered into a little meadow. The brush and wildflowers in the meadow grew nearly waist high.

“I don’t see any other trails,” Kendra said. “Or any monster houses.”

“Let’s take a good look around the meadow,” said Seth. He made a complete search of the perimeter of the meadow, finding neither holes nor trails.

“Let’s face it,” Kendra said. “If we try to go any farther, we’ll be wandering blind.”

“What about climbing that hill?” Seth suggested, indicating the highest point visible from the meadow, less than a quarter-mile away. “If I were going to make a home around here, it would be over there. Plus, if we get up there, we’ll have a better view of the area. These trees make it hard to see.”

Kendra pressed her lips together. The hill was not steep; it would be easy to climb. And it was not too far away. “If we don’t find anything there, we go back?”

“Deal.”

They marched toward the hill, which was along a different line from the course they had originally taken from the path. As they picked their way through denser underbrush, a twig snapped off to one side. They paused, listening.

“I’m getting pretty nervous,” Kendra said softly.

“We’re fine. Probably just a falling pinecone.”

Kendra tried to push away images of the pallid woman with the swirling black garments. The thought of her made Kendra freeze. If she saw her out in the woods, Kendra worried she would just curl up in a ball on the ground and let herself be taken.

“I’m losing track of which way we’re going,” she said. Back under the trees, the line of sight to both hill and meadow was disrupted.

“I have my compass.”

“So if all else fails, we can find the North Pole.”

“The trail we followed went northwest,” Seth assured her. “Then we left it going southwest. The hill is to the west, the meadow is east.”

“That’s pretty good.”

“The only trick is paying attention.”

Before long, the trees were thinning and they were walking up the hill. With the trees farther apart, the underbrush grew higher and the bushes

bigger. Kendra and Seth wound their way up the moderate slope toward the crest.

“Do you smell that?” Seth asked.

Kendra stopped. “Like somebody cooking.”

The smell was faint but, now that she noticed it, distinct. Kendra studied the area with sudden alarm. “Oh my gosh,” she said, crouching down.

“What?”

“Get down.”

Seth knelt beside her. Kendra pointed toward the crest of the hill. Off to one side rose a feeble column of smoke—a thin, wavering distortion.

“Yeah,” he whispered. “We may have found it.”

Again she had to bite her tongue. She hoped someone wasn’t cooking Grandpa. “What do we do?”

“Stay here,” said Seth. “I’ll go check it out.”

“I don’t want to stay alone.”

“Then follow me, but stay back a bit. We don’t want to both get caught at the same time. Keep salt ready.”

Kendra did not need that reminder. Her only worry about the salt was that her sweaty hands were going to turn it to paste.

Seth crept ahead, staying low, using the bushes for cover, gradually making his way toward the meager line of smoke. Kendra imitated his movements, impressed that his hours of playing army were finally paying off. Even as she followed him, she struggled to come to terms with what they were doing. Sneaking up on a monster cookout was among the activities she could do without. Shouldn’t they be sneaking *away*?

The trembling shaft of smoke grew nearer. Seth waved her up to him. She huddled beside him behind a wide bush twice her height, trying to breathe quietly. He put his lips to her ear. “I’ll be able to see what’s going on when I get around this bush. I’ll try to yell if I get captured or anything. Be ready.”

She put her mouth to his ear. “If you play a trick on me, I promise I will kill you, I really will.”

“I won’t. I’m scared too.”

He slunk forward. Kendra tried to calm herself. Waiting was torture. She considered moving around the bush to take a peek, but could not muster the courage. The silence was good, right? Unless they had stealthily dropped Seth with a poison dart.

The pause stretched mercilessly. Then she heard Seth coming back less carefully than he had left. When he came around the bush, he was walking upright, saying, “Come here, you have to see this.”

“What is it?”

“Nothing scary.”

She went around the bush with him, still tense. Up ahead, in a clear area near the summit of the hill, she saw the source of the thin smoke—a waist-high cylinder of stone with a wooden windlass and a dangling bucket. “A well?”

“Yeah. Come smell.”

They walked to the well. Even up close, the rising smoke remained vapory and indistinct. Kendra leaned over, staring down into the deep darkness. “Smells good.”

“Like soup,” Seth said. “Meat, veggies, spices.”

“Am I just hungry? It smells delicious.”

“I think so too. Should we try some?”

“Lower the bucket?” Kendra asked skeptically.

“Why not?” Seth replied.

“There could be creatures down there.”

“I don’t think so,” he said.

“You think it’s just a well full of stew,” Kendra scoffed.

“We *are* on a magical preserve.”

“As far as we know it could be poisonous.”

“It can’t hurt to take a look,” Seth insisted. “I’m starving. Besides, not everything here is bad. I bet this is where fairy people come for dinner. See, it even has a crank.” He began turning the windlass, spooling the bucket down into the darkness.

“I’m staying on lookout,” said Kendra.

“Good idea.”

Kendra felt exposed. They were far enough from the summit that she could not see anything on the far side of the hill, but they were high enough that she commanded an expansive view of trees and terrain when she looked down the slope. With little cover surrounding the well, she worried that unseen eyes might be spying from the foliage below.

Seth continued unwinding the rope, sending the bucket ever deeper. Eventually he heard it wetly hit bottom. The rope slackened a bit. After a moment he began winding the bucket back up.

“Hurry,” Kendra said.

“I am. This thing is deep.”

“I’m worried everything in the forest can see us.”

“Here it comes.” He stopped cranking and pulled the bucket up the last few feet by hand, setting it on the lip of the well.

Kendra joined him. Inside the wooden bucket, bits of meat, cut carrots, potato fragments, and onion floated in a fragrant yellow broth. “Looks like a normal stew,” Kendra said.

“Better than normal. I’m trying some.”

“Don’t!” she warned.

“Lighten up.” He tweezed out a piece of dripping meat and tried it. “Good!” he announced. He plucked out a potato and offered a similar report. Tipping the bucket, he slurped some of the broth. “Amazing!” he said. “You have to try it.”

From behind the same bush they had used as their final hiding place when approaching the well, a creature emerged. From the waist up, he was a shirtless man with an exceptionally hairy chest and a pair of pointy horns above his forehead. From waist down he had the legs of a shaggy goat. Wielding a knife, the satyr charged straight at them.

Both Kendra and Seth turned in alarm at the sound of his hooves racing up the slope. “Salt,” Seth blurted, dipping into his pockets.

As she fumbled for salt, Kendra dashed around the well, placing it between herself and the attacker. Not Seth. He stood his ground, and when the satyr was a couple of steps away, he flung a fistful of salt at the goatman.

The satyr stopped short, obviously surprised by the cloud of salt. Seth threw a second handful, groping in his pockets for more. The salt failed to

spark or sizzle. Instead, the satyr appeared bewildered.

“What are you doing?” he asked in a hushed tone.

“I could ask you the same question,” Seth replied.

“No you can’t. You’re spoiling our operation.” The satyr lunged past Seth and slashed the rope with his knife. “She’s coming.”

“Who?”

“I’d save the questions for later,” the satyr said. He wound the rope until it was tight around the windlass, seized the bucket, and started down the hill, spilling soup as he went. From the far side of the hill, Kendra heard foliage rustling and branches crunching. She and Seth followed the satyr.

The satyr slid into the bush Kendra had crouched behind earlier. Kendra and Seth dove in alongside him.

An instant after they ducked out of sight, a bulky, hideous woman lumbered into view and approached the well. She had a broad, flat face with saggy earlobes that hung almost to her hefty shoulders. Her misshapen bosom drooped inside a coarse, homespun tunic. Her avocado skin had a ridged texture like corduroy, her graying hair was shaggy and matted, and her build bordered on obese. The well barely came to her knees, making her considerably taller than Hugo. She waddled from side to side as she walked, and she was breathing heavily through her mouth.

Bending over, she pawed at the well, stroking the wooden frame. “The ogress can’t see much,” the satyr whispered.

When he said it, the ogress jerked her head up. She yammered something in a guttural language. Shambling a couple of steps away from the well, she squatted down and sniffed at the ground where Seth had thrown his salt. “There been peoples here,” she accused in a husky, accented voice. “Where you peoples be?”

The satyr placed a finger against his lips. Kendra held perfectly still, trying to breathe softly despite her alarm. She tried to plan which direction she would run.

The ogress lumbered down the slope toward their hiding place, sniffing high and low. “I heared peoples. I smelled peoples. And I smell my stew. Peoples been at my stew again. You come out now to apologize.”

The satyr shook his head, slitting his throat with a finger for emphasis. Seth slid a hand into a pocket. The satyr touched his wrist and shook his

head with a scowl.

The ogress had already closed half the distance to the bush. “You peoples like my stew so much, maybe you take a bath in it.”

Kendra resisted the urge to bolt. The ogress would be on them in moments. But the satyr seemed to know what he was doing. He held up a hand, tacitly signaling for them to keep still.

Without warning, something began crashing through the bushes about twenty yards to their right. The ogress pivoted and stumbled toward the ruckus with a quick, awkward gait.

The satyr nodded. They scrambled out of the bush and started down the hill. Behind them, the ogress skidded to a halt and changed direction, coming after them. The goatman pitched the bucket of stew into a tangled patch of thorns and bounded over a fallen log. Kendra and Seth sprinted after him.

Propelled by her downward momentum, Kendra found herself taking larger steps than she wanted. Each time her foot touched the ground became a fresh opportunity to lose her balance and tumble forward. Seth stayed a couple of steps ahead of her, and the swift satyr was gradually increasing his lead.

Heedless of obstacles, the ogress pursued them noisily, trampling bushes and tearing through branches. She breathed in damp, wheezing gasps and cursed periodically, reverting to her unintelligible native tongue. Despite her cumbersome size and apparent exhaustion, the misshapen ogress was rapidly gaining.

The slope leveled out. Behind Kendra the ogress fell, branches and deadfalls snapping like fireworks. Kendra glanced back, catching a glimpse of the burly ogress surging to her feet.

The satyr led them into a shallow ravine, where they found the wide entrance to a dark tunnel. “This way,” he said, dashing into the tunnel. Although it looked spacious enough for the ogress to enter, Seth and Kendra followed without question. The satyr appeared confident, and he had been right so far.

The tunnel grew darker the deeper they ran. Heavy footsteps followed them. Kendra glanced back. The ogress filled the subterranean passageway, blocking out much of the light filtering in from the opening.

It became hard to see the satyr up ahead. The tunnel was growing narrower. Close behind Kendra, the ogress gasped and coughed. Hopefully she would have a heart attack and collapse.

For a space, the darkness became complete. Then it began to brighten. The tunnel continued to shrink. Soon Kendra had to crouch, and the walls were within reach at either side. The satyr slackened his pace, looking back with a mischievous grin. Kendra checked over her shoulder as well.

The panting ogress crawled and then scooted forward on her belly, wheezing and choking. When she could worm no farther, she roared in frustration, a strained, throaty cry. After that it sounded like she vomited.

Up ahead the satyr was crawling. The passage slanted upward. They emerged through a small gap into a bowl-shaped depression. A second satyr stood waiting for them. The second had redder hair than the first and slightly longer horns. He motioned for them to follow.

The two satyrs and two children charged recklessly through the woods for a few more minutes. When they arrived at a clearing with a tiny pond, the redheaded satyr stopped and faced the others.

“What was the idea, ruining our operation?” he asked.

“Clumsy work,” the other satyr agreed.

“We didn’t know,” Kendra said. “We thought it was a well.”

“You thought a chimney was a well?” the redhead complained. “I suppose you sometimes mistake icicles for carrots? Or wagons for outhouses?”

“It had a bucket,” Seth said.

“And it was in the ground,” Kendra added.

“They have a point,” the other satyr said.

“You were on the roof of the ogress’s lair,” explained the redhead.

“We get it now,” Seth said. “We thought it was a hill.”

“Nothing wrong with pinching a bit of soup from her cauldron,” the redhead continued. “We try to be free with our assets. But you need to use some delicacy. A little finesse. At least wait until the old lady falls asleep. Who are you, anyhow?”

“Seth Sorenson.”

“Kendra.”

"I am Newel," said the redhead. "This is Doren. You realize we'll probably have to construct a whole new rigging?"

"She'll rip the old one down," Doren explained.

"Almost more work than cooking our own stew," Newel huffed.

"We can't make it come out like she does," Doren mourned.

"She has a gift," Newel agreed.

"We're sorry," Kendra said. "We were a little lost."

Doren waved a hand. "Don't worry. We just like to bluster. If you spoiled our wine, that would be another story."

"Still," Newel said, "a guy has to eat, and free stew is free stew."

"We'll try to find a way to repay you," Kendra said.

"So will we," Newel said.

"You don't happen to have any . . . batteries?" Doren asked.

"Batteries?" Seth asked, wrinkling his nose.

"Size C," Newel clarified.

Kendra folded her arms. "Why do you want batteries?"

"They're shiny," Newel said, nudging Doren with an elbow.

"We worship them," Doren said, nodding sagely. "They seem like little gods to us."

The kids stared at the goatmen in disbelief, unsure how to continue the conversation. They were obviously lying.

"Okay," Newel said. "We have a portable television."

"Don't tell Stan."

"We had a mountain of batteries, but we ran out."

"And our supplier is no longer employed here."

"We could work out an arrangement," Newel spread his hands diplomatically. "Some batteries to repent for disrupting our stew siphoning ____"

"Then we can trade for more. Gold, booze, you name it," Doren lowered his voice slightly. "Of course, we would need to keep our arrangement private."

"Stan doesn't like us watching the tube," said Newel.

"You know our Grandpa?" Seth asked.

"Who doesn't?" Newel said.

“You haven’t seen him lately?” Kendra asked.

“Sure, just last week,” Doren said.

“I mean since last night.”

“No, why?” Newel said.

“Haven’t you heard?” Seth asked.

The satyrs shrugged at each other. “What’s the news?” Newel asked.

“Our Grandpa was kidnapped last night,” Kendra said.

“Your grandfather is a kid?” Newel said.

“They mean he was abducted,” Doren clarified.

Kendra nodded. “Creatures got into the house and took him and our housekeeper.”

“Not Dale?” Doren asked.

“We don’t think so,” Seth said.

Newel shook his head. “Poor Dale. Never been very popular.”

“Lousy sense of humor,” Doren agreed. “Too quiet.”

“You guys don’t know who might have taken them?” Kendra asked.

“On Midsummer Eve?” Newel said, tossing up his hands. “Anybody. Your guess would be better than mine.”

“Could you help us find him?” Seth asked.

The satyrs shared an uneasy glance. “Yeah, ouch,” Newel began uncomfortably, “this is a bad week for us.”

“Lots of commitments,” Doren confirmed, backing away.

“You know, now that I’ve thought on it,” Newel said, “we may have needed a new rigging on the chimney anyhow. How about we go our separate ways and call it even?”

“Don’t take anything we said to heart,” Doren said. “We were just being satirical.”

Seth stepped forward. “Do you know something you aren’t telling us?”

“It isn’t that,” Newel said, continuing his slow retreat. “It’s just Midsummer Day. We’re booked.”

“Thanks for helping us get away from the ogress,” Kendra said.

“Our pleasure,” Newel replied.

“All part of the package,” Doren added.

“Could you guys at least point us toward home?” Seth asked.

The satyrs stopped retreating. Doren extended an arm. "There's a path over there."

"When you reach it, go right," Newel said.

"That will get you started in the right direction."

"Give our best to Stan when he turns up."

The satyrs hastily turned and dashed off into the trees.

Chapter 12



Inside the Barn

Kendra and Seth located the path just as the satyrs had instructed, and soon reencountered the nickel-sized holes that served as a perfect trail of breadcrumbs toward home. “Those goat guys were idiots,” Seth said.

“They did save us from the ogress,” Kendra reminded him.

“They could have helped us rescue Grandpa but they blew us off.” He wore a scowl as they continued along the path.

As they neared the yard, they heard the inhuman groan again, the same sound they had heard while exiting the basement, only louder than ever. They halted. The perplexing sound was coming from up ahead. A long, plaintive moan, comparable to a blast from a foghorn.

Seth dug some of the remaining salt out of a pocket and rushed ahead. With their quickened pace, they were soon back at the edge of the yard. Everything appeared normal. They saw no hulking behemoth capable of the enormous sound they had heard.

“You know, that salt didn’t do much to the satyr,” Kendra whispered.

“It probably only burns the bad creatures,” he replied.

“I think the ogre lady picked some up.”

“It was all mixed in the dirt by then. You saw it torch those guys last night.”

They waited, hesitant to enter the yard. “Now what?” Kendra asked.

The mighty groan resounded across the yard, nearer and louder. The shingles on the barn rattled.

“It’s coming from the barn,” Seth said.

“We never looked there!” Kendra said.

“I didn’t think about it.”

The monstrous groan blared a third time. The barn shuddered. Birds flew up from the eaves.

“You think something took Grandpa and Lena to the barn?” Kendra said.

“Sounds like it’s still there.”

“Grandpa told us never to enter the barn.”

“I think I’m already grounded,” Seth said.

“No, I mean what if he keeps ferocious creatures in there? It might have nothing to do with his disappearance.”

“It’s our best chance. Where else are we going to look? We have no other clues. The tracks were a dead end. At least we should try to get a peek inside.”

Seth started for the barn, with Kendra following reluctantly behind. The towering structure rose a good five stories tall, topped by a weather vane in the shape of a bull. Kendra had never studied it for entrances until now. She noted the obvious set of large double doors in the front, along with some smaller access doors along the side.

The barn creaked and then started shaking as if there were an earthquake. The sound of timbers splitting filled the air, followed by another mournful moan.

Seth glanced back at Kendra. Something huge was in there. A few moments later the barn grew still.

Chains and a heavy padlock bound the double doors in front, so Seth moved along the side of the building, quietly trying the smaller doors. All were locked. The barn had several windows, but the lowest were three stories off the ground.

They stealthily circled the entire building, finding no doors unlocked. There weren't even any cracks or peepholes. "Grandpa sealed this place up tight," Kendra whispered.

"We may have to make some noise to get inside," Seth said. He started circling the building again.

"I'm not sure that would be smart."

"I'll wait until the barn starts shaking again." Seth sat down in front of a small door, little more than three feet high. Minutes passed.

"Think it knows we're waiting?" Kendra asked.

"You're just bad luck."

"Stop saying that."

A fairy glided over near them. Seth tried to shoo it away. "Get out of here." The fairy effortlessly dodged his shooing motions. The more vigorously he waved her away, the closer she came.

"Stop it, you're just egging her on," Kendra said.

"I'm sick of fairies."

"Then ignore her and maybe she'll leave."

He stopped paying attention to the fairy. She came up right behind his head. When the proximity earned no reaction, the fairy landed on his head. Seth slapped at her, missing as she wove around his intended blows. Just when he jumped to his feet to chase her, the booming groan came again. The little door trembled.

Seth plopped back down and started ramming the door with both feet. The moaning muffled most of the impact's noise. On the fifth kick, the edge of the little door split and swung open.

Seth rolled away from the opening, and Kendra stepped aside as well. Digging in his pockets, Seth withdrew the remnants of his salt. "Want some?" he mouthed.

Kendra accepted some salt. A second or two later, the deafening moaning ceased. Seth gestured for Kendra to wait. He crept through the small door. Kendra waited, squeezing the salt in her palm.

Seth reappeared in the opening wearing an inscrutable expression. "You have to see this," he said.

"What?"

"Don't worry. Come look."

Kendra ducked through the little doorway. The enormous barn contained just one cavernous room with a few closets around the perimeter. The entire room was dominated by a single gigantic cow.

“Not what I expected,” Kendra murmured in disbelief.

She gawked at the colossal bovine in amazement. The huge head was up near the rafters, forty or fifty feet in the air. A hayloft spanning an entire side of the building served as a feedbox. The cow’s hooves were the size of hot tubs. The tremendous udder was absolutely bulging. Milk beaded and dripped from teats almost the size of punching bags.

The gargantuan cow cocked its head, staring down at the newcomers to the barn. It let out a long moo, making the barn shake simply by shifting its stance.

“Holy cow,” Kendra muttered.

“You can say that again. I doubt Grandpa will be running out of milk anytime soon.”

“We’re friends,” Kendra called up to the cow. The cow tossed its head and began munching from the hayloft.

“Why haven’t we heard this thing before?” Seth wondered.

“She probably never moos. I think she’s in pain,” Kendra observed. “See how swollen the udder looks? I bet it could fill a swimming pool.”

“Seriously.”

“Somebody probably milks her every morning.”

“And nobody did today,” said Seth.

They stood and stared. The cow continued munching from the hayloft. Seth pointed at the back of the barn. “Look at the manure!”

“Sick!”

“The world’s biggest cow pie!”

“You would notice that.”

The cow let out another bellowing complaint, the most insistent so far. They clamped their hands over their ears until the lowing stopped.

“We probably should try to milk her,” Kendra said.

“How are we supposed to do that!” Seth cried.

“There has to be a way. They must do it all the time.”

“We can’t even reach her thingies.”

“I bet that cow could tear this place apart if she wanted. I mean, look at her! She keeps getting more upset. Her udder looks like it’s about to burst. Who knows what kind of powers she has. Her milk lets people see fairies. The last thing we need is a giant magical cow running around loose. It could be total mayhem.”

Folding his arms, Seth surveyed the task. “This is impossible.”

“We need to search the closets. Maybe they have special tools.”

“What about Grandpa?”

“We’re out of leads,” said Kendra. “If we don’t milk this cow, we could end up with a new disaster on our hands.”

In the closets they found a variety of tools and equipment, but no obvious gear for milking gargantuan cows. There were empty barrels all around, in and out of closets, which Kendra figured must be used for catching milk. In one closet Kendra found a couple of A-frame ladders. “These might be all we need,” she said.

“How do we even get our hands around those things?”

“We don’t.”

“There has to be a gigantic milking machine,” Seth said.

“I’m not seeing anything like that. But it might work if we just hug and drop.”

“Are you nuts?”

“Why not?” Kendra said, motioning between the teats and the floor. “It isn’t that far from the nipples to the ground.”

“We’re not trying to use barrels?”

“No, we can waste the milk. Barrels would get in the way. We just need to relieve the pressure.”

“What if she steps on us?”

“She hardly has any room to move. If we stay under the udder, we’ll be fine.”

They dragged the ladders into position, one beside each of two teats on the same side of the mammoth cow. They climbed the ladders. Only by standing one rung from the top were they high enough to grip the teat near the udder.

Seth stood waiting while Kendra tried to get into position. “These feel wobbly,” she said.

“Balance.”

She hesitantly stood upright. It felt a lot higher than it had looked from the ground. “You ready?”

“No. I bet this barn will hold her.”

“We have to at least try.”

“Hug the thingy and slide down?” Seth asked.

“We’ll trade off, you, then me, then you, then me. Then we’ll do the other side.”

“How about you start it?”

“You’re better at this sort of stuff,” Kendra said.

“That’s true, I milk a lot of giant cows. I’ll show you my trophies sometime.”

“Seriously, you start,” urged Kendra.

“What if it hurts her?”

“I don’t think we’re big enough. I’m more worried that we’re not going to be able to get any out.”

“So I should squeeze as hard as I can,” Seth confirmed.

“Sure.”

“Once I do it, you’ll do it, and we’ll just keep going as fast as we can.”

“And if I ever find a giant cow milking trophy, I’ll buy it for you,” Kendra offered.

“I’d rather we kept it our little secret. You ready?”

“Go for it.”

Hesitantly Seth placed a hand against the huge teat. The cow mooed, and he recoiled, crouching and grabbing the ladder with both hands to steady himself. Kendra tried to stay balanced as she laughed. Finally the foghorn moo ended.

“I changed my mind,” Seth said.

“I’ll count to three,” said Kendra.

“You go first or I’m not doing it. I almost fell and wet my pants at the same time.”

“One . . . two . . . three!”

Seth stepped off the ladder, embracing the teat. He slid down it and fell to the floor along with an impressive jet of milk. Kendra stepped off and

hugged the teat as well. Even with her holding tightly, it slid through her embrace faster than she expected. She hit the floor with warm milk already soaking her jeans.

Seth was on his way back up the ladder. "I'm already disgusted," he said, stepping off and sliding down again. This time he kept his feet when he landed. Kendra went up and slid down again. Hugging as hard as she could, she descended a little more slowly, but still fell over when she hit the floor. Already milk was everywhere.

Soon they fell into a rhythm, both of them landing on their feet most of the time. The engorged udder hung low, and they got better at using the teat-hug to control their fall. Milk gushed copiously. While they were sliding, the teats sprayed like fire hoses. It must have been at least seventy jumps each before the output began to slacken.

"Other side," Kendra gasped, breathing hard.

"My arms are dead," Seth complained.

"We have to hurry."

They scooted the ladders over and repeated the process. Kendra tried to pretend she was on a surreal playground, where the kids waded in milk instead of sand and slid down thick, meaty poles.

Kendra focused on climbing the ladder and landing as lightly as possible. She worried that if either action became routine, she could have a bad accident, spraining an ankle, breaking a bone, or worse.

At the first sign that the flow of milk was slackening, they collapsed in exhaustion, not worried about lying in milk because their clothes and hair were already drenched. Both of them gulped air desperately. Kendra put a hand to her neck. "My heart is beating like a jackhammer."

"I thought I was going to puke, that was so foul," complained Seth.

"I'm more tired than sick."

"Think about it. You're dripping with warm, raw milk while your face rubs down a cow nipple about a hundred times."

"More than that."

"We doused the whole barn," Seth said. "I'm never drinking milk again."

"I'm never going to the playground," Kendra vowed.

"What?"

“Hard to explain.”

Seth scanned the area under the cow. “The floor has drains, but I don’t think much of the milk is going down.”

“I saw a hose. I doubt the cow would like milk rotting all over the place.” Kendra sat up and squeezed milk out of her hair. “That was the best workout I ever had. I’m dead.”

“If I did that every day I’d look like Hercules,” said Seth.

“You mind grabbing the ladders?”

“Not if you do the hosing.”

The hose was long and had good water pressure, and the drains seemed to have plenty of capacity. Flushing the milk away turned out to be the easiest part of the process. Seth had Kendra hose him off, and then returned the favor.

From the time the milking began in earnest, the cow made no more noise and displayed no more interest in them. They called for Grandpa and Lena in the barn, just to be sure, starting with small voices to avoid startling the cow and gradually building to shouts. As had been their lot all day, their calls went unanswered.

“Should we go back to the house?” Kendra asked.

“I guess. It will be dark before long.”

“I’m tired. And hungry. We should look for food.”

They left the barn. The day was waning.

“You have a big tear in your shirt,” Kendra said.

“I ripped it while we were running from that ogress.”

“I have a pink one you can borrow.”

“This will work fine,” said Seth, “once it dries off.”

“The pink one would hide you just as well as the camouflage,” Kendra said.

“Are all girls as brainless as you?”

“You’re telling me a green shirt will make you invisible to monsters?”

“No. *Less* visible. Less is the point. Less than your blue one.”

“I guess I should find a green one too.”



An Unexpected Message

Sitting on the floor in the dining room, Kendra took a bite of her second peanut-butter-and-jelly sandwich. Scouring the kitchen, she and Seth had found enough food to last for weeks. The pantry contained canned fruits and vegetables, unbroken jars of preserves, bread, oatmeal, cream of wheat, crackers, tuna, and lots of other stuff.

The fridge still worked, even lying on its side, and they cleaned out the broken glass the best they could. There remained plenty of milk, cheese, and eggs. The freezer held a lot of meat.

Kendra took another bite. Leaning back, she closed her eyes. She had felt hungry enough for a second sandwich, but now she doubted she would finish it. "I'm exhausted," she announced.

"Me too," Seth said. He put a piece of cheese on a cracker and topped it with a sardine bathed in mustard sauce. "My eyes feel itchy."

"My throat feels prickly," Kendra said. "The sun isn't even down."

"What are we going to do about Grandpa?"

“I think the best thing we can do is get some rest. We’ll think more clearly in the morning.”

“How long did we sleep last night?” Seth asked.

“About half an hour,” Kendra guessed.

“We’ve stayed up for almost two days!”

“Now you’ll sleep for two days.”

“Whatever,” said Seth.

“It’s true. Your glands will secrete a cocoon.”

“I’m not that gullible.”

“That’s why you’re so hungry. You’re storing up fat for hibernation.”

Seth finished the cracker. “You should try a sardine.”

“I don’t eat fish with the heads still attached.”

“The heads are the best part! You can feel the eyes pop when you—”

“Enough.” Kendra stood up. “I need to get to bed.”

Seth rose as well. “Me too.”

They climbed the stairs, passed down the cluttered hall, and mounted the steps to the attic. Their room had taken a beating, everything except the beds. Goldilocks strutted over to the corner and started clucking. Her feed was scattered across the floor.

“You’re right that the salt didn’t seem to be working,” Seth said.

“It might only work in here.”

“They were jerks, but those goat guys were pretty funny.”

“They’re called satyrs,” Kendra said.

“I need to find some C batteries. They said they’d give us gold.”

“They didn’t say how much.”

“Still, trading batteries for gold! I could become a millionaire.”

“I’m not sure I’d trust those guys.” Kendra flopped onto her bed, face in her pillow. “What does Goldilocks keep clucking about?”

“I bet she misses her cage.” Seth crossed the floor to the flustered hen. “Kendra, you better come see this.”

“Can I look in the morning?” she said, her voice muffled by the pillow.

“You need to look now.”

Kendra pushed herself off her bed and walked over to Seth. In the corner on the floor, more than a hundred feed kernels had been arranged to

form six letters:

I M

GRAM

“You’ve got to be kidding,” Kendra said. She gave Seth a suspicious glance. “Did you write this?”

“No! No way!”



Kendra squatted in front of Goldilocks. “You’re my Grandma Sorenson?”

The hen bobbed her head, as if in affirmation.

“Was that a yes?”

The head bobbed again.

“Give me a ‘no’ so I can be sure,” Kendra said.

Goldilocks shook her head.

“How did this happen?” Seth asked. “Somebody transformed you?”

The chicken bobbed her head.

“How do we change you back?” Kendra asked.

Goldilocks held still.

“Why didn’t Grandpa change her back?” Seth asked.

“Did Grandpa Sorenson try to restore you?” Kendra inquired.

Goldilocks bobbed her head and then shook it.

“Yes and no?”

The head nodded.

“He tried but failed,” Kendra guessed.

The hen gave another affirmative.

“Do you know a way we can change you back?” Kendra asked.

Another head bob.

“Is it something we can do in the house?” Kendra asked.

The head shook.

“Do we need to take you to the witch?” Seth tried.

The head bobbed. And then the hen flapped her wings, moving away.

“Wait, Grandma!” Kendra reached for the hen, but the flustered bird dodged her grasp. “She’s freaking out.”

Seth chased her down. “Grandma,” he said, “can you still hear us?”

The hen made no acknowledgment of comprehension.

“Grandma,” Kendra said, “can you still respond to us?”

The chicken squirmed. Seth kept hold of her. The chicken pecked his hand, and he dropped her. They watched Goldilocks. For several minutes, she did nothing to suggest abnormal intelligence and offered no recognizable reaction to any questions.

“She was answering us before, right?” Kendra asked.

“She wrote us a message!” Seth said, pointing at the I M GRAM in the corner.

“She must have had just a short window to communicate with us,” Kendra reasoned. “Once she got the message across, she left it in our hands.”

“Why hasn’t she spoken up before?”

“I don’t know. Maybe she’s tried, but we never got the message.”

Seth cocked his head thoughtfully and then gave a small shrug. “Do we take her to the witch in the morning?”

“I don’t know. Muriel only has one knot left.”

“No matter what, we don’t undo the last knot. But maybe we could bargain with her.”

“Bargain with what?” Kendra asked.

“We could bring food. Or other stuff. Things to make her more comfortable in that shack.”

“I don’t picture her going for it. She’ll know we’re desperate to fix Grandma.”

“We won’t give her another choice.”

Kendra bit her lip. “What if she won’t budge? She wouldn’t for Grandpa. Do we set Muriel free if she will change Grandma back?”

“No way!” said Seth. “As soon as she gets free, what keeps her from turning all of us into chickens?”

“Grandpa said you can’t use magic against others here unless they use it on you first. We never caused Muriel any harm, did we?”

“But she’s a witch,” Seth said. “Why would she be locked up if she wasn’t dangerous?”

“I’m not saying I want to let her go. I’m saying, we might be in an emergency situation where we have no other options. It might be worth the risk in order to get Grandma back to help us.”

Seth thought about that. “What if we can get her to tell us where Grandpa is?”

“Or both,” Kendra said, getting excited. “I bet she would do just about anything to be released. I’m sure she would do those two things at least. Then we might actually get out of this mess.”

“You’re right that we don’t have many options.”

“We should sleep on it,” Kendra said. “We’re both worn out. We can decide what to do in the morning.”

“Okay.”

Kendra climbed into bed, slid under the covers, let her head sink into the pillow, and fell asleep before another thought entered her mind.

* * *

“Maybe we shouldn’t have rinsed the milk out of our clothes,” Seth said. “Then we could churn butter while we walk.”

“Foul!”

“By the end of the day I might have had yogurt in my armpits.”

“You’re psychotic,” said Kendra.

“Then we could add some of Lena’s jam and make it fruit-at-the-bottom.”

“Quit it!”

Seth seemed pleased with himself. Goldilocks rode in the wheelbarrow inside a burlap sack he had found in the pantry. They had tried to bend the cage back into shape, but could not get the door to stay on. The sack had a drawstring, which they pulled snugly around the hen’s neck so her head could stick out.

It was hard to think of the chicken as Grandma Sorenson. The hen had not performed a single grandmotherly action all morning. She showed no reaction to the announcement that they were going to see Muriel, and she had laid an egg on Kendra’s bed during the night.

Kendra and Seth had awakened just before sunrise. In the barn they had found the wheelbarrow, which they determined might be easier than carrying Goldilocks the entire way to the ivy shack.

It was Kendra’s turn pushing the wheelbarrow. The chicken seemed serene. She was probably enjoying the fresh air. The weather was pleasant—sunny and warm without being hot.

Kendra wondered how the negotiations with Muriel would go. In the end, they had decided it would do no harm to see what terms they could reach with the witch. Then they could base their final decision on the facts of what Muriel would be willing to do, rather than conjecture.

They had loaded food, clothes, tools, and utensils in the wheelbarrow, in case they might be able to barter with comforts instead of freedom. Most of the clothes had been mangled on Midsummer Eve, but they found a few

unshredded items for Grandma to wear in case they succeeded in transforming her. They had made sure to feed the chicken some milk in the morning, as well as to drink some themselves.

The trails to the shack were not difficult to remember. Presently they identified the leafy structure where the witch lived. Leaving the wheelbarrow, Seth carried the chicken, while Kendra collected an armful of bartering items. Kendra had already reminded Seth to stay calm and be polite no matter what happened, but she repeated the admonition.

They heard strange music as they drew near the shack, like somebody playing a rubber band while clacking castanets. When they got around to the front door, they found the grimy old hag playing a mouth harp with one hand while making her limberjack dance with the other.

"I did not hope to have visitors again so soon," laughed the witch when her song ended. "Pity about Stanley."

"What do you know about our Grandpa?" Seth asked.

"The woods are all abuzz with news of his abduction," Muriel said. "The naiadic housekeeper as well, if one is to lend an ear to the gossip. Quite the scandal."

"Do you know where they are?" Seth tried.

"Look at all the lovely gifts you brought me," the witch gushed, clasping her veiny hands together. "The quilt is gorgeous, but it would be ruined in my humble dwelling. I'll not let you waste your generosity on me; I would not know what to do with such niceties."

"We brought these to trade," Kendra said.

"Trade?" the witch asked theatrically, smacking her lips. "For my tea! Nonsense, child, I would not dream of exacting a toll for my hospitality. Come inside, and the three of us shall drink together."

"Not to trade for tea," Seth said, holding up Goldilocks. "We want you to change our grandma back into herself."

"In exchange for a chicken?"

"She is the chicken," Kendra explained.

The witch grinned, stroking her chin. "I thought I recognized her," she mused. "You poor dears, one guardian carried off in the night, the other reduced to poultry."

“We can offer you a quilt, a bathrobe, a toothbrush, and a lot of homemade food,” Kendra said.

“Charming as that may be,” Muriel said, “I would require the energy of a knot unraveling to work any spell capable of restoring your grandmother to her former state.”

“We can’t untie your last knot,” Seth said. “Grandpa would be furious.”

The witch shrugged. “My predicament is simple. Imprisoned in this shack, I am curtailed in my abilities. The problem has nothing to do with my willingness to compromise—the dilemma is that the only way for me to fulfill your request would be to harness the power stored in the final knot. The decision lies in your hands. I have no other options.”

“If we untie the last knot, will you also tell us where our Grandpa was taken?” Kendra asked.

“Child, I would love nothing more than to reunite you with your lost grandfather. But the truth of the matter is, I haven’t the foggiest notion where he was taken. Again, it would require loosing my knot in order for me to marshal sufficient power to discern his whereabouts.”

“Could you find Grandpa and change Grandma with the power from one knot?” Kendra asked.

“Lamentably, I would have the opportunity to accomplish only one feat or the other. Both would not be possible.”

“Unless you figure out a way, you won’t have a chance to do either,” Seth said.

“Then we have reached an impasse,” the witch apologized. “If you tell me we have no deal unless I am able to accomplish the impossible, then we have no deal. I could fulfill either of your requests, but not both.”

“If we have you change Grandma back,” Kendra asked, “could you help us find Grandpa once you’re free?”

“Perhaps,” the witch mused. “Yes, without guarantees, once free I could probably use my abilities to shed light on the location of your grandfather.”

“How do we know you won’t attack us if we let you go?” Seth asked.

“A fair question,” Muriel said. “I might be embittered by long years of imprisonment and eager to work mischief once released. However, I give you my word as a practitioner of the ancient art that I will not inflict any

harm upon you or your grandmother upon my deliverance from this confinement. If I held any malice, it would be toward those who initiated my incarceration, enemies who passed from this life decades ago, not those who set me free. If anything, I would consider myself indebted.”

“And you would promise to help us find Grandpa Sorenson?” Kendra said.

“Your grandmother might refuse my help. She and your grandfather have never held me in much esteem. But if she will accept my assistance in locating Stan, I will give it.”

“We need to talk about this in private,” Kendra said.

“Be my guest,” Muriel said.

Kendra and Seth returned to the path. Kendra dumped her bartering items in the wheelbarrow. She spoke in a soft whisper. “I don’t think we have any other choice.”

“I don’t like how nice she’s being,” said Seth. “It’s almost scarier than before. I think she’s really anxious to get out.”

“I know. But I think we’re just as anxious to restore Grandma and maybe find Grandpa.”

“She’s a liar,” Seth cautioned. “I don’t think we can count on any of her promises.”

“Probably not.”

“We should expect her to attack us as soon as she’s free. If not, great, but I brought salt, whatever good that will do.”

“Don’t forget, we’ll have Grandma to help us handle her,” Kendra said.

“Grandma might not know anything about fighting witches.”

“I’m sure she’s learned a trick or two. Let’s try to ask her.”

Seth held up the hen. Kendra stroked her head gently. “Grandma Sorenson,” Kendra said. “Ruth. I need you to listen to me. If you can hear me, we need you to answer. This is very important.” The hen appeared to be listening. “Should we untie the last knot to have Muriel Taggart restore you?”

The head bobbed.

“Was that a yes?”

The head bobbed again.

“Can you give us a no?”

The hen did not respond.

“Grandma. Ruth. Can you shake your head so we can be sure you hear us?”

Again the chicken made no acknowledgment.

“Maybe it took all she had to answer your first question,” Seth speculated.

“It did seem like she nodded,” Kendra said. “And I don’t know what else we can do. Freeing the witch is a high price to pay, but is it worse than having no hope of finding Grandpa and keeping Grandma trapped forever as a chicken?”

“We should free her.”

Kendra paused, scrutinizing her feelings. Was this really their only option? It seemed to be. “Let’s go back,” she agreed.

They returned to the doorway of the shack. “We want you to restore Grandma,” Kendra said.

“You will voluntarily sunder my last knot, the final impediment to my independence, if I restore your grandmother to her human form?”

“Yes. How do we do it?”

“Just say ‘of my own free will I sever this knot’ and then blow on it. You should probably find something for your grandmother to wear. She will not have any clothes on.”

Kendra ran to the wheelbarrow and returned with the bathrobe and a pair of slippers. Muriel stood in the doorway, clutching the rope. “Lay your grandmother at my threshold,” she instructed.

“I want to blow on the knot,” Seth said.

“Sure,” Kendra answered.

“You let Grandma out of the bag.”

Kendra squatted and pulled the mouth of the bag wide open. Muriel held the rope out to Seth. The chicken looked up, ruffling her feathers and flapping her wings. Kendra tried to steady her, disgusted by the feel of slender bones moving beneath her hands.

“Of my own free will, I sever this knot,” Seth said, as Goldilocks squawked noisily. He blew, and the knot unraveled.

Muriel extended both hands over the flustered hen and began softly chanting indecipherable words. The air wavered. Kendra squeezed the

squirming hen. At first it felt like bubbles were shooting through the flesh of the bird; then the delicate bones started to churn. Kendra dropped Goldilocks and stepped back.

Kendra saw everything as if through fun-house lenses. Muriel appeared distorted, first stretching broad, then tall. Seth became an hourglass with a wide head, a tiny waist, and clownish feet. Rubbing her eyes failed to cure her warped vision. When she looked down, the ground curved away in all directions. She leaned and swung her arms to maintain her balance.

The fun-house Muriel began to ripple, as did the startling image of Goldilocks shedding feathers as she expanded into a person. The scene grew dim, as if clouds had blocked the sun, and a dark aura gathered around Muriel and Grandma. The darkness expanded, momentarily obscuring everything, and then Grandma stood before them, completely naked. Kendra put the bathrobe over her shoulders.

From inside the shack came a sound like the rushing of a terrible wind. The ground rumbled. "Get down," Grandma said, pulling Kendra to the ground. Seth also fell flat.

A furious gale blasted the walls of the shack into shrapnel. The roof rocketed beyond the treetops, a geyser of wooden confetti. The stump split down the center. Fragments of timber and ivy whistled in all directions, clattering against the trunks of trees and slashing through the undergrowth.

Kendra raised her head. Dressed in rags, Muriel gaped in wonder. Chips of wood continued to fall like hail, along with fluttering bits of ivy. Muriel grinned, displaying deformed teeth and inflamed gums. She began to chuckle, tears brimming in her eyes. She flung her wrinkled arms wide. "Emancipation!" she cried. "Justice at last!"

Grandma Sorenson rose to her feet. She was shorter and stouter than Muriel, with hair the color of cinnamon and sugar. "You must vacate this property immediately."

Muriel glowered at Grandma, the joy in her gaze eclipsed by spite. A tear escaped and slid down a crease to her chin. "This is my thanks for unbinding your curse?"

"You have your reward for the services you rendered. You have emerged from confinement. Eviction from this preserve is the consequence of prior indiscretions."

"My debts have been paid. You are not the caretaker."

“My authority is the same as my husband’s. In his absence, I am indeed the caretaker. I invite you to leave and never return.”

Muriel turned and began tromping away. “Where I go is my business.” She did not look back.

“Not on my preserve.”

“*Your* preserve, is it? I object to your claims of ownership.” Muriel still had not looked back. Grandma started walking after her, an old woman in a bathrobe trailing an old woman dressed in rags.

“New crimes will entail new punishments,” Grandma warned.

“You might be surprised who administers the penalties.”

“Don’t provoke new enmity. Depart in peace.” Grandma quickened her pace and caught hold of Muriel by the upper arm.

Muriel twisted free, turning to face Grandma. “Tread lightly, Ruth. If you seek trouble here and now, in front of the little ones, I will oblige you. This is the wrong moment to cling to antiquated protocol. Things have changed more than you realize. I suggest you depart before I regain authority here.”

Seth ran toward them. Grandma took a step back. Seth flung a handful of salt at the witch. It had no effect. Muriel pointed at him. “Your recompense is coming, my bold little whelp. I have a long memory.”

“Your actions require retribution,” Grandma warned.

Muriel was striding away again. “You speak to deaf ears.”

“You said you’d tell us how to find our Grandpa,” Kendra called.

Muriel laughed without looking back.

“Hold your tongues, children,” Grandma said. “Muriel, I have commanded you to depart. Your defiance is an act of war.”

“You issue evictions in order to build a case for wrongdoing and thereby justify retaliation,” Muriel said. “I do not fear a feud with you.”

Grandma turned away from Muriel. “Kendra, come here.” Grandma pulled Seth to her in a tight hug. When Kendra drew near, she embraced her as well. “I am sorry for misleading you children. I should not have guided you to Muriel. I did not realize this was her final knot.”

“What do you mean?” Kendra said. “You heard us talking.”

Grandma smiled sadly. “As a chicken, thinking clearly becomes an exhausting challenge. My mind was in a haze. To interact with you like a

person, even for a moment, required tremendous concentration.”

Seth nodded toward Muriel. “Should we stop her? I bet the three of us could take her.”

“If we attack, she will be able to defend herself with magic,” Grandma said. “We would forfeit the protection afforded by the foundational covenants of the treaty.”

“Have we messed things up?” Seth asked. “Setting her free, I mean.”

“Things were already dismal,” Grandma said. “Having her on the loose certainly complicates the situation. Whether my assistance can compensate for her interference remains to be seen.” Grandma looked flushed. She fanned her face. “Your grandfather left us in quite a predicament.”

“It wasn’t his fault,” Seth said.

Grandma bent over, placing her hands on her knees. Kendra steadied her. “I’m all right, Kendra. Just a little woozy.” She stood up experimentally. “Tell me what happened. I know undesirable beings entered the house and took Stan.”

“They took Lena, too, and I think they turned Dale into a statue,” Kendra reported. “We found him in the yard.”

Grandma nodded. “As caretaker, Stan is a valuable trophy. Same with a fallen nymph. By contrast Dale seemed unimpressive and was left behind. Any clue who took them?”

“We found some footprints near Dale,” Seth said.

“Did they lead you anywhere?”

“No,” Seth said.

“Have you any idea where Grandpa and Lena are being held?”

“No.”

“Muriel probably knows,” Grandma said. “She has an alliance with the imps.”

“Speaking of Muriel,” Kendra said, “where did she go?”

They all looked around. Muriel was no longer in sight. Grandma frowned. “She must have special means of hiding or traveling. No matter. We aren’t equipped to deal with her now.”

“What do we do?” Seth asked.

“Our first order of business is to find your Grandpa. Learning his location should dictate how best to proceed.”

“How do we do that?”

Grandma sighed. “Our nearest option would be Nero.”

“Who?” Kendra said.

“A cliff troll. He has a seeing stone. If we can successfully bargain with him, he should be able to reveal Stan’s location.”

“Do you know him well?” Seth asked.

“Never met him. Your grandfather had dealings with him once. It will be dangerous, but at present he is probably our best alternative. We should hurry. I’ll tell you more on the way.”



Trolling for Grandpa

Have you ever heard people conversing while you're falling asleep?" Grandma said. "The words reach you from a distance, and you can barely glimpse the meaning."

"That happened to me in a motel once when we were on a trip," Kendra said. "Mom and Dad were talking. I fell asleep, and their conversation turned into a dream."

"Then to some degree you can grasp my state of mind as a chicken. You say it is June. My last clear memories are from February, when the spell was enacted. For the first couple of days I remained fairly alert. Over time, I lapsed into a twilight consciousness, incapable of rational thought, unable to interpret my surroundings as a human would."

"Weird," Seth said.

"I recognized you kids when you arrived, but it was through a clouded lens. My mind did not reawaken until you let those creatures in through the window. The shock jolted me out of my stupor. It was a struggle to cling to my elevated consciousness. I cannot describe the concentration it required

to write that message to you. My mind wanted to slip away, to relax. I wanted to eat the delicious kernels, not arrange them into bizarre patterns.”

They traveled along a wide dirt road. Rather than head back toward the house, they had continued on the trail beyond the ivy shack, venturing deeper into the forest. The trail had eventually forked and then intersected the road they were currently following. The sun blazed overhead, the air was heavy and humid, and the forest remained unnaturally silent all around them.

Kendra and Seth had brought a pair of jeans, but they turned out to be from Grandma’s skinnier days, and were not even close to fitting. The tennis shoes belonged to Grandpa and were several sizes too big. So Grandma now wore a bathing suit under her robe, and her feet remained in slippers.

Grandma raised her hands, staring as she opened and closed them. “Strange to have proper fingers again,” she murmured.

“How did you become a chicken in the first place?” Seth asked.

“Pride made me careless,” Grandma said. “A sobering reminder that none of us are immune to the dangers here, even when we imagine we have the upper hand. Let’s save the details for another time.”

“Why didn’t Grandpa change you back?” Kendra asked.

Grandma’s eyebrows shot up. “Probably because I kept laying eggs for his breakfast. I like to think that if he had taken me to Muriel in the first place, I could have prevented all this nonsense from happening. But I suppose he was searching for an alternate cure for my condition.”

“Besides asking Muriel,” Seth said.

“Exactly.”

“Then why did he have Muriel cure me?”

“I’m sure he knew your parents would return soon, leaving insufficient time to discover another remedy.”

“You had no idea Seth had become a mutant walrus and been restored by Muriel?” Kendra said.

“I missed all that,” Grandma said. “As a hen, most details escaped me. When I urged you to take me to Muriel, I assumed she still had two knots remaining. Only when I looked up and observed the single knot did I begin

to fathom the actual predicament. By then it was too late. Incidentally, how did you end up as a walrus?”

Seth and Kendra related the particulars about turning the fairy into an imp and the subsequent retribution. Grandma listened, asking a few clarifying questions.

As the path curved around a tall thicket, a covered bridge came into view up ahead. Spanning a ravine, the bridge was composed of dark wood. Although aged and weathered, it appeared to be in reasonably good repair.

“Our destination draws near,” Grandma said.

“Beyond the bridge?” Kendra asked.

“Down in the ravine.” Grandma stopped, studying the foliage off to either side of the road. “I am suspicious of the stillness in these woods. A great tension rests upon Fablehaven today.” She resumed walking.

“Because of Grandpa?” Seth asked.

“Yes, and your newfound enmity with the fairies. But I worry there may be something more. I am anxious to speak with Nero.”

“Will he help us?” Kendra asked.

“He would rather harm us. Trolls can be violent and unpredictable. I would not solicit information from him if our situation were less dire.”

“What’s the plan?” Seth asked.

“Our only chance is clever bargaining. Cliff trolls are cunning and ruthless, but their avarice can be a weakness.”

“Avarice?” Seth asked.

“Greed. Cliff trolls are miserly creatures. Treasure hoarders. Cunning negotiators. They relish the thrill of besting an opponent. Whatever agreement we reach, Nero will have to feel like the undisputed victor. I only hope we can determine something he values that we are willing to part with.”

“What if we can’t?” Kendra said.

“We must. If we fail to reach an arrangement, Nero will not let us leave unscathed.”

They arrived at the brink of the ravine. Kendra placed a hand against the bridge and leaned forward to look down. It was surprisingly deep. Tenacious vegetation clung to the steep walls. A narrow stream trickled along the bottom. “How do we get down there?”

“Carefully,” Grandma said, taking a seat at the edge of the precipice. Rolling over onto her stomach, she started backing down the slope feet first, looking ridiculous in her robe and slippers. The incline was not completely vertical, but most of the descent was quite steep.

“If we fall, we’ll tumble all the way to the bottom,” Kendra observed.

“A sensible reason not to fall,” Grandma agreed, moving carefully downward. “Come along, it looks worse than it is. Just find solid handholds and take it one step at a time.”

Seth followed Grandma, and then Kendra started down, desperately hugging the side of the ravine, taking tentative steps, hunting blindly for the next place to rest her foot. But Grandma was right. Once she got going, the climb was less difficult than it appeared. There were many handholds, including scrawny bushes with well-anchored stems. After proceeding gingerly at first, she grew in confidence and increased the speed of her descent.

When Kendra reached the bottom, Seth was squatting near a cluster of blossoms at the edge of the stream. Grandma Sorenson stood nearby. “Took you long enough,” Seth said.

“I was being careful.”

“I’ve never seen somebody move an inch per hour before.”

“No time for bickering,” Grandma said. “Kendra did just fine, Seth. We need to hurry along.”

“I like the smell of these flowers,” Seth said.

“Come away from those,” Grandma insisted.

“Why? They smell great; take a whiff.”

“Those flowers are perilous. And we’re in a hurry.” Grandma waved for him to follow and started walking, picking her way carefully along the rocky floor of the ravine.

“Why are they dangerous?” Seth asked, catching up with her.

“Those are a peculiar class of lotus blossoms. The smell is intoxicating, the taste divine. A tiny nibble of a single petal carries you away into a lethargic trance populated by vivid hallucinations.”

“Like drugs?”

“More addictive than most drugs. Sampling a lotus blossom awakens a craving that will never be silenced. Many have wasted their lives pursuing

and consuming the petals of those bewitching flowers.”

“I wasn’t going to eat one.”

“No? Sit and smell them for a few minutes, and you’ll end up with a petal in your mouth before you know what you’re doing.”

They proceeded in silence for a few hundred yards. The walls of the ravine grew more sheer and rocky as they progressed. They noticed a few other clusters of lotus blossoms.

“Where is Nero?” Kendra asked.

Grandma scanned the wall of the ravine. “Not much farther. He lives up on a ledge.”

“We have to climb up to him?”

“Stan said Nero lowered a rope ladder.”

“What’s that?” Seth asked, pointing up ahead.

“I’m not sure,” Grandma said. A good distance down the ravine, about twenty upright logs of increasing height led from the edge of the stream to the wall of the ravine. The highest log granted access to a rocky ledge. “It might be our destination. This is not what Stan described.”

They arrived at the logs. The lowest was three feet tall, the next was six feet, and each subsequent log stood roughly three feet taller than the previous one, until the tallest rose about sixty feet high. The logs were arranged about three feet apart, in a staggered row. None of the logs had any limbs. Short or tall, they were all of a similar circumference, about eighteen inches, and they were all cut flat across the top.

Placing a hand beside her mouth, Grandma called up to the ledge. “Nero! We would like to meet with you!”

“Not a good day,” a voice answered, deep and silky. “Try me next week.” They could not see the speaker.

“We must meet today or never,” Grandma insisted.

“Who has such an urgent need?” the resonant voice inquired.

“Ruth Sorenson and her grandchildren.”

“Ruth Sorenson? What is your request?”

“We need to find Stan.”

“The caretaker? Yes, I could discern his location. Ascend the stairs and we will discuss terms.”

Grandma looked around. “You don’t mean these logs,” she called.

“I most assuredly do.”

“Stan said you had a ladder.”

“That was before I set up these logs. No small undertaking.”

“Climbing them looks precarious.”

“Call it a filter,” Nero said. “A means to ensure that those who seek my services are in earnest.”

“So we must climb the logs for the privilege of speaking with you? How about we talk from down here?”

“Unacceptable.”

“Your stairs are equally unacceptable,” Grandma said firmly.

“If your need is dire, you will scale them,” observed the troll.

“What have you done with the ladder?”

“I still have it.”

“May we please climb it instead? I am not dressed for an obstacle course. We’ll make it worth your while.”

“How about a compromise? One of you climb the logs. Then I will lower the ladder for the other two. Final offer. Concede or go acquire your information elsewhere.”

“I’ll do it,” Seth said.

Grandma looked at him. “If anyone is climbing those logs, it will be me. I’m taller and better able to reach from log to log.”

“I have smaller feet, so the logs will feel bigger. I’ll keep my balance easier.”

“Sorry, Seth. This is something I must do.”

Seth dashed over to the first log, scrambled onto it without much trouble, and, taking a jump as if he were playing leapfrog, ended up seated atop the second log. Grandma hurried over to the second log. “You get down from there!”

Seth shakily got to his feet. Leaning forward, he placed his hands on the third log. From his position on the second log, the top of the third came almost to the middle of his chest. Another leapfrog jump and he sat atop the nine-foot log. “I can do this,” he said.

“It won’t be so easy as you get higher,” Grandma warned. “You come down and let me do it.”

“No way. I already have one dead grandma.”

Kendra watched silently. From his seated position, Seth shifted to his knees and rose unsteadily to his feet. He leapt to the next log, now well out of Grandma’s reach. Kendra was quietly glad Seth was climbing the logs. She could not picture Grandma doing it successfully, especially dressed in a bathrobe and slippers. At the very least, think of the terrible places she could get splinters! And Kendra could very clearly envision Grandma Sorenson crumpled in a lifeless heap at the base of a log.

“Seth Andrew Sorenson, you mind your grandmother! I want you to come down from there.”

“Stop distracting me,” he said.

“It may seem like fun on these lower logs, but when you get higher—”

“I climb high stuff all the time,” Seth insisted. “My friends and I climb up in the bars under the bleachers at the high school. If we fell there we could die too.” He rose to his feet. He seemed to be getting better at it. Seth landed on the next log, straddling it for a moment before getting to his knees.

“Be careful,” Grandma said. “Don’t think about the height.”

“I know you’re trying to help,” Seth said. “But please stop talking.”

Grandma came and stood by Kendra. “Can he do this?” she whispered.

“He has a good chance. He’s really brave, and pretty athletic. The height might not get to him. I would freak out.”

Kendra wanted to look away. She did not want to see him fall. But she could not take her eyes from her brother as he leapfrogged from log to log, higher and higher. As he jumped to the thirteenth, almost forty feet high now, he leaned precariously to one side. Chills raced through Kendra as if she were the one losing her balance. Seth gripped with his legs and leaned the other way, regaining his equilibrium. Kendra could breathe again.

Fourteen, fifteen, sixteen. Kendra glanced at Grandma. He was going to make it! Seventeen. He got to his feet, wobbling a bit, hands out to either side. “These tall ones shake a little,” he called down.

Seth leapfrogged to the next log and landed awkwardly, teetering too far to one side. For a moment he hovered on the brink of regaining his balance. Every muscle in Kendra’s body clenched in horror. Arms pinwheeling, Seth fell. Kendra shrieked. She could not look away.

Something flashed from the ledge—a slender, black chain with a metal weight at the end. The chain coiled around one of Seth’s legs. Instead of falling to the ground, he swung into the cliff, colliding roughly with the stone wall.

For the first time Kendra had a view of Nero. Built like a man, the troll had reptilian features. A few bright yellow markings decorated his glossy black body. He held in a webbed hand the chain from which Seth dangled. Muscles bunching powerfully, Nero hauled Seth up to the ledge. They passed out of sight, and then a rope ladder unfurled from the ledge, unwinding all the way to the base of the cliff.

“Are you okay?” Kendra yelled up at Seth.

“I’m fine,” he answered. “Just had the wind knocked out of me.”

Grandma started up the ladder. Kendra followed, forcing herself to focus on grabbing the next rung, denying the impulse to look down. At length she reached the ledge. She moved to the rear of the ledge, standing beside the low mouth of a dark cave from which wafted a cool draft.

Nero looked even more intimidating up close. Tiny, sleek scales covered his sinuous body. Though he was not much taller than Grandma, the thickness of his brawny physique made him seem massive. He had a snout rather than a nose, and bulging eyes that never blinked. A row of sharp spines ran from the center of his forehead to the small of his back.

“Thank you for rescuing Seth,” Grandma said.

“I told myself, if the boy makes it past fifteen logs, I will assist him if he falls. I admit that I am curious to hear what you would exchange to learn the location of your husband.” His voice was suave and rich.

“Tell us what you have in mind,” Grandma said.

A long, gray tongue popped out of his mouth and licked his right eye. “You would have me speak first? So be it. I do not ask much, an insignificant trifle for the proprietress of this illustrious preserve. Six coffers of gold, twelve puncheons of silver, three casks of uncut gems, and a bucket of opals.”

Kendra looked at Grandma. Could she possibly own that much treasure?

“A reasonable sum,” Grandma said. “Unfortunately, we have brought no such riches with us.”

“I can wait while you retrieve the payment, if you leave the girl as collateral.”

“Regrettably we lack the time to shuttle treasure to you, unless you would reveal Stan’s location before receiving compensation.”

Nero licked his left eye and grinned, a hideous sight that displayed double rows of needle teeth. “I must be paid in full before fulfilling your request.”

Grandma folded her arms. “I take it you already possess great caches of treasure. It surprises me that such a meager financial offering as I could supply would entice you to trade.”

“Go on,” he said.

“You are offering us a service. Perhaps we should repay you with a service as well.”

Nero nodded thoughtfully. “Possible. The boy has some spirit. Indenture him to me for fifty years.”

Seth looked desperately at Grandma.

Grandma frowned. “I hope to leave the possibility of future business open, therefore I do not wish to leave you feeling slighted. The boy has spirit, but little ability. You would assume the burden of training him as a servant, and find yourself yoked to his incompetence. You would add more value to his life through education than he would to yours through service.”

“Your candor is appreciated,” Nero said, “although you have much to learn about bargaining. I begin to wonder whether you have anything of value to offer. If not, our discussion will not end well.”

“You speak of value,” Grandma said. “I ask, what value is treasure to a wealthy troll? The more riches he possesses, the less each new acquisition improves his total worth. A bar of gold means much more to a pauper than to a king. I also question what value a frail human servant would have to a master infinitely more wise and capable? Consider the situation. We want you to render a service of value to us, something we cannot do for ourselves. You should expect no less.”

“I agree. Take care. Your words are spreading a net at your feet.” A lethal edge was creeping into his voice.

“True, unless I am trained to deliver a service of extraordinary value. Have you ever received a massage?”

“Are you serious? The idea has always struck me as ridiculous.”

“The idea seems absurd to all the uninitiated. Beware of rash judgments. We all pursue wealth, and those who gather the most can afford certain comforts unavailable to the masses. Foremost among these luxuries is the indescribable release and relaxation of a massage at the hands of one skilled in the art.”

“And you claim to be skilled in this so-called art?”

“Trained by a true master. My ability is so great as to be nearly beyond purchase. The only person in the world who has received a full massage at my hands is the caretaker himself, and this because I am his woman. I could give you a full massage, kneading and soothing every muscle in your body. The experience would redefine your understanding of pleasure.”

Nero shook his head. “It will take more than florid words and grandiose promises to persuade me.”

“Consider my offer in perspective,” Grandma said. “People pay exorbitant sums for an expert massage. You will receive yours at no cost, merely in exchange for a service. How long would it take you to ascertain Stan’s location?”

“A few moments.”

“A massage will take me thirty grueling minutes. And you will be experiencing something new, a delight you have never encountered in all your long years. A similar opportunity may never arise again.”

Nero licked an eye. “Granted, I have never received a massage. I could name many things I have never done, mainly because I have no interest in doing them. I have sampled human food and found it wanting. I am not convinced that I will find a massage as satisfying as you describe.”

Grandma studied him. “Three minutes. I will give you a sample for three minutes. It will afford you only a narrow glimpse of the unspeakable bliss that awaits, but should place you in a position to make a more educated decision.”

“Very well. I see no harm in a demonstration.”

“Give me your hand.”

“My hand?”

“I will massage a single hand. You will have to use your imagination to envision how this would feel across your entire body.”

He held out a hand. Grandma Sorenson took it and began working his palm with her thumbs. At first he tried to keep a straight face, but his mouth began to twitch, and his eyes began to roll. “How is that?” Grandma asked. “Too deep?”

His meager lips quivered. “Just right,” he purred.

Grandma continued expertly rubbing his palm and the back of his hand. He started licking his eyes compulsively. She finished with his fingers. “The demonstration is concluded,” she announced.

“Thirty minutes of that, you say, across my whole body?”

“The children will assist me,” Grandma said. “We will trade a service for a service.”

“But I could exchange my service for something more enduring! For treasure! A single massage is too fleeting.”

“The law of diminishing returns applies to massages, as it does to most things. The first is the best, and all you really need. Besides, you can always exchange your services for treasure. This may be your only chance to receive an expert massage.”

He held out his other hand. “One more example, to help me decide.”

“No more samples.”

“You offer just one massage? What if you stay on as my personal masseuse for twelve years?”

Grandma grew stern. “I am not petitioning you to look in that stone of yours multiple times for multiple purposes. I am requesting a single piece of information. A service for a service. That is my offer, lopsided in your favor. The massage takes thirty minutes, versus mere moments for you to peer into your stone.”

“But you need the information,” Nero reminded her. “I do not need a massage.”

“Satisfying needs is the burden of the poor. The wealthy and powerful can afford to indulge their wants and whims. If you pass on this opportunity, you will always wonder what you missed.”

“Don’t do it, Grandma,” Kendra said. “Just give him the treasure.”

Nero held up a finger. “This proposition is unorthodox, and against my better judgment, but the idea of a massage intrigues me, and I am rarely intrigued. However, thirty minutes is too short. Say . . . two hours.”

“Sixty minutes,” Grandma said flatly.

“Ninety,” Nero countered.

Grandma wrung her hands. She folded and unfolded her arms. She rubbed her brow.

“Ninety minutes is too long,” Kendra said. “You’ve never given Grandpa a massage longer than an hour!”

“Hold your tongue, child,” Grandma snapped.

“Ninety or no deal,” Nero said.

Grandma sighed in resignation. “All right . . . ninety minutes.”

“Very well, I accept. But if I do not approve of the entire massage, the deal is off.”

Grandma shook her head. “No caveats. A single ninety-minute massage in exchange for the location of Stan Sorenson. You will treasure the memory until the end of your days.”

Nero eyed Kendra and Seth before fixing Grandma with a shrewd gaze. “Agreed. How do we proceed?”

The best table Grandma could find was a fairly narrow stone shelf near the mouth of the cave. Nero stretched out on the shelf, and Grandma showed Kendra and Seth how to massage his legs and feet. She demonstrated how and where to use their knuckles and the heels of their hands.

“He’s very strong,” she said, grinding her knuckles against the bottom of his foot. “Lean into it as much as you want.” She set down his leg and stood beside his head. “The children have their instructions, Nero. The ninety minutes start now.”

Kendra hesitantly laid her hands on the troll’s bulging calf. Although they were not wet, the scales felt slimy. She had held a snake before, and the texture of Nero’s scaly skin was quite similar.

With Nero lying prone, Grandma went to work on the back of his neck and shoulders. She employed a variety of techniques—probing with her thumbs, rubbing with her palms, pressing with her fists, digging with her elbows. She ended up kneeling on the small of his back, careful to avoid the spikes along his spine, squeezing and kneading and applying pressure in diverse ways.

Nero was obviously in ecstasy. He purred and moaned in decadent satisfaction. A constant stream of drowsy compliments flowed from his lips. He languidly encouraged them to rub harder and deeper.

Kendra grew weary, and Grandma periodically demonstrated other techniques for her and Seth to employ. Kendra despised working on Nero's feet the most, from the roughness of his cracked heels, to the smooth pads of his calluses, to the lumpy bunions on his toes. But she tried her best to follow Grandma's tireless example. Besides assisting with his legs and feet, Grandma labored on his head, neck, shoulders, back, arms, hands, chest, and abdomen.

When they finally finished, Nero sat up with a euphoric smile. All the cunning had vanished from his bulbous eyes. He looked ready for the most satisfying nap of his life.

"Closer to a hundred minutes," Grandma said. "But I wanted to do it right."

"Thank you," he said giddily. "I never imagined something like that." He got to his feet, leaning against the wall of the cliff to steady himself. "You have amply earned your reward."

"I've never felt anyone so full of knots and tension," Grandma said.

"I feel loose now," he said, swinging his arms. "I will be right back with the information you seek." Nero ducked into the cave.

"I want to see his magic stone," Seth mumbled.

"Wait patiently," Grandma chided, wiping perspiration from her brow.

"You must be exhausted," Kendra said.

"I'm not in very good condition," Grandma admitted. "That took a lot out of me." She lowered her voice. "But it sure beats barrels of treasure that we don't have."

Seth wandered over to the brink of the ledge and stared down into the ravine. Grandma took a seat on the shelf where they had administered the massage, and Kendra waited beside her.

Before long, Nero emerged. He still looked affable and relaxed, though not quite as loopy as before. "Stan is chained in the basement of the Forgotten Chapel."

Grandma's jaw tightened. "You're sure?"

“It was a little tricky finding him and sneaking a good look, considering who else is confined there, but yes, I am certain.”

“He’s well?”

“He’s alive.”

“Lena was with him?”

“The naiad? Sure, I saw her too.”

“Was Muriel in the vicinity?”

“Muriel? Why would she . . . oh, that’s what that was! Ruth, the agreement was for a single piece of information. But no, I didn’t catch sight of her. I believe this concludes our arrangement.” He gestured toward the ladder. “If you will excuse me, I need to lie down.”



The Far Side of the Attic

Grandma refused to talk while they were in the ravine. She wore a dour, thoughtful expression and hushed any attempts at conversation. Kendra waited until they were back on the path beside the covered bridge to try her question again.

“Grandma—” Kendra began.

“Not here,” Grandma admonished. “We must not discuss the situation out in the open.” She motioned for them to huddle close and continued in a hushed tone. “Let this suffice. We must go after your grandpa today. Tomorrow might be too late. We will return home immediately, get equipped, and go to the place where he is being held. I will reveal his exact whereabouts once we are indoors. Muriel may not yet know his location, and even if she does, I don’t want her to learn that we know.”

Grandma stopped whispering and hurried them along the path. “Sorry if I have been antisocial since leaving Nero,” she said after they had walked in silence for a couple of minutes. “I needed to devise a plan. You kids really did an exceptional job back there. Nobody should have to spend an

afternoon rubbing a troll's feet. Seth was heroic on the logs, and Kendra did some well-timed bluffing during the negotiations. You both surpassed my expectations."

"I never knew you were a masseuse," Kendra said.

"I learned from Lena. She has collected expert instruction from around the globe. If you ever get a chance to receive a massage from her, don't turn it down." Grandma tucked some errant strands of hair behind her ear. She became distant again for a moment, pursing her lips and staring remotely as she walked. "I have a few questions for you two, things we can talk about in the open. Have you met a man named Warren?"

"Warren?" Seth repeated.

"Handsome and quiet? White hair and skin? Dale's brother."

"No," Kendra said.

"They might have brought him to the house on Midsummer Eve," Grandma prodded.

"We were with Grandpa, Dale, and Lena until after sundown, but never saw anybody else," Seth said.

"I never even heard him mentioned," Kendra added.

"Me neither," Seth agreed.

Grandma nodded. "He must have stayed at the cabin. Have you met Hugo?"

"Yeah!" Seth said. "He's awesome. I wonder where he went?"

Grandma gave Seth a measuring glance. "I trust he has been attending to his chores in the barn."

"I don't think so," Kendra said. "We had to milk the cow yesterday."

"You milked Viola?" Grandma said, plainly astonished. "How?"

Kendra described how they had set up the ladders and slid down her teats. Seth added details about how milky they had gotten.

"Resourceful children!" Grandma said. "Stan had told you nothing about her?"

"We found her because she was mooing so loud," Seth said. "She was shaking the whole barn."

"It looked like her udder was going to explode," Kendra said.

"Viola is our milch cow," Grandma said. "Every preserve has such an animal, though not all are bovine. She is older than this preserve, which was

founded in 1711. At that time, she was brought over from Europe by ship. Born from a milch cow on a preserve in the Pyrenees Mountains, she was about 100 years old when she made the voyage, and was already larger than an elephant. She has been here ever since, gradually gaining size each year.”

“Looks like she’s about to outgrow the barn,” Seth said.

“Her growth has slowed over the years, but yes, she may one day become too colossal for her current confines.”

“She provides the milk the fairies drink,” Kendra said.

“More than the fairies drink it. Her ancient breed is nourished and worshipped by all creatures of fairydom. They place daily enchantments on her food and make secret offerings to honor and strengthen her. In return, her milk functions as an ambrosia central to their survival. It is no wonder that cows are still considered sacred in certain parts of the world.”

“She must make tons of dung,” Seth said.

“Another blessing. Her manure is the finest fertilizer in the world, coaxing plants to mature much more quickly than usual and sometimes to reach incredible proportions. By the power of her dung we can reap multiple harvests from a field in a season, and many tropical plants flourish on this property that would otherwise perish. Did you kids happen to put milk out for the fairies?”

“No,” Seth said. “We spilled it all down the drain. We were mainly trying to calm down the cow.”

“No matter. The absence of milk might make the fairies a little ornery, but they’ll get over it. We’ll see they get some tomorrow at the latest.”

“So normally Hugo milks Viola,” Kendra surmised.

“Correct. It is a standing order, so there must be a reason he has not carried it out during the past couple of days. You have not seen him since Midsummer Eve?”

“No.”

“He was probably assigned to watch over Warren and the cabin until summoned. He should come if we call.”

“Could something have happened to him?” Seth asked.

“A golem may seem like little more than animated matter granted elementary intelligence, but most creatures on this preserve fear Hugo. Few

could harm him if they tried. He will be our chief ally in rescuing your grandfather.”

“What about Warren?” Kendra asked. “Will he help too?”

Grandma frowned. “You have not met him because his mind has been ruined. Dale has remained on this preserve mainly in order to care for him. Warren is lost in a catatonic stupor. Fablehaven has many stories. His is another tragic tale of a mortal venturing where he did not belong. Warren will be no help to us.”

“Anybody else?” Seth asked. “Like the satyrs?”

“Satyrs?” Grandma exclaimed. “When have you met satyrs? I may have some choice words for your grandfather when we find him.”

“We met them by accident in the woods,” Kendra assured her. “We were taking stew from what looked like a well, and they warned us that we were actually stealing from an ogress.”

“Those rogues were protecting their underhanded operation more than you,” Grandma huffed. “They have been pilfering her stew for years. The scoundrels didn’t want to have to rebuild their thieving device—probably sounded too much like work. Satyrs live for frivolity. The ultimate fair-weather friends. Your grandfather and I share a mutual respect with various beings on this preserve, but there is not much more loyalty than one would find out in the wild. The herd looks on as the sick or injured are brought down by predators. If your grandfather is to be rescued on such short notice, it will be our doing, with none but Hugo to aid us.”

* * *

It was late afternoon when they reached the yard. Grandma stood with her hands on her hips, taking in the scene. The ruined tree house. The damaged furniture strewn about the garden. The gaping, glassless windows.

“I’m afraid to go inside,” she muttered.

“You don’t remember how bad it is?” Kendra asked.

“She was a chicken, remember?” Seth said. “We ate her eggs.”

Creases appeared on Grandma’s brow. “It feels like such a betrayal to have your home violated,” she said softly. “I know sinister evils lurk in the woods, but they have never crossed that boundary.”

Kendra and Seth followed Grandma across the yard and up the porch steps. Grandma stooped and picked up a copper triangle, attaching it to a hook hanging from a nail. Kendra remembered noticing the triangle dangling among the wind chimes. A short copper rod was linked to the triangle by a chain of beads. Grandma clanged the rod noisily around the inside of the triangle.

“That should bring Hugo,” Grandma explained. She crossed the porch and paused in the doorway, staring into her home. “It looks like we were bombed,” she murmured. “Such senseless vandalism!”

She roamed the gutted house in a somber daze, occasionally pausing to pick up a damaged frame and examine the torn photograph inside or to run her hand along the remnants of a beloved piece of furniture. Grandma climbed the stairs and went to her room. Kendra and Seth watched her rummage through the closet, finally withdrawing a metal lunch box.

“At least this is intact,” Grandma said.

“Hungry?” Seth asked.

Kendra slapped him on the shoulder with the back of her hand. “What is it, Grandma?”

“Follow me.”

Downstairs in the kitchen, Grandma opened the lunch box. She removed a handful of photographs. “Help me lay these out.”

The photos were of the house. Each room was shown from several angles. The exterior was also displayed from multiple perspectives. In total there were more than a hundred pictures. Grandma and the children began spreading them across the kitchen floor.

“We took these pictures in case the unthinkable ever occurred,” Grandma said.

Kendra suddenly made the connection. “For the brownies?”

“Clever girl,” said Grandma. “I’m not sure whether they will be up to the challenge, considering the extent of the damage, but they have worked miracles in the past. I’m sorry this calamity befell us during your stay.”

“You shouldn’t be,” Seth said. “It happened because of me.”

“You mustn’t assume all the blame,” Grandma insisted.

“What else can we do?” Kendra said. “We caused it.”

“Kendra didn’t do anything,” Seth said. “She tried to stop me. The whole thing is my fault.”

Grandma regarded Seth pensively. “You did not mean to harm Grandpa. Yes, you made him vulnerable through your disobedience. As I understand, you were commanded not to look out the window. Had you heeded the order, you would not have been tempted to open the window, and your grandfather would not have been taken. You must face that fact, and learn from it.

“But the full blame for Stan’s predicament is considerably more guilt than you deserve. Your grandfather and I are the caretakers of this estate. We are responsible for the actions of those we bring here, especially children. Stan allowed you to come here to do your parents a favor, but also because we need to start selectively sharing this secret with our posterity. We will not be around forever. The secret was shared with us, and a day came when the responsibility of this enchanted refuge fell on our shoulders. One day we will have to pass the responsibility on to others.”

She took Seth and Kendra by the hands and fixed them with a loving gaze. “I know the mistakes you made were not deliberate or malicious. Your grandfather and I have made plenty of mistakes ourselves. So have all the people who ever lived here, no matter how wise or cautious. Your grandfather must share the blame for placing you children in a situation where opening a window with kind intentions could cause such harm and destruction. And clearly the fiends who abducted him are ultimately the most culpable.”

Kendra and Seth were silent. Seth scrunched up his face. “If it wasn’t for me, Grandpa would be fine right now,” he said, fighting hard not to cry.

“And I would still be a chicken in a cage,” Grandma said. “Let’s worry about fixing the problem instead of the blame. Don’t despair. I know we can set things right. Take me to Dale.”

Seth nodded, sniffing and rubbing his forearm across his nose. He led the way across the back porch, weaving through the garden toward their destination.

“There really aren’t many fairies,” Grandma said. “I’ve never seen the yard so devoid of life.”

“There haven’t been many around ever since they attacked Seth,” Kendra said. “Since Grandpa vanished there have been even fewer.”

When they stood over the painted, life-size metal statue of Dale, Grandma shook her head. "I've never seen this particular enchantment, but that's certainly Dale."

"Can you help him?" Kendra asked.

"Perhaps, given sufficient time. Part of counteracting an enchantment is understanding who placed it, and how."

"We found tracks," Seth said. He showed Grandma the print in the flowerbed. Although the impression had faded a bit, it remained recognizable.

Grandma frowned. "It doesn't look familiar. Many creatures run wild on festival nights that we otherwise never encounter—which is why we take cover indoors. The print may not even be a relevant clue. It could belong to the perpetrator, or to the mount the perpetrator rode, or it could belong to something that just happened to step there sometime during the night."

"So we just ignore Dale for now?" Kendra asked.

"We have no alternative. Time is short. We can only hope that by rescuing your grandfather, we can shed more light on what caused Dale's condition and find a way to reverse the curse. Come."

They returned to the house. Grandma spoke over her shoulder as they mounted the stairs to the second floor. "There are a few special strongholds within the house. One is the room where you have been staying. Another is a second room on the other side of the attic."

"I knew it!" Kendra said. "I could tell from outside there had to be more to the attic. But I could never find a way in."

"You were probably searching in the wrong place," Grandma said, leading them down the hall to her room. "The two sides of the attic are not interconnected. When we get up there, I'll fill you in on my strategy." Grandma crouched and picked through a broken nightstand. She found a few hairpins and used them to pile her hair into a matronly bun. Searching more, she located a key. She led them into the master bathroom, where she used the key to unlock a closet door.

Instead of a closet, the door opened to reveal a second door, this one made of steel with a large combination wheel. A vault door. Grandma began spinning the wheel. "Four turns right to 11, three left to 28, two right to 3, one left to 31, and half a turn right to 18."

She pulled a lever, and the heavy door clacked open. Carpeted stairs led up to another door. Grandma went up first. Seth and Kendra joined her in the attic.

This side of the attic was even larger than the playroom. Grandma flipped a switch, and several lights dispelled the dimness. A long workbench dominated one side of the room, the wall above it covered with tools supported on pegs. Handsome wooden cabinets lined the other walls. Various unusual objects littered the room—a birdcage, a phonograph, a battle-ax, a hanging scale, a mannequin, a globe the size of a beach ball. Trunks and boxes were arranged in rows on the floor, leaving just enough aisle space to access them. Heavy curtains concealed the windows.

Grandma motioned them over to the workbench, where they perched on stools. “What’s in all the boxes?” Seth asked.

“Many things, most of them unsafe. This is where we guard our most prized weapons and talismans. Spell books, ingredients for potions, all the good stuff.”

“You can tell us more about Grandpa now?” Kendra said.

“Yes. You heard Nero say that Stan and Lena are being held in the Forgotten Chapel. Let me summarize some history to bring the ramifications into view.

“Long ago, this land was possessed by a powerful demon named Bahumat. For centuries, he terrorized the natives who dwelt in the region. They learned to avoid certain areas, yet even with these precautions, nowhere in the vicinity was truly safe. The natives made whatever offerings the demon seemed to require, but still they lived in fear. When a group of Europeans offered to overthrow the demon in exchange for a claim to the lands it haunted, the incredulous local leaders consented.

“Aided by mighty allies and potent magic, the Europeans successfully subdued and imprisoned the demon. Some years later, they founded Fablehaven on the land they wrested from Bahumat.

“Years passed. In the early 1800s, a community comprised chiefly of extended family had developed on this preserve. They built a number of dwellings around the original mansion. This was before the current house and barn were constructed. The old mansion still stands deep within this property, though most of the flimsier structures around it have been

swallowed by time and the elements. Although their homes are gone, they did construct one lasting structure—a church.

“In 1826, thanks to human frailty and foolishness, Bahumat nearly escaped. It could have been a serious disaster, because none who remained on the preserve possessed the resources or knowledge to contend successfully with an entity of his power. Although the jailbreak was prevented, the experience proved too unnerving for most who lived here, and the majority departed.

“The prison that held the demon had been damaged. With outside help, Bahumat was moved to a new holding area in the basement of the church. Meetings there ceased a few months after that, and in the intervening years it has become known as the Forgotten Chapel.”

“So Bahumat is still there?” Kendra said.

“Believe me, we would know if Bahumat had been loosed. I doubt anyone in the world has the capacity to recapture that fiend if he were to get free. His kind have been absent for too long, imprisoned or destroyed. Those who knew how to defeat such a foe have passed on, with none to replace them. Which brings me to my greatest concern: that Muriel might try to release Bahumat.”

“Would she do something that stupid?” Seth cried.

“Muriel is a student of evil. She was originally imprisoned for tampering with such things. If she reaches the Forgotten Chapel first, which she may have already done, assuming her imps have apprised her of the situation, we will have to neutralize her in order to save your grandfather. If we allow her enough time to release Bahumat, we will all need saving. That is why I must try to stop her immediately.”

“Not just you,” Seth said.

“Hugo and I will handle this. You kids have done enough.”

“What?” Seth exclaimed. “No way!”

“Retrieving your grandfather should not be too difficult. But if the worst-case scenario transpires, and I fail, Fablehaven could fall. Bahumat never agreed to the treaty that protects this sanctuary. None of his kind would. He has a claim to this land and is a being of sufficient power to overthrow the treaty, plunging the preserve into endless darkness. Every day would become like those fearful festival nights, and this property would

be forever uninhabitable for all but the denizens of shadow. Any mortal trapped here would fall prey to horrors too terrible to contemplate.”

“Could that really happen?” Kendra asked quietly.

“It would not be the first time,” Grandma said. “Preserves have fallen ever since they were instituted. The causes are myriad, usually stemming from human folly. Some have been reclaimed. Others fell beyond redemption. Currently there are at least thirty fallen preserves in the world. Perhaps most unnerving are the recent whispers about the Society of the Evening Star.”

“Maddox told us about them,” Seth said.

“Grandpa got a letter warning him to be on the lookout,” Kendra added.

“Traditionally, the fall of a preserve was an uncommon occurrence. Maybe one or two a century. About ten years ago, rumors began to circulate that the Society of the Evening Star was working mischief again. Around the same time, preserves began falling at an alarming rate. Four have fallen over the past five years.”

“Why would anybody do that?” Kendra asked.

“Many have sought the answer to that question,” Grandma said. “To gain riches? Power? We who safeguard the preserves are essentially conservationists. We don’t want to see the magnificent magical creatures of the world go extinct. We try not to discriminate against creatures of shadow—we want them to survive as well. But we do compartmentalize them when necessary. Members of the Society of the Evening Star mask their true intentions with rhetoric, alleging that we wrongfully imprison creatures of darkness.”

“Do you?” Seth asked.

“The most violent and malevolent demons are imprisoned, yes, but that is for the safety of the world. In pursuit of endless carnage and unlawful dominion, they clashed anciently with good humans and creatures of light, and are paying a heavy price for losing. Many other sinister entities were admitted to preserves only on condition that they would agree to certain limitations—agreements they entered voluntarily. A common restriction is that they are not permitted to leave the preserve, so the Society considers many of these creatures also incarcerated. They argue that the covenants of the preserves create artificial rules that upset the natural order of things.

They consider the majority of humanity expendable. Their premise is that chaos and bloodshed are preferable to just regulations. We disagree.”

“Do you think the Evening Star people are involved in kidnapping Grandpa?” Kendra asked.

Grandma shrugged. “Possibly. I hope not. If so, it was done with great subtlety. There are powerful limits to how any outsider can intrude on a preserve. And our preserve is more secret than most.”

Grandma opened a drawer and pulled out a rolled parchment. Unrolling it, she revealed a map of the world. Large dots and X’s were located on diverse portions of the map, aside from the labeling of major cities.

“The X’s mark fallen preserves,” Grandma said. “The dots mark active ones.”

“Fablehaven isn’t marked,” Kendra noticed.

“Sharp eyes,” Grandma said. “There are thirty-seven active preserves noted on the map. And five unmarked preserves, of which Fablehaven is one. Even among those most trusted in our community, very few people know about the unmarked preserves. None know of them all.”

“Why?” Seth asked.

“Special artifacts of great power are hidden on those five preserves.”

“What artifacts?” Seth asked, excited.

“I cannot say. I don’t know most of the details myself. The artifact here at Fablehaven is not in our possession. It is guarded at an undisclosed location on the property. Evildoers, particularly the Society of the Evening Star, would like nothing more than to collect the artifacts from the hidden preserves.”

“So there are many reasons Fablehaven must be protected,” Kendra said.

Grandma nodded. “Your grandfather and I are prepared to give our lives if necessary.”

“Maybe none of us should go after Grandpa,” Kendra said. “Can’t we get help?”

“There are some who would come to our aid if summoned, but I need to stop Muriel and find your grandfather today. Nobody could reach us that quickly. Fablehaven is protected by secrecy. At times this becomes a hindrance. I do not know what spells bind Bahumat, but I am certain that,

given sufficient time, Muriel will find a way to unravel them. I must act now.”

Grandma slid off the stool, walked down an aisle, opened a trunk, and withdrew an ornate box embossed with vines and flowers. From the box she removed a small crossbow not much larger than a pistol. She also took out a small arrow with black fletching, an ivory shaft, and a silver head.

“Cool,” Seth cried. “I want one!”

“This dart will slay any being that was ever mortal, including the enchanted or undead, if I can lodge it in a lethal place.”

“Where is lethal?” Kendra asked.

“The heart and the brain are surest. Witches can be tricky. This is the only talisman I am certain will slay Muriel.”

“You’re going to kill her?” Kendra whispered.

“Only as a last resort. First I will try to have Hugo capture her. But the stakes are too high for us to sally forth without a failsafe. If the golem should unforeseeably disappoint me, I lack the skills to subdue Muriel myself. Believe me, the last thing I want is her blood on my hands. Killing a mortal is not quite as grievous a crime as killing a mystical being, but it would still dissolve most of the protection afforded me by the treaty. I would probably have to banish myself from the preserve.”

“But she’s trying to destroy the whole preserve!” Seth complained.

“Not by directly killing anyone,” Grandma said. “The chapel is neutral ground. If I go there and kill her, even if I can justify the act, the protection of the treaty will never again be mine.”

“I heard Dale shooting guns and stuff the night the creatures came through our window,” Kendra said.

“Creatures were invading our territory,” Grandma explained.

“Regardless of the reason, by coming into this house, they surrender all their protections. Under those circumstances, Dale could slay them with no fear of retribution, meaning his status under the treaty would remain secure. This same principle could work against you if you were to venture into certain forbidden areas of Fablehaven. If you were thus stripped of all protection, it would be open hunting season on Kendra and Seth. Which is precisely why those areas are prohibited.”

“I don’t get who would punish you for killing Muriel,” Seth said.

“The mystical barriers that protect me would be lifted, and the punishment would naturally follow. You see, as mortals, we can choose to break the rules. The mystical creatures that seek asylum here are not afforded that luxury. Many would break the rules if they could, but they are bound. As long as I obey the rules, I am safe. But if I lose the protections afforded by the treaty, the consequences of my vulnerability would inevitably follow.”

“So does that mean Grandpa is alive for sure?” Kendra asked in a small voice. “They can’t kill him or anything.”

“Stan has kept the rules pertaining to bloodshed, and so, even on their night of revelry, the dark creatures of this preserve would not be able to kill him. Nor would they be able to force him to go to a place that would enable them to kill him. Imprisoned, tortured, driven insane, turned to lead—maybe. But he has to be alive. And I have to go after him.”

“And I have to come with you,” Seth said. “You need backup.”

“Hugo is my backup.”

Seth scrunched his face, resisting tears. “I’m not going to lose you guys, especially when it’s my fault.”

Grandma Sorenson embraced Seth. “Sweetheart, I appreciate your courage, but I’m not about to risk losing a grandchild.”

“Won’t we be in just as much danger here as we would be if we were with you?” Kendra said. “If the demon gets loose, we’ll all be fried.”

“I mean to send you away, off the preserve,” Grandma said.

Kendra folded her arms. “So we can wait outside the gate until our parents get back, tell them you were killed by a demon, and insist that we can’t go to the house because it’s really a magical preserve that has fallen into darkness?”

“Your parents do not know the true nature of this place,” Grandma said. “Nor would they believe without seeing.”

“Exactly!” Kendra said. “If you fail, the first thing Dad will do is go straight to your house and investigate. Nothing we could say would keep him away. And he’ll probably call the cops, and the whole world will find out about this place.”

“They wouldn’t see anything,” Grandma said. “But many would die inexplicably. And actually, they could see the cow, even without the milk,

because Viola remains a mortal being.”

“We came in handy with the troll,” Seth said. “And no matter what you do or say, I’ll follow you anyways.”

Grandma tossed up her hands. “Sincerely, children, I think all will be fine. I know I described a dire scenario, but things like this happen on preserves from time to time, and we normally get them resolved. I don’t see why this would be any different. Hugo will mend the problem without serious incident, and if it comes to it, I am a crack shot with the crossbow. If you will just wait outside the gates, I’ll come for you before it gets too late.”

“But I want to see Hugo pound Muriel,” Seth insisted.

“If we’re supposed to possibly inherit this place someday, you won’t always be able to protect us from danger,” Kendra said. “Wouldn’t it be a good experience for us to watch you and Hugo handle the situation? Maybe we can even help?”

“Field trip!” Seth cried.

Grandma eyed them lovingly. “You kids are growing up so fast,” she sighed.



The Forgotten Chapel

As the sun hesitated above the horizon, Kendra stared out the side of the wagon, watching the trees streak past. She remembered staring at trees out the window of the SUV on the way to the preserve with her parents. This ride was much noisier, bumpier, and windier. And the destination was much more intimidating.

Hugo pulled the oversized rickshaw. Kendra doubted that a team of horses could have matched the tireless speed of his loping strides.

They reached an open area, and Kendra saw the tall hedge that surrounded the pond with the gazebo boardwalk. Strange to think that Lena had once lived there as a naiad.

Before they had boarded the wagon, Grandma had commanded Hugo to obey any instructions from Kendra and Seth. She told Kendra and Seth that if things went wrong, they should make a hasty retreat with Hugo. She also cautioned them to be careful what they told Hugo to do. Since he had no will of his own, the punishments for his actions would fall upon the heads of those issuing the orders.

Grandma had changed out of her bathrobe. She was now dressed in faded jeans, work boots, and a green top—clothing scavenged from the attic. Seth had taken great satisfaction in her choice of a green shirt.

Seth clutched a leather pouch. Grandma had explained it was full of special dust that would keep undesirable creatures away from them. She told Seth he could use it in the same way he had used the salt in the bedroom. She also warned him to use it only as a last resort. Any magic they used would only lead to less tolerable retribution if they failed. She had a pouch of the dust as well.

Kendra was empty-handed. Since she had not yet used magic, Grandma said it would be a mistake for her to start now. Apparently the protections of the treaty were quite strong for those who totally abstained from magic and mischief.

The wagon jolted over a particularly rough spot. Seth caught hold of the side to avoid falling. He looked over his shoulder and smiled. “We’re hauling!”

Kendra wished she could be so obliviously calm about the whole thing. She was getting a sick feeling in her stomach. It reminded her of the first time she had to sing a solo in a school play. Fourth grade. She had always done fine in the practices, but when she peeked out past the curtains at the audience, a queasy feeling began brooding in her belly, until she became certain that she would throw up. At her cue, she walked out onto the bright stage, peering into the dim crowd, unable to find her parents in the throng. Her intro was playing, the moment arrived, and, as she started singing, the fear dissipated and the nausea vanished.

Would it be the same today? Was the anticipation worse than the event itself? At least once they got there, reality would replace uncertainty and they would be able to do something, to act. All she could do at present was worry.

How far away was this crazy church? Grandma said it wouldn’t take Hugo much more than fifteen minutes, since there was a decent road all the way. Although she kept an eye out for unicorns, Kendra saw no fanciful creatures. Everything was hiding.

The sun dipped below the horizon. Grandma was pointing. Up ahead, in the middle of a clearing, sat an old-fashioned church house. It was a boxy structure with a row of large windows fanged with broken glass and a single

cupola that probably contained a bell. The roof sagged. The wooden walls were gray and splintered. There was no guessing what the original color might have been. A short flight of warped steps led up to an empty doorway, where double doors had once granted access. It looked like a perfect lair for bats and zombies.



Hugo slackened his pace, and they came to a stop in front of the shadowy doorway. The church was completely still. There was no sign anybody had been there in a hundred years.

“I’d rather have the sun, but at least we still have some light,” Grandma said, using a tool to set the silver-headed arrow to the string of her undersized crossbow and pull it into position. “Let’s get this over with as soon as we can. Evil likes darkness.”

“Why is that?” Seth asked.

Grandma thought about the question a moment before answering. “Because evil likes to hide.”

Kendra did not appreciate the tingles she got when Grandma said that. “Why don’t we talk about happy things?” she suggested as they climbed down from the wagon.

“Because we’re hunting witches and monsters,” Seth said.

“Kendra’s right,” Grandma said. “It does us no good to dwell on dark thoughts. But we do want to be on the road and away from here before the twilight is gone.”

“I still say we should have brought some shotguns,” Seth said.

“Hugo!” Grandma said. “Lead the way quietly into the basement. Protect us from harm, but do not kill.”

Kendra felt comforted just looking at the hulking goliath of earth and stone. With Hugo as their champion, she could not picture anything giving them much trouble.

The steps groaned beneath Hugo as he climbed them. Stepping gingerly, he ducked through the large doorway. The others followed, staying close to their massive bodyguard. Grandma draped a red scarf over the crossbow, apparently to conceal it.

Please let Muriel not be here, Kendra prayed silently. Please let us just find Grandpa and Lena and nothing else!

The inside of the church was even gloomier than the exterior. The decaying pews had been smashed and overturned, the pulpit at the front had been thrown down, and the walls were graffitied with maroon scrawlings. Spiderwebs festooned the rafters like gossamer banners. Amber light from the sunset found entry through the windows and some irregular holes in the roof, but not enough to dispel the murkiness. There was no token indicating that this had once been a house of worship. It was just a big, dilapidated, vacant room.

The floorboards creaked as Hugo tiptoed toward a door on the far side of the chapel. Kendra found herself worrying that the floor would give way and Hugo would take an abrupt shortcut to the basement. He had to weigh a thousand pounds.

Hugo eased the corroded door open. Since the doorway was of a normal size, he had to crouch and twist in order to squeeze through.

“Everything will be fine,” Grandma said, placing a bracing hand on Kendra’s shoulder. “Stay behind me.”

The stairs wound down and ended at a doorway without a door. Light poured through into the stairwell. Peering around Hugo as he contorted to pass through the doorway, Kendra glimpsed that they were not alone. As she followed Grandma Sorenson into the spacious basement, the implications of the scene began to register.

The room was cheerfully illuminated by no fewer than two dozen bright lanterns. It had a high ceiling and sparse furnishings. Grandpa Sorenson and Lena were each shackled spread-eagle to the wall.

A peculiar figure stood in front of Grandpa and Lena. Fashioned entirely of smooth, dark wood, it looked like a primitive puppet not much shorter than Grandpa. Instead of proper joints, the wooden parts were connected by golden hooks at the wrists, elbows, shoulders, neck, ankles, knees, hips, waist, and knuckles. The head made Kendra think of a wooden hockey mask, though that was not quite right, because it was cruder and simpler. The unusual mannequin was dancing a little jig, arms swaying, feet tapping and shuffling, gazing toward the far end of the basement.

“Is that her limberjack?” Seth asked quietly.

Of course! It was Muriel’s creepy dancing puppet, only much bigger, and no longer guided by a rod in its back!

At the far side of the basement was a large alcove. It looked like someone had torn down some planks to access the niche. A net of knotted ropes crisscrossed the alcove, preventing a view inside the dismal recess. A dark form loomed beyond the ropes. A tall, beautiful woman with a lustrous cascade of honey-blond hair stood beside the recess blowing on one of the many knots. She wore a spectacular azure gown that emphasized her seductive figure.

The striking woman was surrounded by what looked like human-sized versions of the imps Kendra had seen in Muriel’s shack. They were all

facing the alcove, staring at the ground. They ranged from five to six feet tall. Some were fat, some were thin, a few were muscular. Some had crooked backs, or humps, or horns, or antlers, or bulging cysts, or tails. A couple were missing a limb or an ear. All had scars. All had weathered, leathery skin and nubs instead of wings. At the feet of the human-sized imps were a multitude of the tiny, fairy-sized versions.

The air shimmered. A pair of black wings made of smoke and shadow unfurled from the alcove. Kendra experienced the sense of vertigo that had overwhelmed her when they were changing Grandma back from being a hen. It seemed like the alcove was growing more distant, like she was looking at it through the wrong end of a telescope. A burst of darkness momentarily eclipsed the steady luminance of the lanterns, and suddenly, in the midst of where all the imps were focusing their attention, a new human-sized imp sprouted up.

Kendra covered her mouth with both hands. The beautiful woman had to be Muriel. Bahumat was imprisoned by a web of knotted ropes, similar to the rope that had trapped her, and she was using wishes to increase the size of her imps, gradually freeing the demon in the process!

“Hugo,” Grandma said softly. “Incapacitate the imps and capture Muriel, on the double.”

Hugo charged forward.

An imp turned and let out a disgusting yowl, and others spun to face the intruders, revealing cruel, devilish faces. The gorgeous blonde turned, eyes widening in surprise. “Seize them!” she shouted.

There were more than twenty of the big imps, and ten times that many small ones. Led by the biggest and most muscular of the lot, they rushed at Hugo, a motley mob of wiry fiends.

Hugo met them in the center of the room. With fluid precision, he snatched the leader by the waist with one hand, seizing both feet with the other, and twisted briskly in opposite directions. Hugo tossed the howling leader aside as the others descended on him.

Fists flailing like battering rams, Hugo sent imps sailing in wild cartwheels. They swarmed, making agile leaps to land on his shoulders and scratch at his head. But Hugo just kept twirling and twisting and heaving, a violent ballet that sent as many imps as pounced on him careening across the basement.

Some of the imps nimbly dodged around him to sprint toward Grandma and Kendra and Seth. Hugo whirled and charged after them, grabbing a pair of them by the knees and then wielding them like clubs to swat others away.

The resilience of the imps was impressive. Hugo would fling one into the wall, and the tenacious creature would stumble to its feet and wade back in for more. Even the burly leader was still in the fray, staggering awkwardly on mangled legs.

Looking beyond the tumult, Kendra noticed Muriel blowing on a knot. “Grandma, she’s up to something.”

“Hugo,” Grandma cried. “Leave the imps to us and go capture Muriel.”

Hugo hurled the imp he was holding. The whining creature skimmed the ceiling the entire distance to the wall, where it impacted with a revolting crunch. Then the golem dashed at Muriel.

“Mendigo, protect me!” Muriel squealed. The wooden man, who still danced near Grandpa and Lena, sprinted to intercept Hugo.

Free from the indomitable onslaught of the golem, the injured imps converged on Grandma, who placed herself in front of Kendra and Seth. Holding a pouch in one hand, Grandma swung it so that it scattered a twinkling cloud of dust. As the imps reached the cloud, electricity crackled, hurling them back. A few lunged into the cloud, trying to force their way through it, but electricity flared brighter and sent them tumbling. Grandma spread more dust in the air.

Great dark wings were spreading out from the alcove. The air undulated. Kendra felt like she was viewing the basement from far away, through a narrow tunnel.

Hugo had almost reached Muriel. The overgrown limberjack dived at the golem’s feet, using both arms and legs to entangle Hugo’s ankles. The golem toppled forward. Hugo kicked free of Mendigo, sending the wooden puppet skidding across the floor, then rose to his knees and reached for Muriel. His outstretched hands were inches from taking hold of her when a thunderclap shook the basement, accompanied by a brief moment of blackness. The massive golem crumbled into a pile of rubble.

Muriel brayed in triumph, eyes crazed, delirious at having so narrowly avoided Hugo’s clutches. Off to one side of the room, Mendigo sat up. The puppet had lost an arm at the shoulder. He picked up the limb and reattached it.

Muriel's eyes sharpened as she sensed certain victory. "Bring them all to me," she trumpeted.

A red scarf fluttered to the floor. Grandma Sorenson raised the crossbow in one hand while scattering the last of the contents of her pouch with the other. She discarded the pouch and stepped forward into the glittering dust cloud, gripping the crossbow in both hands.

The arrow took flight. Mendigo sprang, desperately trying to block the dart, but Hugo had knocked the puppet too far away. Muriel shrieked and toppled back against the net of knotted ropes, a manicured hand covering the front of her shoulder. She rebounded forward, falling to her knees, panting, still clutching her shoulder, black feathers protruding between her slender fingers. "You will pay for that sting!" she screamed.

"Run!" Grandma Sorenson shouted to the children.

Too late. Eyes closed, lips moving soundlessly, Muriel stretched forth a bloody hand, and a gust of wind stripped away the sparkling dust. The injured imps rushed in, seizing Grandma Sorenson roughly.

Seth sprang forward, throwing a handful of dust over Grandma and the imps. Lightning crackled and the imps stumbled away.

"Mendigo, bring me the boy!" Muriel called.

The wooden servant charged toward Seth, racing on all fours. The imps had fanned out, several clustering near the door to prevent escape. Seth flung dust as Mendigo leaped. The electric cloud repelled the puppet. At the same time, an imp darted in from behind, knocking the pouch from Seth's grasp with a chopping motion.

The tall imp twisted Seth around, grabbed his upper arms, and hoisted him into the air so they were staring eye to eye. The imp hissed, mouth open, black tongue dangling grotesquely.

"Hey," Seth said, recognition dawning. "You're the fairy I caught!"

The imp draped Seth over its shoulder and ran toward Muriel. Another imp seized Grandma to bring her to the witch.

Kendra stood frozen with terror. Imps surrounded her. Escape was impossible. Hugo had been reduced to a pile of debris. Grandma had missed with the arrow, wounding but not killing Muriel. Seth had done his best, but he and Grandma had been captured. There was no more defense. No more tricks. Nothing between Kendra and whatever horrors Muriel and her imps wished to inflict.

Except that the imps were not taking hold of her. They stood all around her, yet they seemed unable to reach out their hands and grab her. They would lift their arms part of the way and then stop, as if their limbs refused to obey.

“Mendigo, bring me the girl,” Muriel commanded.

Mendigo shouldered through the imps. His hand stretched toward her and then stopped, wooden fingers twitching, hooks clinking softly.

“They can’t touch you, Kendra,” Grandpa called from where he hung shackled to the wall. “You have caused no mischief, worked no magic, inflicted no harm. Run, Kendra, they can’t stop you!”

Kendra pushed between a pair of imps, heading for the door. Then she stopped short. “Can’t I help you?”

“Muriel is not bound by the laws restraining her minions,” Grandpa shouted. “Run all the way home, straight down the road you came by. Do no harm along the way! Don’t stray from the path! Then get off the property! Ram the gate with my truck! Fablehaven will fall! One of us has to survive!”

Muriel, clutching her wounded shoulder, was already in pursuit. Kendra raced up the stairs and dashed across the chapel to the front door.

“Child, wait!” called the witch.

Kendra paused at the threshold of the church and looked back. Muriel leaned in the doorway that led to the base-ment. She looked pale. Blood drenched the arm of her gown.

“What do you want?” Kendra said, trying to sound brave.

“Why rush off in such a hurry? Stay, we can talk this through.”

“You don’t look so good.”

“This trifle? Loosing a single knot will mend it.”

“Then why haven’t you done it?”

“I wanted to talk before you hurried away,” the witch soothed.

“What is there to talk about? Let my family go!” demanded Kendra.

“I may, in time. Child, you do not want to run off into the woods at this late hour. Who can say what horrors await out there?”

“They can’t beat what’s going on in here. Why are you releasing that demon?”

“You could never understand,” said Muriel.

“Do you think it will be your friend? You’re going to end up chained to the wall along with the others.”

“Make no speeches about matters far beyond your comprehension,” Muriel snapped. “I have made covenants that will place me in a position of unfathomable power. After biding my time for long years, I feel my hour of triumph at hand. The evening star is rising.”

“Evening star?” Kendra repeated.

Muriel grinned. “My ambitions extend far beyond hijacking a single preserve. I am part of a movement with much broader objectives.”

“The Society of the Evening Star.”

“You could never imagine the designs already in motion. I have been locked away for years, yes, but not without means of communicating with the outside world.”

“The imps.”

“And other collaborators. Bahumat has been orchestrating this day since his capture. Time has been our ally. Watching and waiting, we have quietly leveraged countless opportunities to gradually secure our release. No prison stands forever. At times our efforts have borne little fruit. On gladder occasions, we have toppled many dominoes with a single nudge. When Ephira succeeded in coaxing you to open the window on Midsummer Eve, we were hopeful that events would unfold much as they have.”

“Ephira?”

“You looked into her eyes.”

Kendra cringed. She did not appreciate a reminder of the translucent woman in the gauzy black garments.

Muriel nodded. “She and others are about to inherit this sanctuary, a vital step toward reaching our ultimate ends. After decades of persistence, nothing can forestall me.”

“Then why not just let my family go?” Kendra pleaded.

“They would try to interfere. Not that they could at this point—they had their chance and failed—but I will take no risks. Come, face the end with your loved ones, instead of alone in the night.”

Kendra shook her head.

Muriel extended her uninjured arm. The fingers, red with her own blood, contorted into an unnatural shape. She spoke in a garbled language

that made Kendra think of angry men whispering. Kendra ran out of the church, down the steps, and over to the wagon. She paused to look back. Muriel did not appear in the doorway. Whatever spell the witch had tried to cast apparently had no effect.

Kendra raced down the road. The sunset was still fairly bright. They had been inside the church for only a few minutes. Tears began to blind her, but she kept running, unsure whether she was being pursued.

Her whole family was lost! Everything had happened so fast! One moment Grandma was confidently offering assurance; the next, Hugo was destroyed and Seth and Grandma were captured. Kendra should have been captured as well, except she had been so overcautious since arriving at Fablehaven that she was still apparently shielded by the full power of the treaty. The imps had not been able to lay a finger on her, and Muriel had been too injured to give proper chase.

Kendra looked back along the empty road. The witch would have cured the injury by now, but would probably not come after her until freeing Bahumat, since Kendra had such a big head start.

Then again, Muriel could possibly use magic to catch up with her. But Kendra suspected that the urgency of unleashing the demon would prevent Muriel from giving chase for now.

Should she turn around and head back? Try to rescue her family? How? Throw rocks? Kendra could envision nothing but certain capture if she were to return.

But she had to do something! When the demon was released, it would destroy the treaty, and Seth would die, along with Grandpa, Grandma, and Lena!

The only possibility she could think of was returning to the house and trying to find a weapon in the attic. Could she remember the combination to the vault door? She had watched Grandma open it an hour ago, heard her speak the numbers aloud. She could not recall them, but felt she might once she saw it.

Kendra knew she was without hope. The house was miles away. How many? Eight? Ten? Twelve? She would be lucky to make it there, let alone back, before Bahumat was free.

There were many knots, and it looked like Muriel could undo only one at a time. Each knot seemed to take at least a few minutes. But still, at that

rate, it would be a matter of hours, not days, before the demon was free.

At least finding a weapon at the house was a goal. No matter how desperate the odds, it gave her a direction to head and a reason for going there. Who knew what the weapon would be, or how she would use it, or whether she could even get into the attic? But at least it was a plan. At least she could tell herself there was a brave reason for running away.



A Desperate Gamble

Dreading nightfall did nothing to prevent it. The sunset diminished and disappeared, until Kendra had only the light reflected from half a moon to guide her. The night grew cooler, but not cold. The forest was swathed in gloomy shadow. Occasionally she heard unsettling sounds, but she never caught sight of what made them. Although she glanced back frequently, the road behind remained as empty as the road ahead.

Kendra alternated between jogging and walking. Without landmarks, it was difficult to discern how much ground she was covering. The dirt road seemed to stretch on forever.

She worried about Grandma Sorenson. Since she had shot Muriel and used Hugo to cripple the imps, there would probably be no protection for Grandma from similar torture. Kendra began to wish she had accepted Muriel's invitation to stay at the church with her family. The guilt of being the only escapee was almost too much to bear.

It was hard to calculate the passage of time. The night wore on, as endless as the road. The moon gradually migrated across the sky. Or was it

the road changing direction?

Kendra felt certain she had been on the road for hours when she reached an open area. The moonlight showed a scant trail branching away from the road. It ran toward a tall, shadowy hedge.

The pond with the gazebos! Finally, a landmark. She could not be more than half an hour from the house, and there was still no hint of dawn.

How long before Bahumat would be set free? Maybe the demon was already loose. Would she know when it happened, or would she not find out until she was mobbed by monsters?

Kendra rubbed her eyes. She felt weary. Her legs did not want to walk any farther. She noticed that she was very hungry. She stopped and stretched for a minute. Then she started jogging. She could run the rest of the way, right? It wasn't too far.

As she passed the meager trail branching from the road, Kendra skidded to a halt. A new thought had occurred to her, inspired by the irregular hedge looming off to the side of the road.

The Fairy Queen had a shrine on the island in the middle of the pond. Wasn't she supposed to be the most powerful person in all the fairy world? Maybe Kendra could try asking her for help.

Kendra folded her arms. She knew so little about the Fairy Queen. Apart from hearing that the queen was powerful, she had heard only that to set foot on her island meant certain death. Some guy had tried it and turned into dandelion seeds.

But why was he trying it? Kendra did not think she had been given a specific reason, just that he had a desperate need. But the fact that he had tried meant he thought he might succeed. Maybe he just didn't have a good enough reason.

Kendra considered her need. Her grandparents and brother were about to be killed. And Fablehaven was about to be destroyed. That would be bad for the fairies too, wouldn't it? Or would the fairies not care? Maybe they would just go elsewhere.

Indecisive, Kendra stared at the faint trail. What weapon did she expect to find at the house? Probably nothing. So she would most likely end up crashing through the gate or climbing it to get away before Bahumat and Muriel caught up and finished her off. And her family would perish.

But this Fairy Queen idea might work. If the queen was so powerful, she would be able to stop Muriel and maybe even Bahumat. Kendra needed an ally. Despite her noble intentions, she could not see any way she could succeed on her own.

Kendra had felt a new sensation inside ever since the idea had popped into her head. The feeling was so unexpected that it took a moment to recognize it as hope. There were no combination locks in the way. She just had to throw herself at the mercy of an all-powerful being and plead for her family.

What was the worst that could happen? Death, but on her terms. No bloodthirsty imps. No witches. No demons. Just a big poof of dandelion fluff.

What was the best possibility? The Fairy Queen could turn Muriel into dandelion seeds and rescue Kendra's family.

Kendra started down the trail. She felt butterflies in her stomach. It was an encouraging kind of nervousness, much preferable to the dread of certain failure. She started running.

No crawling under the hedge this time. The path led to an archway. Kendra ran under the archway and onto the manicured lawn beyond.

By moonlight the whitewashed pavilions and boardwalk were even more picturesque than during the day. Kendra really could envision a Fairy Queen living on the island at the center of the tranquil pond. Of course, the queen didn't actually live there. It was just a shrine. Kendra would have to go petition her and hope the queen would respond.

Getting to the island would be the first challenge. The pond was full of naiads who liked to drown people, which meant she needed a sturdy boat.

Kendra hurried across the lawn toward the nearest gazebo. She tried to ignore the shifting shadows she saw ahead—various creatures ducking out of sight. Anticipating what she was about to attempt, Kendra felt like her intestines were caught in an eggbeater. She forced away all fear. Would Grandpa turn and flee? Would Grandma? Would Seth? Or would they try their best to save her?

She charged up the steps of the nearest pavilion and started running along the boardwalk. Her shoes pounded noisily against the boards, defying the silence. She saw her destination—the boathouse, three gazebos away.

The surface of the lake was a black mirror reflecting the moonlight. A few twinkling fairies hovered just above the water. Otherwise there was no sign of life.

Kendra reached the pavilion attached to a small pier. She dashed down the steps and out onto the quay. She reached the boathouse and tried the door. Just like before, it was locked. The door was not big, but it looked sturdy.

Kendra kicked it hard. The impact jolted up the length of her leg, making her wince. She rammed the door with her shoulder, again hurting herself instead of the door.

Kendra stepped back. The boathouse was basically a large shed floating on the water. It had no windows. She hoped it still had boats inside. If it did, they would be sitting in the water, protected by walls and a roof but no floor. If she jumped into the lake, she could surface inside the boathouse and climb into a boat.

She studied the water. The black, reflective surface was impenetrable. There could be a hundred naiads waiting in ambush, or none—it was impossible to tell.

The whole plan would be pointless if she drowned before reaching the island. Based on what she had heard from Lena, there would be naiads eagerly waiting for her to get near the water. Jumping in would be suicide.

She sat down and started bucking the door with both feet, the same method Seth had used to break into the barn. She made a lot of noise, but did not seem to be harming the door at all. Kicking harder only made her legs hurt more.

She needed a tool. Or a key. Or some dynamite.

Kendra ran back up to the pavilion, searching for something she could use to pry the door open. She saw nothing. If only there were a sledgehammer lying around.

She tried to calm herself. She had to think! Maybe if she just kept pounding, the door would eventually give. Sort of like erosion. But it hadn't budged yet, and she didn't have all night. There had to be a smarter solution. What did she have to work with? Nothing! Nothing but a few shadowy creatures who ducked out of sight at her approach.

"Okay, listen up!" she shouted. "I know you can hear me. I have to get inside the boathouse. A witch is setting Bahumat free, and all of Fablehaven

is going to be destroyed. I'm not asking for anybody to stick their necks out. I just need somebody to beat down the boathouse door. My grandfather is the caretaker here, and I give you full permission. I am going to turn my back and close my eyes. When I hear the door break, I'll wait ten seconds before turning back around."

Kendra turned around and closed her eyes. She heard nothing. "Anytime, just smash down the door. I promise I won't look."

She heard a gentle splash and a tinkling sound.

"Okay! Sounds like we have a taker! Just break down the door."

She heard nothing. She suddenly realized that something could have emerged from the water and be sneaking up behind her. Unable to resist, she turned and peeked.

No dripping creatures were in sight. All was quiet. There were ripples on the previously glassy pond. And lying on the dock near the boathouse was a key.

Kendra rushed down the stairs and picked up the key. It was wet, corroded, and a little slimy. Longer than a regular key, it looked old-fashioned.

Wiping it against her shirt, she carried the key to the boathouse and inserted it in the keyhole. It fit perfectly. She turned it, and the door swung inward.

Kendra shivered. The implications were disturbing. Apparently a naiad had tossed her the key. They wanted her out on the water.

With only the moonlight seeping through the door to provide illumination, the boathouse was very dim. Squinting, Kendra could see three boats tied to the narrow pier: two large rowboats, one slightly broader than the other, and a smaller paddleboat. The paddleboat was the kind with bicycle pedals. Kendra had once ridden in one at a park with a lake.

On one wall hung several oars of varying length. Near the door were a crank and a lever. Kendra tried to turn the crank, but it would not move. She pulled the lever. Nothing happened. She tried the crank again, and this time it turned. A sliding door on the opposite side of the boathouse from the dock began to open, letting in more light. Kendra kept cranking, relieved that she would be able to paddle a boat directly out of the boathouse onto the pond.

Standing in the gloom of the boathouse, staring out the open door at the pond, Kendra began to doubt. She felt nauseated with fear. Was she really prepared to go to her death? To have naiads drown her, or to fall victim to a spell protecting a forbidden island?

Grandpa and Grandma Sorenson were resourceful. They might have already escaped. Was she doing this for nothing?

Kendra remembered an occasion three years ago at a community pool. She had desperately wanted to jump off the high dive. Her mom had warned her that it was higher than it looked, but nothing could dissuade her. Many kids were jumping off it, several her age or younger.

She stood in line at the base of the ladder. When her turn came, she started climbing, amazed at how much higher she seemed with each step. When she arrived at the top, she felt like she was standing on a skyscraper. She wanted to turn back, but all the kids in line would know she was scared. Plus her parents were watching.

She walked forward along the diving board. There was a slight breeze. She wondered if the people on the ground could feel it. When she approached the end of the board, she stared down at the rippling water. She could see all the way to the bottom of the pool. Jumping no longer seemed like a fun thing to do.

Realizing that the longer she hesitated, the more attention she would draw, she turned around quickly and descended the ladder, trying to avoid eye contact with the people waiting in line at the bottom. She had not been up a high dive since. In fact, she rarely took any sort of risk.

Once again she was standing on the brink of something frightening. But this was different. Jumping off a high dive, or riding a roller coaster with multiple loops, or passing a note to Scott Thomas—those were all voluntary thrills. There was no real consequence to avoiding the risk. In her current situation, her family would probably die if she failed to act. She had to stand by her previous decision and carry out her plan, regardless of the consequences.

Kendra considered the oars. She had never rowed a boat and could easily picture herself floundering, especially if nasty naiads were giving her a hard time. She examined the paddleboat. Designed for a single passenger, it was wider than it needed to be, presumably for additional stability. The

childish craft was not nearly as big as the rowboats, and she would be close to the water, but at least Kendra thought she could maneuver it.

Kendra sighed. Kneeling, she untied the little boat, tossing the slender rope onto the seat. The paddleboat wobbled when she stepped aboard, and she had to crouch and use her hands to avoid falling into the water. The bottom of the novelty craft was completely closed, which meant nothing could grab at her feet.

After getting situated, Kendra sat facing the dock. There was a steering wheel to control lateral movement. Turning the wheel all the way to one side, she pedaled backwards and slid away from the dock. Cranking the wheel the other way, she started pedaling forward, and the boat quietly slid out of the boathouse.

Ripples radiated out from the front of the paddleboat as she steered it toward the island, pedaling briskly. The island was not far—maybe eighty yards. The paddleboat moved steadily closer to her destination. Until it started moving *away* from the island.

She pedaled harder, but the boat kept sliding diagonally backward. Something was towing her. The boat began to spin. Turning the wheel and paddling did nothing. Then the boat suddenly tilted precariously to one side. Something was trying to tip her!

Kendra leaned to prevent the boat from capsizing, and the boat abruptly rocked the other way. Kendra changed position, counterbalancing desperately. She saw wet fingers holding the side of the boat and slapped at them. The action was rewarded by giggling.

The boat began to rotate quickly. “Leave me alone!” Kendra demanded. “I have to get to the island.” This earned a longer titter from multiple voices.

Kendra paddled furiously, but it did no good. She kept spinning and getting hauled in the wrong direction. The naiads started rocking the boat again. Thanks to the low center of gravity, Kendra found that leaning was enough to prevent the boat from capsizing, but the naiads were relentless. They tried to distract her by banging the bottom of the vessel and by waving at her. The boat pitched and rocked and spun, and then suddenly the naiads would heave in earnest, trying to catch her off balance. Time after time, Kendra reacted quickly, shifting her weight to spoil their attempts to flip her. It was a stalemate.

The naiads did not show themselves. She heard their laughter and glimpsed their hands, but never saw a face.

Kendra decided to quit paddling. It was getting her nowhere, and wasting energy. She resolved to exert herself only to keep the boat from tipping.

The attempts grew less frequent. She said nothing, made no response to the taunting giggles, ignored the hands on the side of the boat. She simply leaned as needed when they tried to tip the boat. She was getting better at it. They were not able to tilt it as much.

The attempts stopped. After about a minute of no activity, Kendra started paddling toward the island. Her progress was soon halted. She quit paddling immediately. The naiads spun her and rocked her some more.

She waited. After another minute of tranquility she paddled again. Again they pulled her away. But less eagerly. She sensed them giving up, getting bored.

On her eighth try using this technique, the naiads apparently lost interest. The island grew closer. Twenty yards. Ten yards. She expected them to stop her at the last moment. They didn't. The front of her paddleboat scraped against the shore. Everything remained still.

The moment of truth had arrived. When she set foot on the island, either she would transform into a cloud of dandelion fluff and drift away, or she wouldn't.

Almost indifferent at this point, Kendra leaped out of the boat and landed on the shore. There did not seem to be anything magical or even special about it, and she did not turn into a cloud of seeds.

There was, however, a barrage of laughter from behind her. Kendra whirled in time to see her paddleboat drifting away from the island. It was already too late to do anything without jumping into the water. She slapped herself on the forehead with the heel of her hand. The naiads had not given up—they were trying a different strategy! She had been so distracted by the prospect of becoming dandelion fluff that she had not hauled the boat out of the water as she should have. She could have at least kept hold of the rope!

Well, one more favor to ask the Fairy Queen.

The island was not large. It took only about seventy paces for Kendra to walk around the edge of it. Her tour of the perimeter revealed nothing interesting. The shrine was probably near the center.

Although the island had no trees, it had many shrubs, many of them taller than Kendra. There were no trails, and pressing through them was irritating. What would the shrine look like? She pictured a little building, but after crisscrossing the island a few times, she realized there was no such structure.

Maybe she had not turned to dandelion seeds because the island was a hoax. Or maybe the shrine was no longer here. Either way, she was stranded on a tiny island in the middle of a pond full of creatures who wanted to drown her. What would drowning feel like? Would she actually inhale water, or just pass out? Or would the demon get her first?

No! She had come this far. She would look again, more carefully. Maybe the shrine was something natural, like a special bush or stump.

She walked around the perimeter of the island again, more slowly this time. She noticed a thin trickle of water. It was strange to find a stream, no matter how small, on such a tiny island. She followed the stream toward the center of the island until she found the place where it came bubbling out of the ground.

There, at the source of the spring, was a two-inch-tall statue of a fairy, finely carved. It rested on a white pedestal that added a few more inches to the height. A small silver bowl sat in front of it.

Of course! Fairies were so tiny, it made sense that the shrine would be miniature as well!

Kendra fell to her knees beside the spring, directly in front of the small figurine. The night was very still. Looking to the sky, Kendra noticed that the eastern horizon was turning purple. Night was coming to an end.

All Kendra could think to do was pour her heart out in complete sincerity. "Hello, Fairy Queen. Thank you for letting me visit you without changing me into dandelion seeds."

Kendra swallowed. This felt weird, talking to a diminutive statue. There was nothing regal about it. "If you can help me, I really need it. A witch named Muriel is about to set free a demon named Bahumat. The witch has my Grandpa and Grandma Sorenson prisoner, along with my brother, Seth, and my friend Lena. If that demon gets out, it will wreck this whole preserve, and there is no way I can stop it from happening without your help. Please, I really love my family, and if I don't do something, that demon is going to, he's going to—"

The reality of what she was saying hit her like a great weight and spilled out as tears. For the first time, the fact that Seth was going to die fully entered her mind. She thought of moments with him, both endearing and annoying, and realized that there would be no more of either.

She shook with sobs. Hot tears streamed down her cheeks. She let them come. She needed the release, to stop trying to suppress the horror of it all. The tears she had shed while fleeing the Forgotten Chapel had been of shock and terror. These were tears of realization.

Tears slid down her chin and plopped into the silver bowl. Her breathing came in ragged gasps between sobs. "Please help me," she finally managed.

An aromatic breeze drifted over the island. It smelled of rich soil and new blossoms, with just a hint of the sea.

Her crying began to subside. Kendra brushed the tears from her cheeks and wiped her nose on her sleeve. She sniffed, amazed at how swiftly congestion could appear.

The miniature statue was wet. Had she cried on it? No! Water was seeping from its eyes, trickling down into the silver bowl.

The air stirred again, still redolent with potent aromas. Kendra inexplicably sensed a presence. She was no longer alone.

I accept your offering, and join you in weeping.

The words were not audible, but they struck her mind with such a forceful impression that Kendra gasped. She had never experienced anything similar. Clear fluid continued to leak from the statue into the bowl.

From tears, milk, and blood, devise an elixir, and my handmaidens will attend you.

The tears were obvious. All Kendra could picture was Viola for the milk. Whose blood? Her own? The cow's? The handmaidens had to be the fairies.

"Wait, what do I do?" Kendra asked. "How do I get off the island?"

In reply, the wind swirled for a moment, and then gusted. The pleasant aromas vanished. The little statue no longer wept. The indefinable presence had departed.

Kendra picked up the bowl. About the size of her palm, it was nearly a third of the way full. She had hoped the Fairy Queen would resolve the

situation for her. Instead she had apparently shown her a way to resolve the problem herself. The telepathic message felt as precise as spoken words. Her family was still in danger, but the spark of hope was now a flame.

How would she get off the island? Rising, Kendra walked to the shore. Unbelievably, the paddleboat was drifting in her direction. It steadily approached until reaching the island.

Kendra stepped inside the boat. It pulled away from the shore spontaneously, turned around, and started toward the little white pier.

Kendra said nothing. She did not paddle. She was afraid to do anything that might disrupt the effortless progress to the pier. She held the bowl in her lap, careful not to spill a drop.

Then she saw it, a dark figure standing on the pier, awaiting her return. A puppet the size of a man. Mendigo.

Her throat constricted with fear. She had worked magic on the island! Getting the tears from the statue—that was magic, right? Her protected status was finished. And Mendigo had come to apprehend her.

“Can you drop me off someplace else?” she asked.

The boat moved steadily forward. What could she do? Even if they dropped her off elsewhere, Mendigo would just follow.

The boat was twenty yards from the pier, then ten. She had to protect the contents of her bowl. And she could not let Mendigo haul her away. But how could she stop him?

The paddleboat brushed up against the pier, coming to a stop alongside it. Mendigo made no move to grab her. He seemed to be waiting for her to disembark. Kendra set the bowl on the pier and stood up, noticing that the boat was being held steady.

When she stepped onto the pier, Mendigo moved forward, but as before, he could not seem to grab her. He stood with both arms half-raised, fingers fluttering. Kendra picked up the bowl and walked around the limberjack. Mendigo followed her along the length of the pier.

Why would Muriel have sent Mendigo after her if he could not seize her? Did Muriel know she had communed with the Fairy Queen? If so, the puppet sure moved quickly. His being there was probably precautionary.

The problem it posed was severe. Evidently Kendra had not actually worked magic on the island; she had merely collected an ingredient. But in

concocting the elixir the Fairy Queen described and giving it to the fairies, she would certainly be performing magic. The moment her protected status ended, Mendigo would be on her.

That was not an option.

Kendra set the silver bowl on the steps leading up to the gazebo. Then she turned and confronted Mendigo. The puppet was more than half a head taller than her. “I think you work like Hugo. You have no brain and just do what you’re told. Is that right, Mendigo?”

The limberjack stood still. Kendra tried not to get creeped out. “I have a feeling you won’t obey me, but it’s worth a try. Mendigo, go climb a tree and sit up there forever.”

Mendigo stood motionless. Kendra walked straight at him. He was trying to lift his arms to grab her, but was unable to carry out the intention. Standing close to him, she reached out a tentative finger and touched his wooden torso. He did not react, except to continue struggling against whatever force prevented him from seizing her.

“You can’t touch me. I haven’t done anything mean or used any magic. But I can touch you.” She gently stroked both of his arms just beneath the shoulders. The limberjack jittered with the effort of trying to grasp her.

“Want to see my second decisive move of the night?” she asked. Mendigo quivered, hooks jingling, but remained powerless to take hold of Kendra. Unconsciously biting her lower lip, she grabbed both arms just below the shoulders, unhooked them, and dashed away from the limberjack. She heard the overgrown puppet chasing her as she raced to the edge of the pond and hurled the wooden arms into the water.

Something clipped Kendra’s shoulder and sent her spinning to the ground. A crushing force pressed against her back, pinning her down. She could hardly breathe. Craning her neck, she saw Mendigo looming over her, using his foot to hold her in place. How could a creature that looked so flimsy be so strong? The spot where he had kicked her stung deep—it would certainly bruise.

Kendra reached for his other leg, hoping to unhook the shin, but the puppet danced out of reach. For a moment Mendigo appeared indecisive. Kendra prepared to roll away in case he charged and tried to kick her again. If she could just unhook a leg!

Instead, Mendigo hurried onto the pier. Both of his arms were floating on the water. One had almost drifted within reach of the pier. Mendigo crouched, balancing carefully on one foot, and stretched out a leg toward the nearest arm.

Just as his toes made contact, a white hand shot out of the water and seized Mendigo by the ankle, yanking him into the pond with a splash. Kendra waited, holding her breath as she watched. The limberjack did not resurface.

She dashed back to the steps and picked up the bowl. Kendra dared not run while holding the tears. Instead she walked swiftly, careful not to waste any of her precious cargo. She walked across the lawn, through the arch, down the path, and onto the road.

Stars continued to fade in the eastern sky. Kendra hurried along the road. She was pretty sure her sheltered status was at an end. But, if mischief had to be done, at least it had felt worthwhile. She had a feeling it would not be her final mischievous act of the night.

Chapter 18



Bahumat

By the time Kendra reached the barn, a predawn gray dominated the eastern horizon. Her journey from the pond had been uneventful. Not a drop had spilled from the silver bowl. She went around to the little door Seth had kicked open and ducked inside.

The titanic cow stood munching hay from the loft. Every time Kendra saw Viola, she marveled anew at her enormity. The cow's udder was bloated, nearly as badly as the first time they had milked her.

Kendra had the tears. Now she needed milk and blood. Since the Fairy Queen had been communicating mentally, Kendra trusted her first impressions. The milk would have to be Viola's. And the blood? Her own? The cow's? Probably both to be safe. Maybe both were required. But first the milk.

Kendra set the silver bowl in a protected corner and retrieved one of the ladders. She intended to steal only a few squirts. There was no time for a proper milking.

Kendra had never tried to collect Viola's milk. She and Seth had simply been relieving pressure for the cow and letting it spill all over the floor. There were plenty of barrels, but trying to dump a barrel into a little silver bowl seemed tricky. And considering that she would be sliding down a teat to get milk out, it seemed like it would be hard to avoid falling in the barrel herself.

She located a large pie tin, the kind Dale used to leave milk around the yard. Perfect. Small enough to dodge, but big enough to catch all the milk she would need. She positioned the tin under the teat, trying to estimate where the milk would squirt.

Kendra climbed the ladder and jumped, embracing the fleshy teat. Milk gushed to the floor. Only a little splashed into the tin. She adjusted the tin, climbed the ladder, and tried again. This time was a direct hit, filling the tin almost to the brim, and she even managed to keep her feet on the landing.

Kendra brought the tin over to the silver bowl. She poured milk until the bowl was three-quarters of the way full. Only blood remained.

Viola mooed thunderously, apparently upset at having her milking abruptly halted right after it began. "You're going to moo louder than that," Kendra muttered under her breath.

How much blood would she need? The Fairy Queen had not specified quantities. Kendra went through the closets looking for tools. She ended up with a weed digger and another pie tin. Getting enough blood to pour from a pie tin into the bowl would be disgusting, but she was scared that if she tried to put blood from the source directly into the bowl she would end up spilling everything.

"Viola!" Kendra called. "I don't know if you can understand me. I need some of your blood in order to save Fablehaven. This might sting a little, so try to be brave."

The cow gave no sign of comprehension. Kendra returned to the teat she had been milking. It was the one area not protected by fur, so she figured it would be the best place to harvest some blood.

She climbed the ladder only a couple of steps. She wanted to stab the teat low, so it would drip. If she had found a knife, she would have tried to make a cut. The only thing sharp about the weed digger were the points at the end, so she would have to go with a puncture wound.

Up close, as she contemplated stabbing it, the pink teat looked alien. She needed to stab hard. On an animal this big, the skin would be pretty thick. She told herself it would just feel like a thorn to the enormous cow. But would she want somebody jabbing a thorn into her? The cow would probably get upset.

Kendra raised the weed digger, holding the pie tin in her other hand. “Sorry, Viola!” she yelled, plunging the weed digger into the spongy flesh. The tool sank almost to the handle, and Viola made a terrified bellow.

The heavy teat swung into Kendra, slamming her off the ladder. She kept hold of the weed digger, wrenching it free of the wound as she fell. The ladder clattered to the floor beside her.

Viola sidestepped and tossed her head, bellowing again. The barn shook, and Kendra heard timbers splitting. The roof shuddered. The walls swayed and cracked. Kendra covered her head. Gigantic hooves thumped against the floor, and Viola let out a long, plaintive moo. Then the cow settled down.

Kendra looked up. Dust and hay floated down from above. Blood trickled down the teat, already dripping from the tip.

Since Viola had calmed down, and the blood was flowing freely, Kendra cast aside the pie tin and retrieved the silver bowl. Standing under the teat, she started catching drops of blood. She had toured a cave with her family once, and the sight reminded her of water dripping from a stalactite.

Soon the mixture in the bowl turned from white to pink. The flow of blood slowed. The lower side and tip of the teat were stained red. Kendra supposed it was enough.

She went and sat by the little door. Now for her blood. Maybe she could just try the cow blood and see if that worked. No, haste was essential. How would she get blood out? No way was she using the weed digger unless she could sterilize it.

Leaving the bowl, she hunted through the closets again. She noticed a safety pin on a pair of coveralls. She unpinning it and ran back to the bowl.

Holding her hand over the bowl, she hesitated. Kendra had always hated needles, the idea of being fully aware that something was about to hurt but having to endure it calmly. But today was not a day to be squeamish. Gritting her teeth, she stuck her thumb with the pin and then squeezed two drops of blood into the mixture. That would have to do.

Kendra looked at the pie tin. She should probably drink some milk herself, since a new day was beginning. She took a sip. Then she realized that her family would need milk as well when she found them.

There had been bottled water in one of the closets. Kendra hurried to the closet, selected a bottle, unscrewed the cap, dumped the contents, and filled it with milk from the pie tin. The bottle barely fit in her pocket.

Kendra retrieved the small silver bowl. Swirling the solution a bit, she exited the barn. Predawn colors streaked the horizon. Sunrise was approaching.

Now what? There were no fairies in sight. When the Fairy Queen had given instructions, Kendra had felt no doubt that the handmaidens she referred to were the fairies. She was supposed to make a potion for them that would somehow get them to help her.

What would it do? Kendra realized that she had no idea. What could it do? Win their affection? Then what? Lacking other options, she had to trust the reassurance she had felt when the Fairy Queen spoke to her mind.

First she needed to find fairies. She wandered the garden. There was one, clad in orange and black with matching butterfly wings. "Hey, fairy, I have something for you!" she cried.

The fairy darted over to her, looked at the bowl, started chirping in a squeaky voice, and zoomed away. Kendra roamed until she found another fairy, and ended up with an identical reaction. The fairy acted excited and then flew away.

Soon multiple fairies were flying up to Kendra, peeking in the bowl, and then soaring off. They were apparently spreading the news.

Kendra ended up beside the metal statue of Dale. She set the bowl on the ground and backed away, in case her proximity might discourage the fairies. The morning grew brighter. Before long, dozens of fairies hovered around the bowl. They were no longer showing up only to zip away. A crowd was forming. Occasionally one would fly right up to the bowl and peer inside. One even laid a tiny hand on the rim. But none took a drink. Most stayed several feet away.

The crowd swelled to more than a hundred. Still they would not drink. Kendra tried to be patient. She did not want to frighten them away.

Suddenly the sound of a mighty wind interrupted the quiet morning. Kendra felt no breeze, but she could hear a shrieking gale in the distance.

As the sound of the wind tapered off, a ferocious roar echoed across the yard. The fairies scattered.

It could mean only one thing. “Wait, please, you have to drink this! Your queen had me make it for you!” The fairies darted around in confusion. “Hurry, time is running out!”

Whether it was her words or simply that they were no longer startled, the fairies gathered around the bowl again. “Try it,” Kendra said. “Have a taste.”

None of the fairies took her up on her offer. Kendra dipped a finger into the bowl and sampled the elixir. She tried not to make a disgusted face—it tasted salty and nasty. “Mmmm . . . delicious.”

A fairy with raven black hair and bumblebee wings approached the bowl. Mimicking Kendra, she dipped a finger and tasted it. In a whirling shower of sparks the fairy grew to nearly six feet tall. Kendra smelled the fertile aroma that had accompanied the Fairy Queen. The enlarged fairy blinked in astonishment, then glided high into the air.

The other fairies mobbed the bowl. A blizzard of sparks flashed across the yard as the fairies transformed into much larger versions of themselves. Kendra backed away, shielding her eyes from the dazzling pyrotechnics. In moments, she was surrounded by a glorious host of human-sized fairies, some standing on the ground, most hovering.

The fairies were uniformly tall and beautiful, with the lithe musculature of professional ballerinas. They wore vivid, exotic apparel. They still had magnificent wings. They still emitted light, although the gentle twinkle had become a brilliant blaze. The biggest change was in their eyes. Merry mischief had been replaced by something stern and smoldering.

A fairy with lustrous silver wings and short blue hair alighted in front of Kendra. “You have summoned us to war,” she announced in a heavy accent. “What is your bidding?”

Kendra swallowed. A hundred human-sized fairies took up much more space than a hundred tiny ones. They used to be so cute. Now they were quite imposing. She would not want to be the enemy of these proud seraphim.

“Can you restore Dale?” Kendra asked.

A pair of fairies crouched over Dale, placed their hands on him, and then helped him to his feet. He regarded Kendra with befuddled wonder,

patting himself, as if surprised he was intact. “What’s going on?” he asked. “Where’s Stan?”

“The fairies healed you,” Kendra said. “Grandpa and the others are still in trouble. But I think these fairies will help us.”

Kendra returned her gaze to the stunning silver fairy. “Muriel the witch is trying to release a demon named Bahumat.”

“The demon is free,” the fairy said. “You have but to command.”

Kendra pressed her lips together. “We have to lock him up again. The witch, too. And we have to rescue my Grandpa and Grandma Sorenson, and my brother, Seth, and Lena.”

The blue-haired fairy nodded and issued instructions in a musical language. Some of the fairies began rummaging in nearby plants. They pulled out weapons. A yellow fairy produced a crystal sword from the soil of a flowerbed. A violet fairy transformed a thorn from a rosebush into a spear. The silver fairy with blue hair changed a snail shell into a beautiful shield. The petal of a pansy became a blazing ax in her other hand.

“This is your will,” the silver fairy confirmed.

“Yes,” Kendra said firmly.

All together, the fairies took flight. Kendra turned to watch them go. Then a hand grabbed her left arm and another seized her right and she was soaring between two fairies—a slender albino with black eyes and a blue, furry fairy. Kendra recognized the blue one as the downy fountain sprite she had seen in Grandpa’s office.

The sudden acceleration took her breath away. They cruised low to the ground, skimming over bushes, dodging tree trunks, and swishing past branches. Flying near the rear, Kendra marveled at the squadron of fairies ahead of her effortlessly weaving through obstacles at such reckless speed.

The exhilaration was overwhelming. The wind of their velocity brought tears to her eyes. The pond with the gazebos streaked by beneath her. At this rate, they would reach the Forgotten Chapel in moments.

But what about when they got there? Bahumat was supposed to be incredibly powerful. Even so, considering the legion of fierce fairies surrounding her, Kendra liked her odds.

Glancing back, Kendra saw no fairies behind her. They had apparently left Dale in the yard.

The mad dash through the forest continued until the fairies ahead swooped skyward. Kendra's escorts followed, rocketing up beyond the treetops. The sudden ascent left her mouth dry and her stomach tingling.

And then she was no longer moving. Kendra and her escorts hovered above the treetops, watching the others plunge toward the Forgotten Chapel. Kendra tried to recover from the thrill of flying and digest what was happening below.

Four winged creatures were rising to meet the fairies. The huge gargoyles were at least ten feet tall, with razor claws and horns like rams. A few fairies broke off from the main group to intercept them. The winged beasts clawed at their smaller opponents, but the fairies adroitly evaded the blows and slashed off their wings, sending the gargoyles hurtling to the ground.

Something flashed in Kendra's eyes. The sun was peeking over the horizon. "Let's go," Kendra said to her escorts.

The fairies dove. Kendra felt her stomach rise to her throat as they plunged toward the church. Human-sized imps were spilling out of the front doorway, shaking their fists and hissing at the incoming fairies. Many of the fairies cast their weapons aside and soared straight at the imps, catching them in vicious embraces and kissing them on the mouth. In radiant bursts of sparks, every imp that was kissed transformed into a human-sized fairy!

Kendra saw the silver fairy with blue hair plant a kiss on an obese imp. The imp instantly metamorphosed into a plump fairy with coppery wings. As the silver fairy glided away, the plump fairy tackled another imp, forced a kiss, and in a flash the imp became a thin, Asian-looking fairy with hummingbird wings.

The fairies streamed into the church. Most did not bother with the door. They glided through windows or smashed through the corroded roof.

Kendra's escorts held her over a gap in the roof. She saw fairies kissing imps. Other fairies drove back a variety of foul beasts. One fairy used a golden lash to send a toadlike monstrosity crashing through the wall. Another fairy grasped a scabby beast by its mane of white hair and hurled it through a window. A gray fairy with mothlike wings chased a brawny minotaur out the front door with a scalding blast of steam from the end of her rod. Many of the unsavory creatures voluntarily fled before the terrible onslaught.

Others fought back.

A demonic dwarf with a hide of black scales bounded around the room wreaking havoc with a pair of knives. A rampaging atrocity that looked like a cross between a bear and an octopus battered fairies with its thrashing tentacles. A greasy creature coughed globs of slime into the air. It had the general appearance of a large tortoise without a shell, its body an amoeboid puddle beneath a long neck. Several fairies crashed to the church floor, wings snarled in the goopy substance.

The undaunted fairies counterattacked. The bottom half of the dwarf was turned to stone. Tentacles severed, the octobear retreated. A torrent of water flushed away the greasy creature. Some fairies attended their fallen comrades, healing injuries and washing away slime.

As the room cleared, fairies charged through the door to the basement.

“Take me to the basement!” Kendra said. Her escorts immediately responded, nearly giving Kendra whiplash as they plummeted into the church and glided to the basement door. The fairies had to tuck in their wings to descend the stairs, so Kendra ran down beside the furry fairy and the albino.

The basement had expanded. A massive excavation and renovation had occurred. It was deeper, broader, and longer. The alcove at the far side had grown as well, now completely unfettered by knotted ropes.

The basement was not lighted as brightly as before, although the fairies carried their own luminescence with them. Hideous carvings sneered from the walls. One corner was piled with strange treasures—jade idols, spiked scepters, and jeweled masks.

Kendra scanned the room for her family. The easiest to spot was Seth. He was inside an enormous jar with breathing holes punched in the lid. There were some leaves and branches in it with him. He had grown no taller, but he looked a hundred years old. Saggy wrinkles creased his face, and he had only a few wisps of white hair left atop his head. He placed a pruned palm against the glass.

Kendra guessed that the orangutan chained to the wall was Grandpa. The large catfish swimming in the tank beside him was probably Lena. She saw no sign of Grandma.

Flanked by her fairy escorts, Kendra dashed toward her family. Scores of hideous imps scuffled with fairies. Those fights did not last long as kisses

transformed the imps back into their original forms.

Kendra reached the gigantic jar. “Are you all right, Seth?”

Her elderly brother nodded feebly. His smile showed that he had no teeth.

A snarling imp pounced at Kendra. The blue, furry fairy caught the creature in midflight, pinning its arms to its sides. It resembled the same imp that had apprehended her brother earlier. The albino fairy flew up and gave the imp a kiss on the mouth, and it became a striking fairy with fiery red hair and iridescent dragonfly wings.

Seth began tapping on the glass. He was pointing excitedly at the fairy. Kendra realized that it was the fairy he had unwittingly transformed.

The redheaded fairy approached the jar, shaking a scolding finger at Seth. “I’m sorry,” Seth mouthed from inside the container. He clasped his hands and made pleading motions. The fairy regarded him through narrowed eyes. Then she snapped her fingers, and the jar shattered. She leaned forward and kissed Seth on the forehead. His wrinkles smoothed and his hair filled in until he promptly looked like himself again.

Kendra pulled the bottle of milk from her pocket and handed it to Seth. “Save some for Grandma and Grandpa.”

“But I can see—”

An earsplitting roar shook the room. A creature who could only have been Bahumat emerged from the alcove. The loathsome demon stood three times as tall as a man and had the head of a dragon crowned by three horns. The demon walked upright, possessing three arms, three legs, and three tails. Oily black scales bristling with barbed spikes covered its grotesque body. Malevolent eyes gleamed with wicked intelligence.

To one side of Bahumat floated the spectral woman Kendra had seen outside her window on Midsummer Eve. Her ebony wrappings flowed unnaturally, as if she were underwater. The unearthly apparition made Kendra think of a negative photograph.

At the other side of Bahumat stood Muriel, now clad in a gown as black as midnight. She leered at the fairies and glanced confidently at the towering demon.

No imps remained in the room. A crowd of shining fairies faced these final opponents.

Bahumat crouched. Inky darkness gathered around him. The demon sprang forward with a roar like a thousand cannons firing together. A black wall of shadow flowed from Bahumat like a wave of tar. Total darkness engulfed the room. Kendra felt like she had been struck blind. Even with her hands over her ears, the prolonged bellowing of the demon was practically deafening.

There seemed to be no substance to the shadow Bahumat had emitted. It was just darkness. Where were the fairies? Where was their light?

The ground rumbled, and a sound like an avalanche overpowered the demon's roar. Suddenly daylight flooded the room. Looking up, Kendra beheld a blue sky. The slanted rays of the rising sun fell into the basement. The entire church had been hurled aside!

Descending from above, and charging from all directions, fairies swarmed Bahumat. The demon slashed a fairy with one of its tails, raked another with an impossibly quick swipe of its claws. Jaws snapping, the creature swallowed a yellow fairy whole. Many fairies were falling. While the majority attacked, other fairies laid hands on the injured, curing most of them rapidly.

Muriel stood in a theatrical pose chanting spidery words. A pair of fairies near her turned to glass and shattered. She extended a contorted hand, and another fairy turned to ash and disintegrated in a gray cloud.

Long streamers of ebony fabric flowed from the spectral woman, entangling nearby fairies. The ensnared fairies began to lose their luster and wither. The silver fairy appeared, slicing through the fabric with her ax of fire. Other fairies joined her, using gleaming swords to sever the black material.

The fairies swirling around Bahumat now held ropes. They looked like the ropes that had crisscrossed the front of the alcove, except now they appeared to be woven out of gold. Bahumat kept roaring and swinging and biting, but the ropes were beginning to tangle him up. Knots were forming in them. The draconic creature was slowing down. His great jaws clamped shut, tearing off the gauzy wing of a fairy with markings like a ladybug.

The spectral woman turned and drifted away, her ethereal wrappings no longer quite as flowing. The fairies ignored her departure. A pair of fairies had taken hold of Muriel, and they flung her at Bahumat. Soon she was

bound to the demon by flaxen cords. She screeched as her body shriveled with age and her gown turned to rags.

Three fairies alighted atop the demon's head. They each grabbed a horn and tore it out. The demon wailed. Dozens of fairies seized the ropes binding the demon and hurled Bahumat back into the alcove. Busily the fairies began threading knotted ropes back and forth over the entrance.

Kendra turned. The blue, furry fairy gestured toward the orangutan, and the shackles binding it to the wall fell apart. Another gesture and a burst of light changed the orangutan into Grandpa Sorenson.

The albino fairy pulled the convulsing catfish from the aquarium and changed her back into Lena. "Where's my Grandma?" Kendra cried.

The red-haired fairy who had freed Seth approached the aquarium. She lifted out a small, putrid slug that had been clinging to the side above the water and changed it back into Grandma.

Grandma Sorenson massaged her temples. "And I thought my mind was muddy as a chicken," she muttered. Grandpa hurried over and embraced her.

"Do you need milk?" Kendra asked, holding out the bottle to her grandfather.

He shook his head. "We have not slept, and so the veil has not yet covered our eyes."

A group of fairies gathered near the alcove, extending their arms, palms downward. Soil, clay, and stone began flowing together and piling up until Hugo was reborn. The golem stretched and let out a groan to rival the roars of the banished demon.

The fairies busily healed one another, mending wings and closing wounds. One circle of fairies spread their arms, and fragments of glass skittered together, took the form of a pair of fairies, and came back to life. Several other fairies joined hands and started humming. Particles of ash swirled loosely in their midst, but refused to coalesce. The fairies released one another, and the ash dissipated. Some fairies, it seemed, were beyond rescue.

Several fairies took hold of Hugo and lifted him out of the basement. Others did the same for Grandpa, Grandma, Lena, Seth, and Kendra. Airborne again, Kendra had a view of the destroyed church. The wreckage

spread across the clearing for a couple hundred yards. The Forgotten Chapel had not simply been flung aside—it had been obliterated.

The fairies set them down a good distance from the wreckage and the basement. All except Lena. Two fairies were carrying her away. The former naiad was having harsh words with them in a foreign tongue, struggling in their grasp.

Kendra touched Grandpa Sorenson's arm and nodded toward the commotion.

"Nothing to be done about it," he sighed as the fairies hauled Lena away. He had an arm around Grandma, holding her close.

"Hey!" Kendra shouted. "Bring Lena back here!" The fairies holding Lena paid her no heed, passing out of sight into the woods.

The remainder of the fairies assembled above the basement, floating in an enormous ring. They had more than tripled their numbers with all the imps they had reclaimed. Kendra had seen many fairies fall during the battle, but most had been revived and healed by the magic of their comrades.

The radiant fairies raised their arms together and started singing. The music sounded impromptu, full of hundreds of interweaving melodies with almost no harmonies. As they sang, the ground in the clearing began to undulate. The wreckage from the church slid across the field, clattering into the open basement. The ground began to quake. The walls of the basement crumbled. The surrounding area folded in and swallowed it up. The field heaved like a stormy sea.

As the undulations subsided, the basement had been replaced by a low hill. The fairy choir became more shrill. Wildflowers and fruit trees began sprouting throughout the clearing and on the hill, coming to full bloom in a matter of seconds. Flowers blossomed all over Hugo, who offered no reaction. When the singing finally ceased, a cheery hill covered by a fragrant array of brilliant blossoms and mature fruit trees had replaced the Forgotten Chapel.

"They made Hugo look all fruity," Seth complained.

The legion of fairies glided toward them, scooped them up, and carried them on a breakneck flight for home. Kendra relished being part of the mercurial procession, overjoyed at the fortunate ending to the terrible night.

Seth whooped the whole way, as if he were riding the coolest roller coaster on the planet.

Finally the fairies deposited them in the yard, where Dale stood waiting. “Now I’ve seen everything,” he said as Grandpa and Grandma Sorenson were set down beside him.

The fairy with short blue hair and silver wings stood before Kendra. “Thank you,” Kendra said. “You did wonderfully. We can never repay you.”

The silver fairy gave a single nod, eyes glittering.

As if responding to a signal, the fairies crowded Kendra, each in turn giving her a quick kiss. As each kiss was bestowed, the fairy reverted to her former size amid dazzling sparks and darted away. The rapid succession of kisses brought overpowering sensations. Again Kendra smelled the earthy aromas of the Fairy Queen—rich soil and young blossoms. She tasted honey and fruit and berries, all sweet beyond comparison. She heard the music of rainfall, the cry of the wind, and the roar of the sea. She felt as if the warmth of the sun were embracing her, flowing through her. The fairies kissed her eyes, her cheeks, her ears, her brow.

When the last of more than three hundred fairies kissed her, Kendra stumbled backwards and sat down hard on the grass. She felt no pain. In fact, she was mildly surprised that she did not float away, she felt so light and drowsy.

Grandpa and Dale helped Kendra to her feet. “I would wager that this young lady has quite a story to tell,” Grandpa said. “And I would also wager that now is not the time. Hugo, attend to your labors.”

Dale was helping Kendra to the house. She felt euphoric and distant. She was glad her family was safe. But she felt so inexplicably blissful, and the troubles of the evening seemed so remote, that she began to wonder whether it had all been a surreal dream.

Grandpa was holding hands with Grandma. “I’m sorry it took so long to get you back,” he said softly.

“I can guess at the reasons,” she said. “We need to talk about you eating my eggs.”

“They weren’t your eggs,” Grandpa protested. “They were the eggs of the hen your mind was inhabiting.”

“I’m glad you can be so detached.”

“There may still be a couple in the fridge.”

Kendra stumbled on her way up the porch steps. Grandpa and Dale helped her onto the porch and into the house. The furniture was back! Nearly all of it had been restored, with some alterations. A couch had been reconstructed as a chair. Some lampshades were made of different material. Jewels had been added to a picture frame.

Could the brownies have worked so fast? Her eyes were drooping. Grandpa was holding Grandma’s hand, whispering something in her ear. Seth was chattering, but the words made no sense. Dale held her shoulders, guiding her. They were almost to the stairs, but she could not keep her eyes open. She felt herself falling, and hands catching her, and then consciousness fled.



Farewell to Fablehaven

Kendra and Grandpa reclined in the wagon while Hugo pulled them down the road at a leisurely pace. The morning was clear and bright, with a few thin, high clouds barely clinging to existence, accidental brush strokes on a blue canvas. The day would be hot, but for now it was pleasant.

A couple of fairies drifting alongside the wagon waved at Kendra. She waved back and they sped away, weaving around one another. The garden now teemed with fairies, and they paid Kendra a lot of special attention. They seemed pleased whenever she acknowledged them.

“We haven’t really gotten to talk since it all happened,” Kendra said.

“You were sleeping half of the time,” Grandpa replied. It was true. She had slept for two days and two nights straight after the ordeal—a personal best.

“All those kisses knocked me out,” she said.

“You excited to see your parents?” asked Grandpa.

“Yes and no.” It was the third day since Kendra had awakened. Her parents were coming to pick them up this afternoon. “Going home will

seem bland after all this.”

“Well, you’ll have fewer demons to worry about.”

Kendra smiled. “True.”

Grandpa folded his arms. “What you did was so special, I don’t know how to speak about it.”

“It barely seems real.”

“Oh, it was real. You mended an irreparable situation, and saved all of our lives in the process. The fairies have not gone to war for centuries. In that state, their power is virtually unrivaled. Bahumat did not stand a chance. What you did was so brave, and so doomed to failure, I can’t think of anyone I know who would have even tried it.”

“It felt like my only hope. Why do you think the Fairy Queen helped me?”

“Your guess is as good as mine. Maybe to save the preserve. Maybe she sensed the sincerity of your intentions. Your youth must have helped. I’m sure fairies would much rather follow a little girl into battle than some pompous general. But the truth is, I never would have guessed it would have worked. It was a miracle.”

Hugo stopped the cart. Grandpa climbed down and then helped Kendra. She held the silver bowl that she had taken from the island. They started down a faint path toward an archway in a tall, unkempt hedge.

“Weird how I don’t have to drink the milk anymore,” Kendra said. On the morning she awoke after the fairy kisses, when she went to the window, she saw fairies fluttering about. It had taken a moment to register that she had not yet consumed any milk that day.

“I’ll admit that it worries me somewhat,” Grandpa said. “Creatures of whimsy are not solely confined to the preserves. The blindness of mortals can be a blessing. Take care where you look.”

“I’d rather see things how they are,” Kendra declared. They passed under the archway. A group of satyrs were playing tag with several slender maidens wearing flowers in their hair. The paddleboat was adrift in the middle of the pond. Fairies skimmed the surface of the water and soared among the gazebos.

“I’ll be curious to know what other changes the fairies wrought in you,” Grandpa said. “I’ve never heard of such a thing. You’ll let me know if

you discover any other oddities?”

“Like if I turn Seth back into a walrus?”

“I’m glad you can joke about it, but I’m serious.”

They walked up the steps to the nearest pavilion. “Just toss it in?”
Kendra asked.

“I think it would be best,” Grandpa said. “If the bowl came from that island, you should give it back.”



Kendra threw the bowl like a Frisbee. It landed in the water. Almost immediately a hand shot up and snatched it.

“That was quick,” Kendra said. “It will probably end up down with Mendigo.”

“The naiads respect the Fairy Queen. They’ll make sure the bowl ends up where it belongs.”

Kendra looked at the pier.

“She may not know you,” Grandpa said.

“I just want to say good-bye, whether she gets it or not.”

They walked along the boardwalk until they reached the gazebo adjoining the pier. Kendra walked out to the end of the pier. Grandpa stayed a few steps behind her. “Remember, not too close to the water.”

“I know,” Kendra said. She leaned forward to look down into the pond. It was much clearer than it had been at night. She jumped a little when she realized that the face looking up at her was not her reflection. The naiad looked like a girl of about sixteen, with full lips and a profusion of golden hair swirling about a face shaped like a valentine.

“I want to talk to Lena,” Kendra said loudly, overpronouncing the words.

“She may not come,” Grandpa said.

The naiad kept staring up at her. “Get Lena, please,” Kendra repeated. The naiad swam away. “She’ll come,” Kendra asserted.

They waited. Nobody came. Kendra studied the water. She turned her hands into a megaphone around her mouth. “Lena! This is Kendra! I want to speak with you!”

Several minutes passed. Grandpa waited with her patiently. Then a face rose almost to the surface of the water, right at the end of the dock. It was Lena. Her hair was still white with a few black strands. Though she looked no younger, her face had the same ageless quality.

“Lena, hi, it’s Kendra, remember?”

Lena smiled. Her face was barely an inch from the surface.

“I just wanted to say good-bye. I really enjoyed our talks. I hope you don’t mind being a naiad again. Are you mad at me?”

Lena motioned for Kendra to come closer. She put her hand by her mouth like she wanted to share a secret. Her almond eyes looked mirthful and excited. They did not match the white hair. Kendra bent down a little.

“What?” Kendra asked.

Lena rolled her eyes and motioned for her to come closer. Kendra crouched a little more, and in the same instant that Lena reached up for her,

Grandpa Sorenson pulled her back.

"I told you," Grandpa said. "She is no longer the woman she was back at the house."

Kendra leaned forward just enough to peer over the edge again. Lena stuck her tongue out and swam away. "At least she isn't suffering," Kendra said.

Grandpa walked her back to the gazebo in silence. "She told me she would never choose to return to life as a naiad," Kendra said after a while. "She said it more than once."

"I'm sure she meant it," said Grandpa. "From where I stood, it didn't look like she went willingly."

"I noticed the same thing. I worried she might be suffering. I thought maybe she needed us to save her."

"Are you satisfied?" Grandpa asked.

"I'm not even sure she remembered me," Kendra admitted. "At first I thought she did, but I bet she was faking, trying to get me close enough to drown me."

"Probably."

"She doesn't miss being human."

"Not from her current point of view," Grandpa agreed. "Much like how being a naiad did not sound very fulfilling to her from a mortal perspective."

"Why would the fairies do that to her?"

"I don't think they saw it as a punishment. Lena was probably a victim of good intentions."

"But Lena was arguing with them. She didn't want to go."

Grandpa shrugged. "The fairies might have known that once they restored her, she would change her mind. Looks like they were right. Remember, the fairies experience existence like the naiads. From their point of view, Lena was out of her mind wanting to be mortal. They probably thought they were curing her insanity."

"I'm glad they restored everybody else," Kendra said. "They just restored Lena too much."

"Are you sure? She was a naiad to begin with."

“She didn’t like the idea of aging. At least she won’t die now. Or get any older.”

“No, she won’t.”

“I still think she would rather be human.”

Grandpa frowned. “You may be right. Truth be told, if I knew a way to reclaim Lena, I would. I believe once she was mortal again, she would be grateful. But a naiad can only descend to mortality voluntarily. In her current state, I doubt she would make that choice. I am sure she is very disoriented. Perhaps in time she will gain some perspective.”

“What’s it like for her?”

“No way to be sure. For all I know, this is a unique occurrence. Her memories of mortality are apparently distorted, if she retains them at all.”

Kendra unconsciously twisted the sleeve of her shirt, a pained expression on her face. “So we just leave her there?”

“For now. I will do some research and give the matter considerable thought. Don’t tear yourself up about it. Lena would not want that. The alternative was being devoured by a demon. She looked all right to me.”

They started back toward the wagon. “What about the Society of the Evening Star?” asked Kendra. “Are they still a threat? Muriel said she was in contact with them.”

Grandpa pinched his bottom lip. “The Society will be a threat as long as it endures. It is difficult for an uninvited guest to gain access to a preserve—mortal or not. Some would say impossible, but the Society has shown repeated resourcefulness at circumventing so-called impossible obstacles. Fortunately we foiled their attempt to use Muriel to free Bahumat and overthrow the preserve. But we now know they have learned the whereabouts of Fablehaven. We will have to be more vigilant than ever.”

“What secret artifact is hidden here?”

“It is unfortunate that your grandmother had to share that secret with you. I realize it was a precaution in case both of us were incapacitated, but the knowledge is a terrible burden to place on children. You must never speak of it. I have tried to impress that idea on Seth as well—heaven help us all. I am the caretaker of Fablehaven, and I know little about the artifact save that it is hidden somewhere on this property. If members of the Society of the Evening Star are aware that the artifact is here, and we have every

reason to believe they are, they will stop at nothing to penetrate our defenses and lay their hands on it.”

“What will you do?” Kendra said.

“What we always do,” Grandpa said. “Consult with our allies and take every measure to ensure that our defenses remain intact. The Society has known the location of dozens of preserves for centuries and yet has failed to infiltrate them. They may pay us extra attention, but unless we let our guard down, there is little they can do.”

“What about that ghost lady? The one who escaped while the fairies were trapping Bahumat?”

“I do not know her story, except that she was obviously colluding with our enemies. I have never met many of the dark beings who lurk in the inhospitable corners of Fablehaven.”

They reached the wagon. Grandpa boosted Kendra up and then climbed in himself. “Hugo, take us home.”

They rode in silence. Kendra considered all they had discussed—the fate of Lena and the impending threat of the Society of the Evening Star. The fateful night that had seemed like the end of her problems was starting to look like the beginning.

Up ahead, off to the side of the road, Dale was chopping a fallen tree into firewood. Drenched in sweat, he swung the ax aggressively. As the wagon rolled by, he glanced up at Kendra. She smiled and waved. Dale gave a tight smile and looked away, returning to his chore.

Kendra frowned. “What’s up with Dale lately? Do you think being turned to lead traumatized him?”

“I doubt he felt a thing. He’s beating himself up over something else.”

“What?”

“Don’t say a word about this to him.” Grandpa paused, glancing back toward Dale, then went on speaking. “He feels bad that his brother Warren wasn’t present when the fairies were curing everybody.”

“Grandma said Dale’s brother is catatonic. I still haven’t met him. Could the fairies have helped?”

Grandpa shrugged. “Considering that they put Lena back in the water, changed imps back into fairies, and remade Hugo out of a pile of rubble, yes, I imagine they could have cured Warren. Theoretically, any magic that

can be done can also be undone.” Grandpa scratched his cheek. “You have to understand, last week I would have said there was no possible way of curing Warren. Believe me, I have investigated the subject thoroughly. But I’ve never heard of an imp changing back into a fairy, either. It simply doesn’t happen.”

“I wish I’d thought of it,” Kendra said. “Warren didn’t even cross my mind.”

“Not your fault in the slightest. Warren just wasn’t in the right place at the right time. I’m grateful the rest of us were.”

“How did Warren get like that?”

“That, my dear, is part of the problem. We have no idea. He disappeared for three days. On the fourth he returned, white as a sheet. He sat down in the garden, and hasn’t said a word or responded to anyone since. He can chew food, and walk if you lead him. He can even do some simple chores if you get him started. But no communication. His mind has flown.”

Hugo stopped at the edge of the yard. Grandpa and Kendra climbed down. “Hugo, see to your chores.” The golem hauled the cart away.

“I’m going to miss this place,” Kendra said, taking in the bright flowers attended by glittering fairies.

“Your grandmother and I have waited a long time to find somebody like you among our posterity,” Grandpa said. “Trust me. You’ll be back.”

* * *

“Kendra,” Grandma called up the stairs. “Your folks are here!”

“I’ll be right down.” Kendra sat alone on her bed in the playroom. Seth was already downstairs. She had packed her bags and helped him with his.

Kendra sighed. When her parents had first dropped her off, she had counted the days until their return. Now she almost felt reluctant to see them. Since they knew nothing about the magical nature of the preserve, there was no way they could possibly relate to what she had experienced. The only person she could share it with was Seth. Anyone else would think she was insane.

Just thinking about it made her feel isolated.

Kendra crossed the room to the painting she had done of the pond. It was a perfect keepsake from her stay—a paint-by-numbers drawn by a naiad depicting the location of the bravest act of her life.

Yet she hesitated to bring it. Would the image stir too many painful memories? Many of her experiences here had been dreadful. She and her family had nearly been killed. And she had lost a new friend when Lena was returned to the pond.

At the same time, the painting might make her long for the enchanted world of the preserve. So many aspects of Fablehaven were wonderful. Life would seem so dry after the extraordinary events of the past couple of weeks.

Either way, the painting might cause her pain. But of course those memories would persist with or without the picture of the pond. She picked it up.

The rest of her bags were already downstairs. She cast a final glance around the playroom, treasuring up the details, and walked out the door. She went down the stairs, along the hall, and started down the staircase to the entry hall.

Her mom and dad stood in the entry hall smiling up at her. They had notably gained weight, especially Dad—he looked twenty pounds heavier. Seth stood near Dad clutching his painting of the dragon.

“You did a painting too!” Mom exclaimed. “Kendra, it’s gorgeous!”

“I had help,” she said, reaching the bottom of the stairs. “How was the cruise?”

“We made a lot of memories,” Mom said.

“Looks like Dad ate plenty of snails,” Seth said.

Dad rubbed his belly. “Nobody warned me about all the desserts.”

“You ready, honey?” Mom said, putting an arm around Kendra.

“Aren’t you going to look around?” Kendra asked.

“We walked the grounds a bit while you were upstairs, and toured the lower rooms. Was there something in particular you wanted to show us?”

“Not really.”

“We should probably get going,” Dad said, opening the front door. Not too many days ago that door had been mangled and an arrow had protruded from the frame.

Outside, Dale was loading the last of the bags into the SUV. Grandma and Grandpa waited nearby on the driveway. Dad helped Kendra and Seth load their paintings while Mom thanked Grandma and Grandpa Sorenson profusely.

“It was our pleasure,” Grandma said earnestly.

“You’ll have to let them visit again sometime soon,” Grandpa insisted.

“I’d like that,” Kendra said.

“Me too,” Seth agreed.

Seth and Kendra hugged their grandparents good-bye and then climbed into the SUV. Grandpa winked at Kendra. Dad started the engine. “You kids have a good time?”

“Yeah,” Seth said.

“Amazing,” Kendra added.

“Remember how worried you were when we dropped you off?” Mom said as she buckled her seatbelt. “I bet it wasn’t half as scary as you imagined.”

Kendra and Seth shared a very special look.

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Most important, a special acknowledgment to my enchanting wife, Mary, and my beautiful children, Sadie and Chase. Thank you for giving my life something to revolve around besides the sun.

Reading Guide

The following questions may be useful in promoting discussion about some of the themes and ideas found in *Fablehaven*. They are intended as a starting point for interactions in classrooms and with reading groups.

1. There can be great protection from exact obedience. How was this principle reinforced for Seth? For Kendra? How does the principle of obedience function in your life?

2. Kendra was generally a rule keeper, Seth a rule breaker. How did their attitudes evolve over the course of the book? What are advantages to both attitudes? Disadvantages?

3. Consequences serve an essential role for maintaining order and justice and harmony. How do laws help to keep order in Fablehaven? How were Kendra and Seth affected by the consequences of their decisions? How have the consequences of past decisions helped or hindered you?

4. Many of the problems in Fablehaven arose as a result of decisions the characters made, often without bad intentions. Sometimes, what we don't know *can* hurt us. How was that true for Kendra and Seth? Are there similar examples in the world around you?

5. It can be a challenge to find the courage to do what we fear the most. What enabled Kendra to do something that terrified her? What circumstances do you find most intimidating? How do you find the strength to make it through difficult situations?

6. Circumstances arose where many of the characters in Fablehaven had to risk their lives. Do you think you would risk your life for anything? If so, what?

7. Many of the creatures in Fablehaven have roots in various mythologies, particularly Greek. Can you identify which creatures come from which mythologies? Did you recognize any vocabulary in the book

with mythological roots? What are some common words that come from mythologies?

8. Several of the creatures of Fablehaven personified specific attributes. What did the fairies seem to personify? The satyrs? The cliff troll? What are the strengths and weaknesses of those characteristics?

9. Lena spent part of her life as a naiad, in an unchanging state. What aspects of mortality did she like? What did she dislike? How do you think she felt about being returned to the water? Was it fair for the fairies to do that?

10. Fablehaven existed to help protect and conserve vanishing magical species. Why would that be worthwhile? Why do you suppose Grandpa Sorenson even wanted to protect the dangerous creatures? What non-magical plants or animals in our world are in danger of extinction? What are we doing to protect them?

11. There is a promise at the front of the book that none who enter Fablehaven will leave unchanged. How did their experiences at Fablehaven change Seth and Kendra? What do you take from the book?

These are just a few topics to initiate discussion. We would love to hear your discussion topics, your reactions, and your questions on the message board at Fablehaven.com.

To find out more about all things Fablehaven, or to get in touch with the author, be sure to visit Fablehaven.com

BOOK TWO

Fablehaven: Rise of the Evening Star

FABLEHAVEN

RISE OF THE EVENING STAR



Mull, Brandon, 1974-

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Summary: When Kendra and Seth go to stay at their grandparents' estate,

they discover that it is a sanctuary for magical creatures and that a battle

between good and evil is looming.

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To Mom and Dad,

for their endless love and support

Chapter 1



The New Student

Crowding into homeroom with the other eighth graders, Kendra found her way to her desk. In a moment the bell would ring, signaling the start of the last week of school. One final week and she would leave middle school behind forever and start anew as a high school freshman, mingling with kids from two other junior highs.

A year ago that had sounded like a more exciting prospect than it did now. Kendra had been stuck in a nerd rut since around fourth grade, and a fresh start in high school might have meant an opportunity to shed the quiet, studious image. But this had been a renaissance year. Amazing how swiftly a little confidence and a more outgoing attitude could elevate your social status. Kendra no longer felt as desperate for a new beginning.

Alyssa Carter sat down in the desk next to her. “I heard we get yearbooks today,” she said. She had short blonde hair and a slender build. Kendra had met Alyssa after making the soccer team back in September.

“Great, I looked hypnotized in my picture,” Kendra groaned.

“Yours was adorable. Remember mine? My braces look the size of train tracks.”

“Whatever. You could hardly even notice them.”

The bell rang. Most of the kids were in their seats. Mrs. Price entered the room accompanied by the most disfigured student Kendra had ever

seen. The boy had a bald, scabrous scalp and a face like a chapped welt. His eyes were puckered slits, his nose a malformed cavity, his mouth lipless and crusty. He scratched his arm, crooked fingers lumpy with bulging warts.

The hideous boy was otherwise nicely dressed in a black and red button-down shirt, jeans, and stylish tennis shoes. He stood in front of the class beside Mrs. Price while she introduced him.

“I’d like you all to meet Casey Hancock. His family just moved here from California. It can’t be easy starting at a new school so late in the year, so please give him a warm welcome.”

“Just call me Case,” the boy rasped. He spoke like he was strangling.

“Would you look at that,” Alyssa murmured.

“No kidding,” Kendra whispered back. The poor kid barely looked human. Mrs. Price directed him to a desk near the front of the room. Creamy pus leaked from multiple sores on the back of his scabby head.

“I think I’m in love,” Alyssa said.

“Don’t be mean,” Kendra muttered.

“What? I’m serious. Don’t you think he’s a hottie?”

Alyssa was acting so sincere that Kendra found herself repressing a smile. “That’s just cruel.”

“Are you blind? He’s amazing!” Alyssa sounded genuinely offended that Kendra didn’t agree.

“If you say so,” Kendra placated. “Just not my type.”

Alyssa shook her head as if Kendra were crazy. “You must be the pickiest girl on the planet.”

Morning announcements were droning over the loudspeaker. Case was talking with Jonathon White. Jonathon smiled and laughed. That was strange—Jonathon was a jerk, not the sort of kid to befriend a circus freak. Kendra noticed Jenna Chamberlain and Karen Sommers sharing looks and whispers as if they too found Case attractive. Like Alyssa, they didn’t seem to be joking. Scanning the room, Kendra didn’t see a single student who seemed repulsed by his appearance.

What was going on? Nobody who looked this weird could come into a class without raising any eyebrows.

And suddenly the truth was apparent.

Casey Hancock looked inhumanly deformed and hideous because he was not a human. He had to be some sort of goblin who looked like a normal kid to everybody else. Kendra alone could see his true form, the aftereffect of having been kissed by hundreds of giant fairies.

Since leaving Fablehaven nearly a year ago, Kendra had seen magical creatures only twice. Once she had noticed a bearded man barely a foot tall pulling a length of pipe out of a pile of rubble behind the movie theater. When she tried to move in for a closer look, the tiny man scurried away into a storm drain. On another occasion she spotted what looked like a golden owl with a human face. She made eye contact with the creature for an instant before it took flight in a flurry of gilded feathers.

Such odd sights were usually veiled from mortal eyes. Her Grandpa Sorenson had introduced her to magical milk that enabled people to see through the illusions that normally concealed mystical creatures. When the fairy kisses had made that ability permanent, he had warned Kendra that sometimes it was safer to leave certain things unseen.

And here she was, staring at a grotesque monster posing as a new student in her homeroom! Mrs. Price came down the aisle handing out yearbooks. Kendra doodled absently on one of her book covers. Why was the creature here? Surely it had something to do with her. Unless repulsive goblins routinely infiltrated the public school system. Was he here to spy? To cause trouble? Almost certainly he was up to mischief.

Glancing up, Kendra caught the goblin staring at her over his shoulder. She should be glad to be aware the new kid had a hidden identity, right? The knowledge made her nervous, but it would help her prepare to counter any threat he might pose. With her secret ability, she could keep an eye on him. If she played it cool, Case would have no idea she could see his true form.

* * *

Shaped like a huge box, Roosevelt Middle School was constructed so that in winter the students never needed to go outdoors. Interior hallways connected everything, and the same room where they held assemblies doubled as an indoor cafeteria. But beneath the June sun, Kendra found herself seated outside for lunch with three friends at a circular table connected to curved benches.

Kendra signed Brittany's yearbook while munching on a croissant sandwich. Trina was signing Kendra's, Alyssa was signing Trina's, and Brittany was signing Alyssa's. It was important for Kendra to write a long, meaningful message—after all, these were her best friends. “Have a great summer” might work for acquaintances, but true friends required something more original. The key was to mention specific jokes you had shared, or fun things you had done together during the year. At the moment, Kendra was writing about the time Brittany couldn't stop laughing while trying to give an oral report in History.

Suddenly, uninvited, Casey Hancock plopped down at their table holding a lunch tray loaded with cafeteria lasagna, sliced carrots, and chocolate milk. Trina and Alyssa scooted aside to make room for him. It was almost unprecedented boldness for a lone boy to settle in at a table with four girls. Trina appeared slightly annoyed. Alyssa shot Kendra a look as if she had just won the lottery. If only Alyssa could see what her new crush actually looked like!

“I don't think we've met,” Case announced, his voice pinched and gravelly. “I'm Case. I just moved here.” Just hearing him speak made Kendra's throat sore.

Alyssa introduced herself and the others. Case had been in two of Kendra's classes since homeroom. He had been well received each time he had stood up front for an introduction, particularly by the girls.

Case lifted a forkful of lasagna to his toothless mouth, affording Kendra a glimpse of his narrow black tongue. Watching him chew made her stomach churn.

“So what do you do for fun around here?” Case asked around a mouthful of carrots.

“We start by sitting with people we know,” Trina said. Kendra covered a smile. She had never been so grateful to see Trina giving somebody a hard time.

“Is this the cool kids' table?” Case replied with mock surprise. “I'd planned to start at the bottom and work my way up.” The comeback left Trina speechless. Case winked at Alyssa, to show he meant no harm. For a scab-faced goblin, he was pretty smooth.

“You've been in some of my classes,” Case said to Kendra, wolfing down more lasagna. “English and Math.” It was hard to look into those

squinty eyes and keep her face pleasant.

“That’s right,” Kendra managed.

“I don’t have to take the finals,” he said. “I finished up at my old school. I’m just here to hang out and meet people.”

“That’s how I feel,” Brittany said. “But Kendra and Alyssa get like straight A’s.”

“You know,” Case said, “I hate going to the movies alone, but I have no friends yet. You guys want to catch a show tonight?”

“Sure,” Brittany said.

Kendra was stunned by the outlandish bravado of asking out four girls all at once on the first day at a new school. This was the smoothest goblin of all time! What was he after?

“I’ll come,” Alyssa said.

“Okay,” Trina agreed. “If you’re on your best behavior, I might even let you sign my yearbook.”

“I don’t give autographs,” Case replied offhandedly. “Kendra, you coming?”

Kendra hesitated. How could she sit through an entire movie beside a foul monster? But how could she abandon her friends when she was the only person who knew what they were getting into? “Maybe,” she conceded.

The crusty goblin took a final bite of lasagna. “How about we meet outside the theater at seven? The one on Kendall by the mini mall. Just trust to luck that something good will be playing.” The other girls agreed as he stood up and walked away.

Kendra watched her friends talk animatedly about Case. He had won Alyssa at first sight. Brittany was an easy sell. And Trina was the sort of girl who liked to be catty but then got attracted if the guy stood up to her. Kendra supposed she would have been impressed herself if she didn’t know he was a revolting monster.

There was no way she could tell her friends the truth about Case. Any accusations would sound crazy. But he was almost certainly up to something shady.

There was only one person in her whole town whom Kendra could tell about her situation. And he wasn’t exactly her most reliable acquaintance.

* * *

Seth lined up against Randy Sawyer. Randy was quick, but short. Seth had started the school year a bit shorter than most of the boys in his grade, but was finishing the year taller than average. The best strategy against Randy would be to go long and make the most of his height advantage.

Spencer McCain hiked the football to himself and dropped back. Four boys went out, while four others covered. One defender stayed at the line counting alligators. Seth jukeed like he was going to cut across the field, then raced straight for the end zone. Spencer lofted a high spiral. The pass was a little short, but coming back for it, Seth outjumped Randy and hauled it in. Randy immediately tagged Seth with both hands, downing him just shy of Chad Dupree's sweatshirt, which marked the front of the end zone.

"Third and goal," Spencer declared, jogging down the field.

"Seth!" a voice exclaimed. Seth turned. It was Kendra. His sister didn't usually talk to him at school. Roosevelt Middle School was sixth through eighth grades, so Seth was at the bottom of the pecking order after having ruled his elementary school the previous year.

"Just a second," Seth called to Kendra. The guys were lining up. Seth got into position. Spencer hiked the football to himself, then threw a short interception to Derek Totter. Seth didn't even bother chasing Derek. He was the fastest kid in their grade. Derek dashed all the way to the opposite end zone.

Seth trotted over to Kendra. "Bringing good luck as usual?" he said.

"That was a weak pass."

"Spencer only gets to quarterback because he throws the best spirals. What's up?"

"I need you to come see something," Kendra said.

Seth folded his arms. This was all very uncommon. She wasn't just talking to him at school, she wanted him to go someplace with her?

"We're kicking off!" Randy yelled.

"I'm in the middle of a game," Seth told her.

"This is Fablehaven-type stuff."

Seth turned to his friends. "Sorry! I have to quit for a while." He and Kendra headed off together. "What is it?"

“You know how I can still see magical creatures?”

“Yeah.”

“There was a new student in some of my classes today,” she explained. “He’s pretending to be human, but he’s actually an ugly monster.”

“No way.”

“My friends think he’s cute. I can’t see what he looks like. I want you to describe him to me.”

“Where is he?” Seth asked.

“Over there, talking to Lydia Southwell,” Kendra said, pointing subtly.

“The blond kid?”

“I don’t know. Red and black shirt?”

“He *is* cute!” Seth gushed.

“What does he look like?”

“He has the dreamiest eyes.”

“Knock it off,” Kendra demanded.

“He must be thinking the most beautiful thoughts.”

“Seth, I’m serious!” The bell rang, announcing the end of lunch.

“He’s really a monster?” Seth asked.

“He looks a little like the creature who came in through the window on Midsummer Eve,” Kendra said.

“The one I salted?”

“Yes. What is he pretending to look like?”

“Is this a joke?” Seth asked suspiciously. “He’s just some new kid you have a crush on, isn’t he? If you’re scared, I can go ask for his phone number.”

“I’m not messing around.” Kendra swatted him on the arm.

“He looks athletic. He’s got a dent in his chin. Blond hair. It’s kind of messy, but cool. Like it’s on purpose. He could probably get a part on a soap opera. Good enough?”

“Not bald and covered in scabs and pus?” Kendra verified.

“Nope. Is he really all disgusting?”

“He makes me want to puke. Thanks, see you later.” Kendra hurried away.

Mr. Soap Opera was also moving away, still chatting with Lydia Southwell. For a monster, he had good taste. She was one of the cutest girls in the school.

Seth figured he had better get to class. Mr. Meyers had threatened to give him detention if he was late again.

* * *

Kendra sat in silence as Dad chauffeured her to the movie theater. She had tried to persuade Alyssa not to go. Alyssa had started to act suspicious that Kendra secretly wanted Case all to herself, and since Kendra could not tell her friend the truth, she had to drop it. In the end, Kendra had decided to join them, concluding that she could not leave her friends alone with a scheming goblin.

“What movie are you seeing?” Dad asked.

“We’re going to figure it out when we get there,” Kendra said. “Don’t worry—nothing racy.” Kendra wished she could tell her father about her predicament, but he knew nothing about the magical properties of the preserve Grandpa and Grandma Sorenson managed. He thought it was just a normal estate.

“You’re sure that you’re ready for finals?”

“I’ve been keeping up with my assignments all year. It will just take a quick review. I’ll ace them.” Kendra wished she could talk to her Grandpa Sorenson about the situation. She had tried to call. Unfortunately, the only number her parents had for him led repeatedly to a recorded message informing her that the call could not be completed as dialed. The only other way she knew to contact him was through the mail. So, just in case the phone was out for a while, she had written Grandpa a letter describing the situation, which she planned to mail the next day. It felt good to lay out her predicament to somebody besides Seth, even if it was just on paper. Hopefully she would get through by phone even before the letter arrived.

Dad pulled into the movie theater parking lot. Alyssa and Trina were standing out front. Beside them stood a hideous goblin wearing a T-shirt and khakis.

“How do I know when to pick you up?” Dad asked.

“I told Mom I would call on Alyssa’s cell phone.”

“Okay. Have fun.”

Not very likely, Kendra thought as she stepped out of the SUV.

“Hey, Kendra,” Case rasped. She could smell his cologne ten feet away.

“We were getting worried you weren’t coming,” Alyssa said.

“I’m right on time,” Kendra insisted. “You guys were early.”

“Let’s pick a movie,” Trina said.

“What about Brittany?” Kendra asked.

“Her parents wouldn’t let her come,” Trina said. “They’re making her study.”

Case clapped his hands together. “So what are we seeing?”

They negotiated for a couple of minutes. Case wanted to see *Medal of Shame*, about a serial killer addicted to terrorizing veterans who had won the Congressional Medal of Honor. He finally relented on watching his action movie when Trina promised to buy him popcorn. The winning movie was *Switching Places*, the story of a nerdy girl who gets to date the guy of her dreams after her mind gets swapped into the body of the most popular girl in school.

Kendra had wanted to catch that movie, but now she worried it would be ruined. Nothing like cuddling up to a bald goblin during a cheesy chick flick.

As she had suspected, Kendra had a tough time focusing on the movie. Trina sat on one side of Case, with Alyssa on the other. Both were vying for his attention. They all shared a jumbo bucket of popcorn. Kendra declined whenever they offered her some. She wanted no part of anything those warty hands had pawed.

By the time the credits were rolling, Case had an arm around Alyssa. The two of them kept whispering and giggling. Trina sat with her arms crossed, wearing a disgruntled expression. Monster or not, when had any good come from multiple girls going out together with a guy they were all interested in?

Case and Alyssa held hands as they exited the theater. Trina’s mom was waiting in the parking lot. Trina said a terse good-bye and stalked away.

“Can I use your cell phone?” Kendra asked. “I need to call my dad.”

“Sure,” Alyssa said, handing it over.

“You want a ride?” Kendra asked as she dialed.

“I’m not that far,” Alyssa said. “Case said he would walk me.”

The goblin gave Kendra a strange, sly smile. For the first time, she wondered if Case was aware that she knew his true identity. He seemed to be gloating that there was nothing she could do about it.

Kendra tried to keep her expression neutral. Mom answered the phone, and Kendra reported that she needed to be picked up. She handed the phone back to Alyssa. “Isn’t that a pretty long walk? You can both have a ride.”

Alyssa gave Kendra a look that questioned why she was deliberately trying to ruin something spectacular. Case put an arm around her shoulders, leering.

“Alyssa,” Kendra said firmly, taking her hand, “I need to talk to you in private for a second.” She tugged Alyssa toward her. “Is that all right, Case?”

“No problem. I need to run and use the rest room anyhow.” He went back inside the theater.

“What is your deal?” Alyssa complained.

“Think about it,” Kendra said. “We hardly know anything about him. You just met him today. He’s not a little guy. Are you sure you want to go walking alone in the dark with him? Girls can get in a lot of trouble that way.”

Alyssa gave her an incredulous look. “I can tell he’s a nice guy.”

“No, you can tell that he’s good-looking, and pretty funny. Lots of psychos seem like nice guys at first. That’s why you hang out a few times in public places before you spend time alone. Especially when you’re fourteen!”

“I hadn’t thought of it that way,” Alyssa conceded.

“Let my dad give both of you a ride. If you want to talk with him, do it in front of your house. Not on a dark, lonely street.”

Alyssa nodded. “Maybe you have a point. It wouldn’t hurt to hang out within screaming distance of home.”

When Case got back, Alyssa explained the plan, minus the part about him potentially being a psychopath. He resisted at first, saying it was such a

nice night that it would be a crime not to walk, but finally consented when Kendra reminded him that it was after nine.

Dad showed up in the SUV a few minutes later, and agreed to give Alyssa and Case a ride. Kendra climbed up front. Alyssa and Case rode in the back, whispering and holding hands. Dad dropped the lovebirds off at Alyssa's house. Case explained that he lived just down the street.

As she drove away, Kendra looked back at them. She was leaving her friend alone with a creepy, conniving goblin. But there was nothing else she could do! At least Alyssa was in front of her house. If something happened she could cry out or run inside. Under the circumstances, that would have to suffice.

"Looks like Alyssa has a boyfriend," Dad remarked.

Kendra leaned her head against the window. "Looks can be deceiving."



Talking to Strangers

Kendra arrived at her homeroom several minutes early the next day. As kids trickled in, Kendra sat with her heart in her throat, waiting to see Alyssa. Case walked in, and although Kendra watched him, he paid her no attention. He went to the front of the room and stood near Mrs. Price's desk talking to Jonathon White.

Was Alyssa's face going to end up on milk cartons? If so, Kendra could only blame herself. She shouldn't have left her friend alone with that goblin for a second.

Less than two minutes before the bell, Alyssa entered the room. She glanced at Case, but did not acknowledge him. Instead, she came straight to her desk and sat down next to Kendra.

"Are you okay?" Kendra asked.

"He kissed me," Alyssa said through a tight smile.

"He *what*?" Kendra tried to conceal her revulsion. "You don't sound too thrilled."

Alyssa shook her head regretfully. "I was having so much fun. We talked in front of my house for a while after you drove away. He was being really cute and funny. Then he moved in close. I was terrified—I mean, I hardly know him, but it was also sort of exciting. Until we actually kissed. Kendra, he had dog breath."

Kendra could not resist laughing.

Alyssa relished the reaction, becoming more animated. “I’m serious. It was rancid. Putrid. Like he had never brushed his teeth since birth. It was worse than I could ever describe. I thought I was going to throw up. I swear, I almost did.”

Staring at the leprous scalp of the thing Alyssa had kissed, Kendra could only imagine how bad his mouth would have tasted. At least the illusion concealing his true identity had not disguised his rank breath.

The bell rang. Mrs. Price was encouraging a few noisy boys at the back of the classroom to take their seats.

“So what did you do?” Kendra whispered.

“I think he could tell how shocked I was by his breath. He had this weird smile like he’d been expecting it. I was totally grossed out, so I wasn’t very nice. I told him I had to go and rushed inside.”

“Is the crush over?” Kendra asked.

“I don’t mean to be shallow, but yes. Trina can have him. She’ll need a gas mask. It was that foul. I went straight to the bathroom and gargled mouthwash. When I look at him now, he makes me shiver. Have you ever eaten food that made you puke, then not been able to imagine ever eating it again?”

“Alyssa,” Mrs. Price interrupted. “The school year does not end for four more days.”

“Sorry,” Alyssa said.

Mrs. Price crossed to her desk and sat down. Yelping, she jumped up, swatting at her skirt. Mrs. Price squinted at the class. “Did somebody put a tack on my chair?” she asked incredulously. She patted her skirt and checked her chair and the floor. “That really hurt and was far from funny.” She put her hands on her hips, glaring at the class. “Somebody must have seen. Who did it?”

The class members were silent, exchanging sidelong glances. Kendra could not imagine anybody doing something so hurtful, not even Jonathon White. Until she remembered that Case had been standing near Mrs. Price’s desk at the start of class.

Mrs. Price leaned against her desk, one hand rubbing her forehead. Was she going to cry? She was a fairly nice teacher—a middle-aged woman with

curly black hair. She had narrow features and wore a lot of makeup. She didn't deserve to have a goblin play hurtful pranks on her.

Kendra considered speaking up. She would have ratted out the monster in a heartbeat. But to her classmates it would look like she was telling on a cool kid. And although he was a prime suspect, she hadn't actually seen him do it.

Mrs. Price was blinking and swaying. "I don't feel so . . ." she began, her words slurred, and then she toppled to the floor.

Tracy Edmunds screamed. Everybody stood for a better look. A couple of kids hurried over to the fallen teacher. One boy was feeling her neck for a pulse.

Kendra pressed forward. Was Mrs. Price dead? Had the goblin pricked her with a poisonous needle? Case was crouching beside her.

"Get Mr. Ford," Alyssa shouted.

Tyler Ward ran out the door, presumably to fetch the principal.

The kid feeling for a pulse, Clint Harris, declared that her heart was beating. "She probably just fainted because of the tack," he speculated.

"Elevate her feet," someone said.

"No, elevate her head," someone else said.

"Wait for the nurse," a third voice instructed.

Mrs. Price gasped and sat up, eyes wide. She appeared momentarily disoriented. Then she pointed toward the desks. "Get back in your seats, pronto."

"But you just passed—" Clint began.

"Back in your seats!" Mrs. Price repeated more forcefully.

Everyone complied.

Mrs. Price stood at the front of the classroom, arms folded, eyeing the students as if trying to read their minds. "I have never in my life met such an unruly group of vipers," she spat. "If I have my way, you'll all be expelled."

Kendra furrowed her brow. This was not like Mrs. Price, even under the current circumstances. Her voice had a different edge to it, cruel and hateful.

Mrs. Price grabbed the lip of Jonathon White's desk. He sat in the front row because of repeated discipline issues. "Tell me, my little man, who put

a tack on my chair?” She was gritting her teeth. Veins bulged in her neck. She looked like she was about to explode.

“I . . . didn’t see,” Jonathon stuttered. Kendra had never heard him sound scared before.

“Liar!” Mrs. Price yelled, heaving the front of his desk up so that it tipped over backwards. The seat was connected to the desk, so Jonathon went down as well, banging his head on the desk behind him.

Mrs. Price moved over to the next desk, to Sasha Goethe, her favorite student. “Tell me who did it!” the crazed teacher demanded, spittle flying from her lips.

“I don’t—” was all Sasha managed before her desk was upended as well.

Despite her shock, Kendra realized what was going on. Case hadn’t poisoned Mrs. Price. Whatever pricked her had cast some sort of spell over her.

Kendra stood up and shouted, “It was Casey Hancock!”

Mrs. Price paused, staring at Kendra through narrow eyes. “Casey, you say?” Her voice was soft and lethal.

“I saw him by your desk before class started.”

Mrs. Price advanced toward Kendra. “How dare you accuse the one person in this class who would never harm a fly?” Kendra started backing away. Mrs. Price continued speaking in a low voice, but she was clearly furious. “You did this, didn’t you, and now you’re pointing fingers, blaming the new kid, the one with no friends. Very low, Kendra. Very low.”

Kendra reached the back of the classroom. Mrs. Price was closing in. She was only an inch or two taller than Kendra, but her fingers were hooked into claws, and her eyes boiled with malice. The normally even-tempered teacher looked like she had murder on her mind.

Only a few steps away from Kendra, Mrs. Price leaped forward. Kendra dodged sideways and raced down a different aisle toward the door at the front of the classroom. Mrs. Price was right behind her until Alyssa stuck out a foot and sent the rabid teacher sprawling.

Kendra yanked open the door and found herself face-to-face with Mr. Ford, the principal. Behind him stood a panting Tyler Ward.

“Mrs. Price isn’t herself,” Kendra explained.

Shrieking, Mrs. Price lunged at Kendra. Mr. Ford, a heavy man with a sturdy build, intercepted the manic teacher, pinning her arms to her sides. “Linda!” he said in a tone that suggested he could not believe what was going on. “Linda, calm down. Linda, stop.”

“They’re all maggots,” she hissed. “They’re all vipers. Devils!” She continued struggling vigorously.

Mr. Ford was looking around the room, taking in the overturned desks. “What’s going on here?”

“Somebody put a tack on her chair and she freaked out,” Sasha Goethe sobbed, standing near her overturned desk.

“A tack?” Mr. Ford said, still trying to control the squirming teacher. Mrs. Price suddenly whipped her head back, slamming Mr. Ford square in the face. He staggered backwards, losing his grip on her.

Mrs. Price shoved Kendra aside and sprinted out the door and down the hall. A stunned Mr. Ford was catching blood from his nostrils in a cupped hand.

Across the room, Casey Hancock, the goblin in disguise, grinned wickedly at Kendra.

* * *

By the end of the school day, Kendra was sick of recounting the drama in homeroom. The school was buzzing with the news that Mrs. Price had lost her mind. The frazzled teacher had run off school property, leaving her car in the parking lot, and had not been seen since. As word spread that Kendra had spoken up against Case and been specifically attacked, she was bombarded with endless questions.

Kendra felt terrible for Mrs. Price. She was certain it was some strange goblin magic that had led to the outburst, but that was an impossible theory to present to the principal. In the end, Kendra had to admit that she had not actually seen Case put anything on the chair. Nor had anyone else, apparently. They couldn’t even find the tack. And of course she could not say anything about Case’s secret identity, because there was no way to prove it short of convincing Mr. Ford to kiss him on the mouth.

Walking out to catch her bus, Kendra brooded over the unjust situation. The reputation of an innocent teacher had been ruined, and the obvious

culprit was totally getting away with it. Thanks to his disguise, the goblin would keep on causing mayhem without any consequences. There had to be a way to stop him!

“Ahem.” A man walking beside Kendra cleared his throat in order to get her attention. Lost in thought, she had failed to notice his approach. The man was dressed in a fancy suit that looked about a hundred years out of style. The coat had tails, and he wore a vest with it. It was the sort of suit Kendra would have expected to see in a play, not in real life.

Kendra stopped walking and faced the man. Kids heading for the buses passed them on either side. “Can I help you?” she asked.

“Beg your pardon, but do you have the time?”

His vest had a watch chain. Kendra pointed at it. “Isn’t that a watch?”

“Just the chain, my girl,” he said, patting his vest. “I parted with the watch some time ago.” He was fairly tall, with wavy black hair and a pointy chin. Although the suit was fancy, it was rumpled and worn, as if he had slept in it for several consecutive nights. He seemed a little seedy. Kendra resolved immediately not to let him lure her into a windowless van.

She was wearing a watch, but did not check it. “School just got out, so it’s a little after two-forty.”

“Allow me to introduce myself.” He held up a business card in his white-gloved hand, in a way that suggested he meant for her to read it, not take it. The card said:

Errol Fisk

*Cogitator * Ruminator * Innovator*

“Cogitator?” Kendra read dubiously.

Errol glanced at the card and flipped it over.

“Wrong side,” he apologized with a smile.

The back side said:

Errol Fisk

Street Performer Extraordinaire

“Now, *that* I believe,” Kendra said.

He glanced at the card and, with a look of chagrin, flipped it over again.

“I already—” Kendra began, but she hadn’t.

Errol Fisk

Heaven’s Special Gift to Women

Kendra laughed. “What is this? Am I on a hidden-camera show?”

Errol checked the card. “My apologies, Kendra, I could have sworn I tossed that one out long ago.”

“I haven’t told you my name,” Kendra said, suddenly on guard.

“You didn’t have to. You were the only one of these youngsters who looked fairystruck.”

“Fairystruck?” Who was this guy?

“I take it you’ve noticed an unwanted visitor in your school recently?”

Now he had her full attention. “You know about the goblin?”

“The kobold, actually, though the two are often confused.” He flipped the card again. It now read:

Errol Fisk

Kobold Exterminator

“You can help me get rid of him?” Kendra asked. “Did my grandpa send you?”

“He did not. But a friend of his did.”

At that moment, Seth came up to them, his backpack slung over one shoulder. “Who’s the ringmaster?” he said to Kendra.

Errol held the card up for Seth to see. “What’s a kobold?” Seth patted Kendra on the shoulder. “Hey, you’re going to miss the bus.” Kendra could tell he was trying to give her an opening to get away from the stranger.

“I might be walking home today,” Kendra said.

“Four miles?” Seth said.

“Or I’ll catch a ride with somebody. The goblin who kissed Alyssa and framed Mrs. Price is a kobold.” She had told Seth about the disastrous incident at lunch. He was the one person who could understand the real story.

“Oh,” Seth said, sizing up Errol anew. “I get it. I thought you were a salesman. You’re a magician.”

Errol fanned out a deck of playing cards that had appeared out of nowhere. “Not a bad guess,” he said. “Pick a card.”

Seth pulled out a card.

“Show it to your sister.”

Seth showed Kendra the five of hearts.

“Put it back in the deck,” Errol instructed.

Seth replaced it so that Errol could not see the face of the card. Errol flipped all the cards around, so they faced the kids, still fanned out. They were all the five of hearts. “And there’s your card,” Errol announced.

“That’s the lamest trick ever!” Seth protested. “They’re all the same. Of course you know what I picked.”

“All the same?” Errol said, reversing the cards and thumbing through them. “No, I’m sure you’re mistaken.” He turned them back around, and it now looked like a normal deck of fifty-two different cards.

“Wow!” Seth said.

Errol held the cards face down and fanned them out again. “Name a card,” he said.

“Jack of clubs,” Seth said.

Errol held the cards up. They were all the jack of clubs. He flipped them over again. “Kendra, name a card.”

“Ace of hearts.”

Errol displayed an entire deck full of the ace of hearts. Then he tucked the deck away into an inner pocket.

“Whoa, you really are magic,” Seth said.

Errol shook his head. “It’s just legerdemain.”

“Leger-what?”

“Legerdemain. A word of French origin meaning sleight of hand.”

“What, you’ve got a bunch of decks up your sleeve?” Seth asked.

Errol winked. "Now you're on the right track."

"You're good," Seth said. "I was watching close."

Errol tweezed his business card between two fingers, folded it into his palm, and then immediately opened his hand. The card was gone. "The hand is quicker than the eye."

The buses started pulling out. They always left in a caravan of five. "Oh no," Seth said. "My bus!"

"I can give you kids a ride," Errol offered. "Or I suppose calling you a cab might be more appropriate. My treat. Either way, we need to talk about this kobold."

"How did you find out about this so fast?" Kendra asked suspiciously. "The kobold only showed up yesterday. I just mailed my letter to Grandpa Sorenson this morning."

"Cogent question," Errol said. "Your grandfather has an old friend named Coulter Dixon who lives in the area. He asked Coulter to keep an eye on you two. When Coulter caught wind of the kobold, he called me. I'm a specialist."

"So you know our grandpa?" Seth asked.

Errol held up a finger. "I know a friend of your grandpa's. I've never actually met Stan."

"Why do you wear that weird suit?" Seth asked.

"Because I'm terribly fond of it."

"Why are you wearing gloves?" Seth pursued. "It's hot out."

Errol glanced furtively over his shoulder, as if he was about to share a secret. "Because my hands are made of pure gold and I'm worried somebody will steal them."

Seth's eyes widened. "Really?"

"No. But remember the principle. Sometimes the most preposterous lies are the most believable." He tugged off a glove and flexed his fingers, revealing a normal hand with black hairs on the knuckles. "A street magician needs places to hide things. Gloves serve that purpose. Same with a coat on a warm day. And a vest with lots of pockets. And a wristwatch or two." He pulled back his sleeve, revealing a pair of watches.

"You asked me for the time," Kendra said.

“Sorry, I needed an opener. I have three watches. A watch can be a great place to hide a coin.” Errol squeezed his wrist and then held up a silver dollar. He put his glove back on, and the coin vanished in the process.

“So you *do* have a pocket watch,” Kendra said.

Errol held up the empty chain. “Sadly, no, that was true. Pawn shop. I needed to buy combs for my girlfriend.”

Kendra smiled, getting the reference. Errol did not explain it to Seth. “So, do I pass inspection?” he asked.

Kendra and Seth looked at each other. “If you get rid of the kobold,” Kendra said, “I’ll believe anything you say.”

Errol looked a little concerned. “Well, see, the thing is, I’m going to need your help to do it, so we’re going to need to trust one another. You could call your grandpa, and he could tell you about Coulter, at least. And then he could get in touch with Coulter, who would tell him about me. Or maybe Coulter has already contacted him. For now, consider this—your grandfather has hardly told a soul that you were fairystruck, and I am certain he urged you to keep that information private as well. Yet I am privy to that knowledge.”

“What do you mean by fairystruck?” Kendra asked.

“That the fairies shared their magic with you. That you can see whimsical creatures without assistance.”

“You can see them too?” Seth asked.

“Sure, if I use my eyedrops. But your sister can see them all the time. I got that information directly from Coulter.”

“Okay,” Kendra said. “We’ll check with our grandpa, but until we hear back, we’ll trust that you’re here to help.”

“Fabulous.” Errol tapped his temple. “I’m already hatching a plan. What are the chances of you two sneaking out tomorrow night?”

Kendra winced. “That’s going to be tough. I have finals the next day.”

“Whatever,” Seth said, rolling his eyes. “We’ll pretend to go to bed early and slip out the window. Would it work to meet around nine?”

“Nine would be nearly perfect,” Errol said. “Where should we rendezvous?”

“You know the service station on the corner of Culross and Oakley?” Seth suggested.

“I’ll find it,” Errol said.

“What if Mom and Dad notice we’re missing?” Kendra said.

“Which would you rather do: risk getting grounded, or keep putting up with your ugly friend?” Seth asked.

Seth was right. It was a no-brainer.



Extermination Procedures

The sky was nearly dark when Kendra and Seth entered the service station's convenience store. Inside, one of the fluorescent bulbs was flickering, interrupting the harsh, even glow. Seth fingered a candy bar. Kendra turned around in a circle. "Where is he? We're almost ten minutes late."

"Play it cool," Seth said. "He'll be here."

"You're not in a spy movie," Kendra reminded him.

Seth picked up the candy bar, closed his eyes, and smelled it from end to end. "Nope. This is the real thing."

Kendra noticed the headlights of a battered Volkswagen van flashing in the parking lot. "Maybe you're right," she said, approaching the window. The lights flashed again. Squinting, she saw Errol behind the wheel. He motioned her over.

Kendra and Seth crossed the parking lot to the van. "Are we really going to drive away with him in that thing?" Kendra mumbled.

"Depends on how badly you want to get rid of the kobold," Seth replied.

The creature had not caused any new commotion that day at school, although he had taunted Kendra with several knowing looks. The horrid imposter was reveling in his victory. He kept hanging around with her friends, and there was nothing she could do about it. Who knew what his next act of sabotage might be?

Kendra had continued to try to reach Grandpa Sorenson, and had repeatedly gotten the recorded message that the call could not be completed as dialed. Had he stopped paying his phone bill? Maybe he had switched telephone numbers? Whatever the cause, she had still not been able to speak with him to confirm whether Errol could be trusted.

Errol leaned across the van and pushed the door open. Once again he was wearing his rumpled, antiquated suit. Kendra and Seth climbed inside. Seth shut the door behind them. The motor was already running.

“Here we are,” Kendra said. “If you’re going to kidnap us, tell me now. I can’t handle the suspense.”

Errol put the van into gear and pulled out of the service station onto Culross Drive. “I’m really here to help you,” Errol said. “Although, if I had kids, I’m not sure I would want them climbing into a vehicle late at night with a man they’d just met, no matter what story he told them. But do not fret, I’ll deliver you safe and sound to your home before long.”

Errol turned onto a different street. “Where are we going?” Seth asked.

“Nasty vermin, kobolds, very tenacious,” Errol said. “We need to get something that will enable us to drive the interloper away permanently. We are going to steal a rare item from a wicked and dangerous man.”

Seth leaned forward on the edge of his seat. Kendra leaned back with her arms folded. “I thought you said you were a kobold exterminator,” Kendra said. “Don’t you have your own gear?”

“I have expertise,” Errol said, turning onto a new street. “Exterminating a kobold is a trifle more complicated than spraying your yard with chemicals. Each situation is unique and demands improvisation. Be glad that I know where to get what we need.”

They rode in silence for a few miles. Then Errol pulled off to the side of the road and switched off his lights. “We’re already here?” Seth asked.

“Fortunately, what we need is close by,” Errol said. He indicated a stately building half a block down the road. A sign out front read:



“We’re going to break into a mortuary?” Kendra asked.

“Are we going to steal a body?” Seth said, sounding too eager for Kendra’s liking.

“Nothing so morbid,” Errol assured them. “The owner of the mortuary, Archibald Mangum, lives on the premises. He owns a stylized figurine in the likeness of a toad. We can use the figurine to drive away the kobold.”

“He wouldn’t just lend it to us?” Kendra asked.

Errol smiled. “Archibald Mangum is not a kind man. In fact, he is not a man at all. He is a vampiric abomination.”

“He’s a vampire?” Seth asked.

Errol cocked his head. “Strictly speaking, I have never encountered an actual vampire. Not like you see in the movies, turning into bats and hiding from the sun. But certain orders of beings are vampiric in nature. These beings are probably where the notion of vampires originated.”

“So what exactly is Archibald?” Kendra pressed.

“Hard to say for certain. Most likely a member of the blix family. He might be a lectoblix, a species that ages swiftly and must drain the youth of others to survive. Or a narcoblix, a fiend capable of exerting control over victims while they are asleep. But given his residence, my best guess would be that he’s a viviblix, a being with the power to temporarily reanimate the dead. Like the vampires of legend, blixes connect with their victims through a bite. All varieties of blixes are highly uncommon, and here you are, with one just a few miles from your home!”

“And you want us to break into his mortuary!” Kendra said.

“My dear,” Errol said. “Archibald is away. I wouldn’t dream of sending you anywhere near his funeral home if it were otherwise. It would be far too perilous.”

“Will he have zombie guards?” Seth asked.

Errol spread his gloved hands. “If he is a viviblix, there may be a few reanimated corpses about. Nothing we can’t handle.”

“There has to be some other way to deal with the kobold,” Kendra muttered nervously.

“None that I know of,” Errol said. “Archibald will return tomorrow. After that, we can forget about procuring the figurine.”

The three of them sat in silence, looking down the street at the gloomy windows of the funeral home. It was an old-style mansion with a covered

porch, a circular driveway, and a large garage. The lighted sign out front provided the only illumination besides the moonlight.

At last Kendra broke the silence. "I don't feel good about this."

"Oh, toughen up," Seth said. "It won't be so bad."

"I'm glad to hear you say that, Seth," Errol said. "Because you will have to go into the house alone."

Seth swallowed. "You're not coming with us?"

"Nor Kendra," Errol said. "You're not yet fourteen, correct?"

"Right," Seth said.

"Protective spells guarding the home will prevent anybody over the age of thirteen from entering," Errol explained. "But they neglected to make it childproof."

"Why not protect it from everybody?" Kendra asked.

"The young enjoy an innate immunity to many such spells," Errol said. "Creating enchantments to divert children requires greater skill than erecting barriers to foil adults. Almost no magic works on children under the age of eight. The natural immunity diminishes as they age."

For the first time since entering the van, Kendra was amused. Seth looked as sober as she had ever seen him. No matter what the circumstances, it was always a pleasure to see him have to eat his words. He shifted in his seat and glanced at her.

"Okay, well, what do I do?" he said. The bravado had faded.

"Seth, don't—" Kendra began.

"No," he said, holding up his hand. "Leave the dirty work to me. Just tell me what to do."

Errol unscrewed the cap of a small bottle. An eyedropper was attached to the cap. "First, we need to sharpen your vision. These drops will work like the milk you drank at Fablehaven. Tilt your head back."

Seth obeyed. Errol leaned forward, placed a finger under Seth's right eyelid to pull it down, and squeezed out a drop. Blinking wildly, Seth recoiled. "Whoa!" Seth complained. "What is that, hot sauce?"

"It tingles a little," Errol said.

"It burns like acid!" Seth wiped tears from the afflicted eye.

"Other eye," Errol said.

"Don't you have any milk?"

"Sorry, fresh out. Hold still, it will only take a second."

“So would branding my tongue!”

“Isn’t the first eye already feeling better?” Errol inquired.

“I guess so. Maybe I can just look out of one eye.”

“I can’t send you in there blind to the dangers you might face,” Errol said.

“Here, let me do it.” Seth accepted the eyedropper from Errol. With his untreated eye squinted almost shut, Seth put a drop on the eyelashes. Blinking, he grimaced and growled. “Of course, the one person who doesn’t need these is too old to help out.”

Kendra shrugged.

“I use the drops every morning,” Errol said. “You get accustomed to it.”

“Maybe after your nerves die,” Seth said, brushing more tears away.

“What now?”

Errol held up an empty hand. His fingers fluttered, and a garage-door opener materialized. “Enter through the garage,” Errol said. “You will probably find the door from the garage to the house unlocked. If not, force it open. Once inside, to the left of the door, on the wall you will see a keypad. On top of the protective charms, the funeral home has a conventional security system. Press 7109 and then hit enter.”

“7109 enter,” Seth echoed.

“How do you know that?” Kendra asked.

“The same way I know Archibald is gone,” Errol replied.

“Reconnaissance. I wouldn’t send Seth in there unprepared. What do you think I’ve been doing since I first contacted you?”

“How do I find the statue?” Seth asked.

“My best guess would be down in the basement. Access it by the elevator adjoining the viewing room. If you turn right after entering, you can’t miss it. You’ll be looking for a toadlike statue not much bigger than my fist. Very likely in plain view. Look in off-limits areas. When you find the figurine, feed it this.” Errol held up a dog biscuit shaped like a bone.

“Feed the statue?” Seth questioned doubtfully.

“Until you feed it, the figurine will be immovable. Feed the statuette, pick it up, bring it to us, and I will drive you home.” Errol handed Seth the garage-door opener and the dog biscuit. He also gave him a small flashlight, with the warning to use it only if necessary.

“We haven’t covered what I do if I run into the living dead,” Seth reminded Errol.

“You run,” Errol said. “Reanimated corpses are not particularly swift or nimble. You won’t have trouble staying ahead of them. But don’t take any chances. If you encounter any undead adversaries, statue or no statue, retreat to the van.”

Seth nodded gravely. “So just run, huh?” He did not sound fully satisfied with the plan.

“I doubt you’ll have any trouble,” Errol reassured him. “I’ve scouted this location thoroughly, and there has been no hint of undead activity. Should be a snap. In and out.”

“You don’t have to do this,” Kendra said.

“Don’t worry, I won’t blame you if my brain gets eaten,” Seth said. He opened the door and hopped out. “Although I can’t help it if you blame yourself.”

Seth jogged across the street and walked toward the lighted sign. A few cars came down the road toward him, and he averted his eyes from the bright headlights until they passed. On his way to the mortuary, Seth passed a small house that had been converted into a barber shop, and then a larger one that housed dental offices.

Even though he knew Kendra and Errol were close by, facing the forbidding mortuary was a lonely feeling. Glancing back at the Volkswagen van, Seth could not see the occupants inside. He knew they could see him, though, so he tried to look relaxed.

Beyond the illuminated sign at the edge of the yard was a neatly trimmed lawn bordered by tidily rounded hedges that came no higher than his knees. Large potted plants crowded the shadowy porch. Three balconies with low railings projected from the upper story. All the windows were dark and shuttered. A pair of cupolas crowned the mansion, along with several chimneys. Even forgetting the dead bodies inside, the house looked haunted.

Seth considered turning back. Going into the funeral home with Errol and Kendra had sounded like an adventure. Going inside alone felt like suicide. He could probably stomach a spooky house full of dead bodies. But he had seen amazing things at Fablehaven—fairies and imps and monsters. He knew such things really existed, and so he knew there was a serious possibility that he was walking into an actual zombie lair, presided over by a real-life vampire (regardless of what Errol called him).

Seth fidgeted with the garage-door opener. Did he really care this much about getting rid of the kobold? If Errol was such a pro, why was he having

kids do his dirty work? Shouldn't somebody with more experience tackle this sort of problem, instead of a sixth-grader?

If he had been unaccompanied, Seth probably would have walked away. The kobold alone was just not worth it. But people were watching, expecting him to do this, and pride would not allow him to wimp out. He had followed through on some intimidating dares—going down steep hills on his bike, fighting a kid two grades older, eating live insects. He had almost died climbing an escalating series of wooden poles. Yet this was the worst so far, because going into a zombie lair alone not only meant you could die, it meant you could die in a really upsetting way.

No cars were coming down the road. Pressing the button on the garage-door opener, Seth hustled across the driveway. The door opened loudly. It made him feel conspicuous, but he told himself that anybody who saw a person going into a garage would not think twice about it. Of course, any zombies inside the mortuary now knew he had arrived.

An automatic light brightened the garage. The black, curtained hearse did little to make the mansion feel more cheery. Neither did the assemblage of taxidermic animals positioned on a workbench along one wall: a possum, a raccoon, a fox, a beaver, an otter, an owl, a falcon—and, in the corner, a huge black bear standing upright.

Seth entered the garage and tapped the button again. The garage door shut with a prolonged mechanical groan. He hurried to the door that would lead into the funeral home. The knob turned, and Seth eased the door open. He heard an immediate beeping. Light from the garage spilled into a hallway.

To the left of the door was a keypad, exactly where Errol had described. Seth punched in 7109 and hit enter. The beeping stopped. And the growling started.

Seth whipped around. The door was still open, and light from the garage revealed a mass of white dreadlocks approaching down the carpeted hall. At first Seth thought it was a monster. Then he realized it was a huge dog with such thick cords of fur that one of its ancestors must have been a mop. Seth did not know how the animal could see, it had so much hair dangling in its eyes. The growls continued rumbling, deep and steady, the kind of sound that meant at any second the dog might make a violent charge.

Seth had to reach a quick decision. He could probably leap out the door and shut it behind him before the dog reached him. But that would be the end of going after the statue. Maybe it would serve Errol right, for carrying out such lousy reconnaissance.

Then again, he was holding a dog biscuit. Surely the statue would not need the whole thing. “Sit,” Seth commanded, calmly but firmly, extending his hand palm outward.

The dog grew silent and stopped advancing.

“That’s a good dog,” Seth said, trying to exude confidence. He had heard that dogs could sense fear. “Now sit,” he ordered, repeating the gesture.

The dog sat, its shaggy head higher than Seth’s waist. Seth snapped the biscuit in two and tossed half to the dog. The canine caught the biscuit on the fly. Seth had no idea how it saw the treat coming through all that fur.

Seth approached the dog and let it sniff his hand. A warm tongue caressed his palm, and Seth rubbed the top of the animal’s head. “You’re a good boy,” Seth said in his special voice reserved for babies and animals. “You’re not going to eat me, right?”

The automatic light in the garage switched off, plunging the hall into darkness. The only glow came from a tiny green bulb on the security keypad, so faint that it was useless. Seth remembered the shutters covering the windows. Even moonlight and the light from the sign could not penetrate the house. Well, that probably meant that people on the outside would not notice his flashlight, and he could not risk zombies sneaking up on him in the blackness, so he turned it on.

Once again he could see the dog and the hall. Seth moved down the hall to a large room with plush carpeting and heavy drapes. He swung the beam of his flashlight around, checking for zombies. Several couches and armchairs and a few tall lamps lined the perimeter of the room. The center of the room was empty, apparently so mourners could mingle. There was a place on one side where Seth figured they laid the casket for people to view the deceased. He had visited a room not too different from this one when his Grandma and Grandpa Larsen had died just over a year ago.

Several doors led out of the room. The word *Chapel* was written above a set of double doors. Some other doors were unmarked. A brass gate blocked access to an elevator. A sign above it announced, “Authorized Personnel Only.”

The dog followed Seth as he crossed the room to the elevator. When Seth pushed the gate sideways, it collapsed like an accordion. Seth entered the elevator and shut the gate, preventing the dog from following. Black buttons projected from the wall, looking very old-fashioned. The floor buttons were marked “B,” “1,” and “2.” Seth pushed “B.”

The elevator lurched downward, rattling enough that Seth wondered if it was about to break. Through the gate Seth could see the wall of the elevator shaft scrolling by. Then the wall of the shaft disappeared. With a final squeal the ride came to an abrupt halt.

Without opening the gate, and keeping one hand near the elevator buttons, Seth shone the flashlight around the room. The last thing he wanted was to get cornered by zombies inside of an elevator.

It appeared to be the room where the bodies were prepared. It was much less fancy than the parlor above. He saw a worktable, and a table with wheels that had a casket on it. There were multiple storage cabinets and a big sink. Seth estimated that the casket would barely fit inside the elevator. One side of the room had what appeared to be a large refrigeration unit. He tried not to dwell upon what was kept in there.

He saw no statues, toadlike or otherwise. There was a door marked *Private* on the wall opposite the elevator. Satisfied that the room was zombie-free, Seth slid the gate open. He stepped out, tense, ready to leap back into the elevator at the slightest provocation.

The room remained silent. Walking between the worktable and the casket, Seth tried the private door. It was locked. The knob had a keyhole.

The door looked neither particularly strong nor unusually flimsy. It was built to open into the next room. Seth tried kicking it near the knob. It shuddered a bit. He tried a few more times, but, despite the repeated shuddering, the door showed no sign of weakening.

Seth supposed he could use the wheeled table to ram the door with the casket. But he doubted he could generate enough speed to strike the door much harder than he could kick it. And he could picture knocking the casket off the table and creating a huge mess. The casket might not be empty!

Another door, this one unmarked, also led out of the room. It was against the same wall as the elevator, so Seth had not seen it until after he had stepped into the room. Seth found that door unlocked. Behind it was a bare hall with doors along one side and an open doorway at the end.

Seth cautiously ventured down the hall. He realized that if zombies came at him from behind, he could become pinned in the basement, so he listened very carefully. The large room at the end of the hall was crammed almost from floor to ceiling with cardboard boxes. Seth hurried through the narrow aisles that granted access to the room, scanning for the statue. All he found was more boxes.

Back in the hall, Seth tried the other doors. One led to a bathroom. Behind the other door was a large storage closet full of cleaning supplies and various tools. One object among the mops and brooms and hammers caught his attention: an ax.

Seth returned with the ax to the private door. So much for stealth. If the garage door and elevator had not alerted the zombies, this should do the job. The ax was fairly heavy, but, choking up a little, he gave it a solid swing, and the bit crunched into the wood about a foot away from the doorknob. He wrenched it free and attacked the door again. A few more strokes and he had chopped a hole in the door large enough to reach his hand through. Seth wiped the handle of the ax with his shirt before setting it aside, just in case vampires knew how to check for fingerprints.

Seth shone his flashlight through the hole in the door. He could not see any reanimated corpses, but a zombie could easily be standing off to the side, out of view, waiting for his hand to appear. Reaching into the splintery hole, worried that clammy fingers might close around his wrist at any second, Seth felt the doorknob on the far side and unlocked it. Twisting the knob, he pushed the door open. Seth used the flashlight to examine the room. It was large and L-shaped, so the entirety was not in view at once. Funeral paraphernalia littered the room: nameless headstones, caskets lying horizontal or upended, easels with colorful wreaths of fake flowers. A long desk with a rolling chair and a computer was covered with a mess of papers. Beside the desk stood a row of tall filing cabinets.

Half-expecting slobbering zombies to burst from the caskets at any moment, Seth wove through the cluttered room until he could see around the corner of the “L.” He found a red felt pool table underneath a ceiling fan. Inside an arched niche beyond the table, a statuette squatted atop a variegated block of marble.

Seth rushed to the recess in the wall. The statue was not on all fours like a toad. Rather, it sat upright on two legs with a pair of short arms folded across its chest. The figurine looked like a pagan idol with froglike features. A polished dark green, it appeared to be carved out of speckled jade, and stood about six or seven inches tall. Above the statue a sign read:



The brief message filled Seth with foreboding. What exactly would happen once he fed the frog? Errol had made it sound like it would simply enable him to carry the statue out of the mortuary.

The statue did not look too heavy. Seth tried to pick it up. The figurine would not budge. It felt welded to the block of marble, which in turn felt firmly anchored to the base of the niche. Seth could not even slide the statuette or slightly tip it. Maybe Errol knew what he was talking about after all.



Not wanting to spend more time than necessary inside the funeral home, Seth held out the remaining half of the dog biscuit. Would the statuette actually eat it? Seth inched the treat forward. When the biscuit was almost touching the mouth, the froglike lips began to twitch. He moved the treat back, and the lips stopped moving. Holding the biscuit closer than ever, he saw the lips pucker outward, quivering.

Apparently it was going to work! Seth slid the biscuit into the eager jade mouth, careful not to let the figurine nip his fingertip. The statue gulped down the food, and once again sat motionless.

Nothing seemed to have changed, except that when Seth tried to pick up the statuette, it lifted off the marble block easily. Without warning, the statue squirmed and bit the side of his thumb. Yelling in surprise, Seth dropped the figurine and the flashlight onto the carpeted floor. The sensation of a jade statue wriggling like a living thing was extremely unnerving. Retrieving the flashlight, Seth checked the side of his thumb and found a row of tiny puncture wounds. The frog had teeth.

Seth nudged the fallen figurine with his foot. It did not twitch. Warily he picked it up, holding it near the base so if it tried to bite him again he could avoid the tiny fangs. The statue did not move. He tapped it on the head. The statuette was once again inanimate.

Seth hurriedly backtracked, exiting the room. There was nothing he could do to hide the damage to the door, so he opened the accordion gate and entered the elevator. It squealed up one floor and rattled to a stop. He opened the gate and stepped out.

The dog padding toward him made him jump, and he almost dropped the statue again. Fortunately, the shaggy animal seemed to have accepted his presence. Seth stooped and petted it for a moment, and then went to the door to the garage. He paused at the keypad and reset the alarm by pressing the "Away" button.

Closing the door behind him, Seth pressed the button to open the garage door. When the automatic light came on, he switched off the flashlight. Seth jogged out onto the driveway and pressed the button again to shut the garage.

Seth knew running would look more conspicuous, but he could not resist racing to the Volkswagen van. Errol opened the door and Seth climbed in.

"Well done," Errol said, starting the engine. It took a second to turn over.

"You were in there for a long time," Kendra said. "I was getting worried."

"I found a computer and played some video games," Seth said.

“While we were out here stressing about you?” Kendra exclaimed.

“I’m kidding,” Seth said. “I had to whack down a door with an ax.” He turned to Errol. “By the way, thanks for telling me about the dog.”

They were now driving down the road, the lighted sign of the funeral home receding behind them. “There was a dog?” Errol said. “Archibald must really keep him hidden. Was he big?”

“Enormous,” Seth said. “One of those dogs that looks like a giant mop. You know, with hair covering its eyes?”

“A komondor?” Errol said. “You’re fortunate; that breed can be really unfriendly to strangers. They were originally bred to guard livestock in Hungary.”

“I played nice and gave it half of the dog biscuit,” Seth said. “The statue bit me!”

“Are you all right?” Kendra said.

“Yeah.” Seth held up his thumb. “It’s hardly bleeding.”

“I should have warned you,” Errol said. “Once the statue eats, it temporarily gets aggressive. Nothing to worry about, but they do nip at you.”

“Tell the truth, you knew about the dog, didn’t you?” Seth accused.

Errol knitted his brow. “What makes you say that?”

“Why send me in with a dog biscuit? You could have given me any food for the statue. I think you were worried I might not go if I knew there was a dog.”

“I’m sorry, Seth,” Errol said. “I assure you the biscuit was a coincidence. Why would I warn you about the undead, yet not mention a dog?”

“Good point,” Seth admitted. “At least I didn’t see any zombies. That was a relief.”

“So how does this statue get rid of the kobold?” Kendra asked.

“For that,” Errol said, “you need simply follow my instructions.”

Chapter 4



Vanessa

The following morning in homeroom, well before the bell sounded, a steady murmur filled the air as students huddled in abnormal clusters. At the center of the clusters were the smartest kids, leafing through their notes. The others were trying to leech information, in hopes that some last-minute cramming might earn them a few extra right answers on the forthcoming finals.

Alyssa hovered near Sasha Goethe, gleaning information for Science. Alyssa normally got impressive grades, but she worried a lot nonetheless. Kendra felt confident about the upcoming exams. They were not weighted as heavily as they would be next year in high school, and she had kept up on her readings and homework all year. She had skimmed her notes and reviewed her old tests. Even with the distraction of the excursion to the mortuary the night before, she was unconcerned.

Besides, she had more pressing matters on her mind. The scabby kobold was the only other student in the room who appeared indifferent to the looming exams. Which made sense, considering he didn't have to take them. He sat at his desk with his hands folded. Mr. Reynolds, the same prematurely balding substitute from yesterday, sat behind Mrs. Price's desk.

A wrapped package rested in front of Kendra. The paper had a pattern of reindeer and snowflakes. She had found it on a closet shelf, left over

from the previous Christmas. Inside the paper was a shoebox, and inside the box was the stolen statue.

The night before, prior to dropping off Kendra and Seth around the corner from their house, Errol had explained how to proceed. The figurine was apparently sacred to kobolds. Once a kobold took possession of it, he would be compelled to return it to the shrine where it belonged, hidden deep in the Himalayas. Errol also stressed that kobolds were suckers for gifts, so all they needed to do was wrap up the statue like a present and give it to him. The rest would take care of itself.

It sounded almost too easy to be true. But Kendra had learned at Fablehaven that sometimes powerful magic was worked through simple means. For example, keeping a captured fairy indoors overnight would turn her into an imp.

Kendra studied the kobold. The instant popularity Case had initially enjoyed was fading as his rancid breath became legendary. He had now also kissed Trina Funk and Lydia Southwell, and, along with Alyssa, they had wasted no time spreading the word about his chronic halitosis.

The bell would ring in less than a minute. Kendra had been toying with having somebody else deliver the gift, in case the kobold knew to distrust her. But with time running out, she decided that she could always rewrap it and have somebody less suspect give the figurine to him later if this attempt failed. By now he had seen the present in her possession anyway.

Kendra took the wrapped shoebox to his desk. "Hi, Case."

He leered up at her. "Kendra."

"I know I haven't been very kind since you arrived," Kendra said. "I thought I would make a peace offering."

The kobold glanced down at the present and back into her eyes. "What? More mouthwash?"

Kendra stifled a laugh. "No, something nice. If you don't want it—"

"Give it." He reached for the present, and she let him take it. He shook the package, revealing nothing, because Kendra had packed the statue snugly amid wadded newspapers.

The bell rang. "You're welcome to open it," Kendra said. Study groups disbanded and everyone went to their desks. Kendra returned to her desk as Case unwrapped the gift.

By the time Kendra sat down, Case had the lid off the shoebox and was rummaging through the newspapers. He froze, staring. Then he slowly pulled out the statuette, holding it gingerly. Glancing over his shoulder, he glowered at Kendra.

The substitute gave a couple of announcements and then welcomed the class to use the remainder of homeroom as a review session. Alyssa asked if he knew anything about Mrs. Price. He replied that he had not been informed.

The study clusters re-formed rapidly. The kobold collected his things, placing the statue in his backpack, and walked toward the door, giving Kendra a final venomous glare.

“Hey, where are you going?” the substitute asked.

“The rest room,” Case replied.

“You need a hall pass,” the substitute said.

“Ten to one I can manage without one,” Case sneered.

The substitute could not have been older than thirty. He had a laid-back air and did not look accustomed to having students behave with such insolence. “Ten to one you’re heading to the principal’s office,” the sub said, his face becoming stern.

The class was growing silent as the exchange continued. Case smirked. “I’ll take that bet. Five hundred dollars. That would be, what, three years’ earnings?”

Case opened the door. The substitute stood up. “You’re not going anywhere!”

Case exited and dashed down the hall. The substitute remained impotently by the desk. “What’s his name?” he asked, bewildered.

“Casey Hancock,” Alyssa reported. “But you can call him dog breath.”

* * *

Seth was heading for the bus when he recognized a familiar man in an outmoded suit. He diverted from his course to speak with Errol.

“Did you hear?” Seth said. “Kendra gave Case the package this morning and he left immediately.”

Errol nodded. “I followed the kobold out of town. You will never see him again. A kobold seldom travels far unless compelled.”

“Thanks for your help,” Seth said. “I better catch my bus.”

“Can you spare a moment?” Errol asked. “You did an exceptional job at the funeral home last night. Better than many of the trained professionals I have partnered with in the past. I could use some assistance with one other task.”

“What?”

“A similar mission, actually. I need to recover an amulet from a member of the Society of the Evening Star. It would issue quite a blow to their organization.”

“They’re the people trying to destroy all the magical preserves like Fablehaven,” Seth said. “And free the demons.”

“Sharp lad.”

“Is it a vampire again?” Seth asked.

“Nothing so exotic,” Errol assured him. “The amulet is on a houseboat. The owner is out of the country, so the boat is currently vacant. The only catch is, we’ll have to drive a few hours to get there. It would take all night. If we left at ten or so, I could have you back before six in the morning.”

“Tonight is a school night,” Seth said.

“Which is why I was planning on tomorrow night,” Errol said. “The school year will be over. Your sister can help with this one. The barrier on the houseboat functions only against those eighteen and older.”

“I’ll talk it over with her. How should I confirm?”

“I will be at the service station tomorrow night. Come as close to ten as you can. Show up before ten-thirty, and I’ll be waiting. Otherwise I’ll assume you declined.”

“Got it. I better go; the buses will leave any minute.”

“By all means,” Errol said. “By all means.”

* * *

Kendra placed a period after the final sentence of the final essay of her final exam. English. She knew she had aced it, just as she had sailed through the others. Once she handed in the test, middle school would be officially over. It was Friday afternoon, and there were almost three months between her and the next homework assignment.

Yet as Kendra turned in the exam, she did not experience the euphoria she had earned. Instead she was weighed down by the question of whether she should sneak out of her house to break into a houseboat hundreds of miles away with a virtual stranger and her younger brother.

As of that morning, she still had not reached her grandpa by telephone, and he still had not replied to the letter she had mailed Tuesday. She had told Seth that until she confirmed the identity of Errol Fisk with Grandpa, they were not going on a road trip with him in the middle of the night. The thing with the kobold had been a desperate situation. Now they could afford to wait a day or two.

Seth had ranted about her being a traitor and a coward. He had complained that if there was a chance to harm the Society of the Evening Star, they had better take it. He had finished by threatening to join Errol with or without her.

Having completed the exam early, Kendra had about twenty minutes before the buses would be leaving. She went to her locker and took her time loading everything she wanted to keep into her backpack, including the pictures she had clipped from magazines and taped to the inside of the door. Maybe Seth had a point. Checking with Grandpa was more of a formality at this stage. Errol had already helped them dispose of the kobold. If he had wanted to harm them, he'd had his chance when he took them to the mortuary.

Kendra tried to be completely honest with herself. She was afraid of going to the houseboat. If it belonged to somebody from the Society of the Evening Star, it would be very dangerous. And this time she would have to go inside, not just wait in the van.

She zipped her backpack. What she wanted was for Grandpa Sorenson to tell her that Errol was a friend but that stealing amulets from houseboats in the middle of the night was no job for children. Or teenagers. And it was true! Barriers or no barriers, it seemed peculiar that Errol recruited kids for tasks like this.

She headed down the hall and out the doors. The sun was shining. The buses idled in a line along the curb. Only a few kids were on them. Ten minutes remained before school would officially let out.

Was Seth right? Was she a coward? She had been brave on the preserve when she sought help from the Fairy Queen and rescued everybody. She

had been brave when trying to get rid of the kobold. Brave enough to sneak out of the house and go with Errol. But those were emergencies. She had been forced to be brave. What happened to her courage without an immediate threat? How dangerous was sneaking onto an empty houseboat? Nothing had happened at the mortuary; Seth had gone in and out. Errol would not take them to the houseboat if it was too dangerous. He was a professional.

Kendra climbed onto her bus, walked to the back, and plopped down onto a seat. Her last bus ride from Roosevelt Middle School. She was now in high school. Maybe she ought to start acting more like an adult and less like a scaredy-cat.

* * *

Seth whistled as he inventoried his emergency kit. He clicked the flashlight on and off. He examined an assortment of firecrackers. He inspected the slingshot he had received for Christmas.

Kendra sat on his bed, chin in her hand. “You really think firecrackers are going to come in handy?” she asked.

“You never know,” Seth answered.

“I get it,” Kendra said. “Somebody might want to have an early Fourth of July celebration.”

Seth shook his head in exasperation. “Yeah, or we might need a diversion.” He ignited a flame with his cigarette lighter to make sure it worked. Then he held up a couple of dog biscuits. “I added these since the mortuary. I might have been eaten alive without one.”

“I can’t believe you talked me into this,” Kendra said.

“Neither can I,” Seth agreed.

Mom opened the door, holding the cordless telephone. “Kendra, Grandpa Sorenson wants to speak with you.”

Brightening, Kendra jumped off the bed. “Okay.” She took the phone. “Hi, Grandpa.”

“Kendra, I need you to go someplace where you can speak freely,” Grandpa said, his tone urgent.

“Just a second.” Kendra rushed into her room and shut the door. “What is it?”

"I fear you and your brother may be in danger," Grandpa said.

Her grip tightened on the phone. "Why?"

"I have just received reports of some disturbing activity in your area."

Kendra relaxed a little. "I know, I've been trying to call you. There was a kobold in my school."

"A what?" Grandpa exclaimed.

"It's okay, a guy named Errol Fisk helped us get rid of it. He knows your friend Coulter."

"Coulter Dixon?"

"I guess. Errol said Coulter found out about the kobold and recruited him to help us get rid of it."

"When did this happen?"

"This week."

Grandpa paused. "Kendra, Coulter has been here at Fablehaven for more than a month."

She squeezed the phone, knuckles white. A sick feeling was creeping into her stomach. "What do you mean?"

"I'll confirm with Coulter, but I'm sure this man approached you under false pretenses. You must not go near him."

Kendra was silent. She looked at her digital clock. It was 8:11 p.m. In less than two hours they were supposed to meet Errol at the service station. "He was going to pick us up tonight," she said.

"Pick you up?"

"To take us to steal an amulet from a houseboat. He said it would harm the Society of the Evening Star."

"Kendra, this man is almost certainly a member of the Society of the Evening Star. They recently stole something from a friend of mine."

Kendra's mouth was dry. Her heart was sinking. "What did they steal?"

"No matter," Grandpa said. "The problem is—"

"Not a little statue of a frog," Kendra said.

Now Grandpa was silent. "Oh, Kendra," he finally muttered. "Tell me what happened."

Kendra recounted how Errol had told them the only way to get rid of the kobold was to acquire the statue. She related how he had told them the

owner of the mortuary was an evil viviblix in order to convince Seth to steal the frog.

“So that’s how they did it,” Grandpa said. “There was a spell on the mortuary that would have prevented all but children from entering. Archibald Mangum is an old friend. He is no blix. He was away at his eightieth birthday party in Buffalo the night Seth stole the statue from his house. He phoned me a few minutes ago.”

“I’ve been trying to call you all week,” Kendra said. “And I wrote you a letter Tuesday.”

“There has been foul play,” Grandpa said. “I have not received your letter. I suspect it was intercepted, perhaps from my mailbox. I didn’t know the phone was down until yesterday. We hardly use it except for emergencies. The phone company came out to fix it a few hours ago. They found where the line had been damaged, not far beyond the front gates. I asked if it looked like the line had been deliberately cut, and they said no, but I have my doubts. When Archibald called, my worries were multiplied. He has quietly kept an eye on you and Seth for me. Of course, I realized that any action taken against him could also involve you, but I did not expect this. The Society of the Evening Star is on the move.”

“What do I do?” Kendra asked, feeling unbalanced.

“I have already set a plan in motion,” Grandpa said. “Now I see that my suspicions were more warranted than I had anticipated. I told your mother that I was in an accident, and asked if you and Seth could come stay with us while I recover.”

“What did she say?” Kendra asked.

“Your parents are willing as long as you and your brother want to come,” Grandpa said. “I told her I wanted to invite you myself. Assuming you would agree, I already dispatched somebody to pick you up.”

“Who?”

“You have not met her,” Grandpa said. “Her name is Vanessa Santoro. She’ll give you a code word: *kaleidoscope*. She should be there within a couple of hours.”

“What should we do until then?”

“You said this Fisk character is expecting to meet you tonight?”

“We haven’t confirmed with him,” Kendra said. “I wanted to talk to you first.” She deliberately neglected to mention that although she had not confirmed the rendezvous, she had already resolved to go. “He’s going to wait for us at a gas station near our house. If we aren’t there by ten-thirty, he’ll know we aren’t coming.”

“I don’t like the interest the Society is showing in you,” Grandpa said pensively, as if talking to himself. “We’ll have to puzzle that out later. For now, pack your things. Vanessa should arrive around ten-thirty herself. Be on the lookout. It may be tough to anticipate how Errol will react when the two of you fail to keep his appointment.”

“Can you tell your friend to hurry?”

“She’ll hurry,” Grandpa said, chuckling. “For now, let your mother know your decision. Then I’ll need to speak with her again, get her used to the idea that a friend of mine is going to swing by and pick you up tonight. I’ll tell her Vanessa is a trusted neighbor who happens to be returning from a trip to Canada.”

“Grandpa?”

“Yes?”

“You weren’t really in an accident?” she asked.

“Nothing life-threatening, but yes, I’m rather banged up. There have been many interesting developments over the past months, and whether I like it or not, you are becoming involved. Right now, as dangerous as Fablehaven can be, it is the safest place for you.”

“Grandma’s not a chicken again or anything.”

“Your grandmother is fine,” he assured her.

“What about Mom and Dad? What if Errol Fisk goes after them?”

“Oh, no, Kendra. Don’t worry about your parents. Their ignorance of the secret world we know about should be all the protection they need. With you and Seth out of the house, they will be much safer than any of us. Now, pass me off to your mother.”

Kendra found her mom and handed her the telephone. She then raced to Seth’s room and filled him in on everything she had discussed with Grandpa Sorenson.

“So Errol was using us,” Seth said. “And if we’d gone with him tonight . . . I never learn my lesson, do I?”

“This wasn’t your fault,” Kendra said. “Errol had me fooled too. You were just being brave. That isn’t always a bad thing.”

The compliment seemed to buoy him up. “I bet Errol thought he had us in the bag. I wonder what he would have done with us. I wish I could see his face when we don’t show up tonight.”

“Hopefully by then we’ll already be on the road.”

Dad entered the room. He clapped his hands together and rubbed them. “We need to get you guys packed,” he said. “You two must have really done a number on your grandparents last summer. Dad falls off the roof, and he wants you there to help him. I hope he knows what he’s getting himself into.”

“We’ll be good,” Seth said.

“Are those firecrackers?” Dad asked.

“Just little ones.” Seth stuffed them into his emergency kit.

* * *

Kendra paced in her room, watching the clock. She peeked out between her blinds every few minutes, hoping to see Vanessa pull up. The closer the time got to ten-thirty, the more anxious she became.

Her suitcase and her duffel bag were on her bed. She tried to distract herself by putting on her earphones and listening to music. She sat on the floor, closed her eyes, and leaned against the bed. Any minute Vanessa would pull up, and she and Seth would be on their way.

She heard a voice calling her name from far away. She opened her eyes and took off her earphones. Dad was standing over her. “She’s here?” Kendra asked, standing up.

“No, I said you have a phone call. Katie’s dad, he’s wondering if you know where Katie might be.”

Kendra accepted the phone. Katie Clark? Kendra barely knew her. “Hello?”

“You disappointed me, Kendra.” It was Errol. Dad left the room.

Kendra spoke quietly. “Sorry, we decided tonight wouldn’t work. How did you get our number?”

“The phone book,” Errol said, sounding hurt by the accusation in her tone. “Sorry about pretending to be the parent of a schoolmate. I didn’t

want to startle your parents.”

“Good thinking,” Kendra said.

“I was wondering if I might persuade you to join me after all. I’m down the street from your home, right where I dropped you off the other night. You see, tonight is the last night the houseboat will be unoccupied, and that amulet could cause great harm to your grandparents and their preserve.”

“I’m sure it could,” Kendra said sincerely. Her mind was racing. Errol could not possibly know she and Seth planned to escape to Fablehaven tonight. She had to pretend she still thought of him as a friend. “Isn’t there some other way? I was so scared the other night.”

“If I knew of another solution, I would not trouble you. My predicament is dire. The amulet could cause tremendous harm in the wrong hands. Please, Kendra, I helped you. I need you to return the favor.”

Kendra heard a vehicle pulling to a stop outside. The engine quit. Parting the blinds, she saw a woman climbing out of a sleek sports car. “I don’t think I can,” Kendra said. “I’m really sorry.”

“Looks like you have a visitor,” Errol said, a trace of suspicion entering his voice. “That’s quite a car. Friend of the family?”

“I’m not sure,” Kendra said. “Look, I need to go.”

“Very well.” The line went dead.

Dad poked his head in. “Everything okay?”

Kendra put the phone down, trying not to let her anxiety show. “Katie’s dad was just freaking out a little,” she said. “I don’t hang out with Katie much, so I couldn’t really help him. I’m sure she’s fine.”

There was a knock at the door.

“That must be your ride.” Dad grabbed the suitcase and the duffel bag off the bed. Kendra followed him to the living room, where Mom stood chatting with a statuesque woman. Tall and slender, the woman had a lustrous cascade of black hair and an olive complexion. She looked Spanish or Italian, with generous lips and a playful arch to her eyebrows. Her cosmetics were applied with an expertise Kendra had never seen outside of fashion magazines. She wore trendy jeans, brown boots, and a snug, stylish leather jacket.

As Kendra entered the room, the woman smiled, her expressive eyes lighting up. “You must be Kendra,” the woman said warmly. “I’m Vanessa Santoro.” She had the faint remnant of an accent.

Kendra extended her hand. Vanessa clasped only her fingers. Dad introduced himself and Vanessa offered him a similar handshake. Despite her polished looks and demeanor, her fingernails were incongruously short. Seth came into the room and stopped in his tracks. Kendra felt embarrassed for him—he was so unable to disguise his amazement at Vanessa’s striking appearance.

“I’ve looked forward to finally meeting the famous Seth Sorenson,” Vanessa said.

“Me?” Seth replied inanely.

Vanessa smiled tenderly. She seemed accustomed to making boys tongue-tied. Kendra was starting not to like her.

Vanessa glanced at her small, fashionable watch. “I hate to be in a rush, but we have a lot of ground to cover before the night ends.”

“You’re welcome to stay the night here and get a fresh start in the morning,” Mom said. “We could make up the spare bed.”

Kendra experienced an acute moment of distress. They had to get out of there. Errol was waiting outside, and he had acted suspicious of Vanessa. Who knew what he might try during the night?

Vanessa shook her head with a regretful smile. “I have an appointment tomorrow,” she said. “No worries, I’m a night owl. I slept in late. We’ll get to Stan’s in one piece.”

“Can I get you some refreshments?” Mom pursued.

Vanessa held up a hand. “I have goodies in the car,” she said. “We should get on the road.”

Dad had pulled out his wallet. “At least let us chip in on gas.”

“I wouldn’t think of it,” Vanessa insisted.

“You’re saving us a long drive,” Dad persisted. “It’s the least—”

“I was going there anyhow,” Vanessa said, picking up Seth’s suitcase, the largest of the bunch. “Giving your children a lift is my pleasure.” Dad snatched Kendra’s suitcase before Vanessa could grab it as well. Instead Vanessa seized Seth’s duffel bag.

Mom opened the door, and Vanessa walked out, followed by Dad. “I can get my bags,” Seth said from behind.

“I’m quite capable,” Vanessa assured him, striding easily toward her car.

“Whoa!” Seth said when he got a look at her dark blue sports car.

Dad whistled. “Ferrari?”

“No,” Vanessa said. “Custom made. I got a deal through a friend.”

“You’ll have to introduce me,” Dad said.

“In your dreams,” Mom muttered.

Standing beside the sports car, Kendra could not believe she was going to get to ride in it all the way to Fablehaven. Low and aerodynamic, the glossy vehicle had twin tailpipes, a sunroof, and fat tires like a race car. In spite of the dead insects plastered to the front, it looked like the sort of vehicle you would expect to see in a showroom or at a car expo—not something that anybody would actually drive.

Vanessa pressed a couple of buttons on her key chain. The passenger door swung open and the trunk popped up. “There should just be room for the suitcases in the trunk,” she said. She leaned the passenger seat forward and tucked Seth’s duffel bag behind the driver’s seat.

“Shotgun,” Seth called.

“Sorry,” Vanessa said. “House rules. Tallest passenger gets shotgun. The back is a bit cramped.”

Seth drew himself up to his full height. “I’ve almost caught up with her,” he said. “Besides, she’s more flexible.”

“Good,” Vanessa said, “because we’ll have to slide her seat forward to fit the two of you. I don’t often have riders in the back.” Dad handed Kendra’s duffel bag to Vanessa and then loaded the suitcases into the trunk.

Seth slouched into the backseat and fastened his seat belt. Vanessa slid the passenger seat forward a bit and pushed the back upright. “Can you live with that?” Seth nodded glumly. His legs were twisted sideways with the knees together. “Kendra might be able to spare an extra inch or two once she gets settled,” Vanessa soothed.

Vanessa stepped aside so Kendra could get in the car. Kendra met her eyes and glanced at the Volkswagen van parked down the road. Vanessa

winked in a way that suggested she was aware of the threat. Kendra hesitated for another moment. “Kaleidoscope,” Vanessa murmured.

Kendra got into the car and Vanessa shut the door. The engine roared to life spontaneously. Vanessa thumbed her key chain again and the driver’s door opened.

Mom and Dad stood together on the curb, waving. Doubting whether her parents would be able to see her through the tinted glass, Kendra rolled down her window and waved back. According to Grandpa, with her and Seth out of the house, Mom and Dad would be out of danger. Although Kendra was unsure what new hazards awaited at Fablehaven, at least she could take comfort knowing her departure would ensure the safety of her parents.

Vanessa scooted behind the wheel and closed the door. Her demeanor instantly changed as she tugged on a pair of black driving gloves. “How long has he been there?” she asked, switching on the lights, throwing the manual transmission into gear, and pulling forward.

Calling a final good-bye, Kendra rolled up the window. “Only a few minutes, I think,” Kendra said. “He showed up after we skipped out on meeting him at the service station.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?” Seth complained.

“I just found out,” Kendra said. “He called. I was getting off the phone with him when Vanessa pulled up. He was trying to talk me into going.”

They drove past the Volkswagen van. Looking back, Kendra saw the headlights come on and the van pull into the street behind them. “He’s following us,” Seth said.

“Not for long,” Vanessa promised. “Once we’re out of earshot from your parents, we’ll get rid of him quick.” She put on a pair of sunglasses.

“Isn’t it a little dark for sunglasses?” Seth said.

“Night vision,” Vanessa explained. “I can kill the lights and go as fast as I like.”

“Awesome!” Seth said.

They turned a corner, heading toward the interstate. Vanessa looked over at Kendra. “You were just on the phone with him?”

“Watch out!” Kendra yelled, pointing straight ahead. A gigantic humanoid figure made of straw shambled out into the road, waving a pair of

crude arms. Having just rounded a corner, they were not going very fast. Vanessa swerved, but the monstrous figure leapt sideways to continue blocking their path. Vanessa slammed on the brakes. The seat belts locked, and the car stopped about ten yards shy of the creature.

Yellow and bristly under the bright headlights, the oafish figure towered at least ten feet above the asphalt, straddling the yellow line in the center of the road. It had short legs with large feet, a massive torso, and long, thick arms. The bushy head lacked eyes, but a gaping mouth appeared when the monstrosity let out a raspy roar.

“A haystack?” Seth said, sounding bewildered.

“A dullion,” Vanessa corrected, throwing the car into reverse. “A pseudo golem.”

The dullion charged. The engine growled and the tires squealed as they backed away. Vanessa expertly whipped the car around and switched gears, wheels shrieking. They were suddenly going forward again, away from the creature. The sharp odor of burnt rubber filled the car.

As they neared the intersection where they had just turned, the Volkswagen van screeched to a stop, blocking their escape. A second car, an older-model Cadillac, pulled up beside it, completing the barricade. The road was only two lanes wide, and the scant shoulder was steep and rocky.

Vanessa cranked the car into a slide and, after a wild fishtail, tires spinning and smoking, they were again facing the lumbering strawman. The bulky creature shuffled toward them. Vanessa gunned the engine. As the screaming tires gained traction, the car picked up speed, but with the dullion rapidly drawing closer, there was not enough space to get going really fast.

Without much room to maneuver, Vanessa did her best, bringing the car to the right edge of the road, then cutting across to the left just before they reached the monster. The tactic kept them from plowing directly into the dullion, but the lunging strawman pounded the car with its huge fists as they roared past. It sounded like they had been struck by a rocket. The car trembled and skidded, and for a terrible moment Kendra thought they were going to sail off the road, but Vanessa regained control and they raced away.

Part of the roof had crumpled above Kendra, and cracks webbed her window and the sunroof. The wheels smelled like they were on fire. But the

engine purred and the car seemed to be driving smoothly as the speedometer topped ninety.

“Sorry about the turbulence,” Vanessa said. “Everybody all right?”

“I bet we left some sweet skid marks,” Seth gushed. “What was that thing?”

“A golem made out of straw,” Kendra said.

“It looked ridiculous,” Seth said. “Like a moving haystack.”

Kendra realized that Seth had not seen the true form of the creature that had assailed them. “You haven’t had milk, Seth.”

“Oh, yeah. Did he look like Hugo?”

“Sort of,” Kendra said, “but bigger and sloppier.”

“The thing bashed us hard,” Seth said. “He caved in the roof.”

They turned onto a wider road, tires whining mildly, then accelerated aggressively. “We were lucky to get away with so little damage,” Vanessa said. “The body of the car has been reinforced and the windows are bulletproof. A lesser vehicle would no longer be running. They chose the right spot for an ambush.”

“How could something made of hay hit us so hard?” Seth asked.

“Who knows what was underneath the straw?” Kendra said.

“Which is why I didn’t just ram him in the first place,” Vanessa said. “Good thing for us.”

Kendra checked the speedometer. They were going faster than a hundred miles per hour. “Don’t you worry about speed traps?”

Vanessa grinned. “Nobody will be able to catch us without a helicopter.”

“Really?” Seth said.

“I’ve never had a ticket,” Vanessa bragged. “But I’ve been chased. I’m tough to catch, especially outside of metropolitan areas. I’ll have you to Fablehaven in a little over two hours.”

“Two hours!” Kendra exclaimed.

“How do you think I reached your house so soon after you spoke with Stan? We can comfortably average a hundred and fifty on the interstate. Late at night, with our lights off, anybody holding a radar gun will think they clocked a UFO.”

“This might be the coolest day of my life,” Seth said. “Except that I don’t have anyplace to put my legs.”

“I don’t normally speed for fun,” Vanessa explained. “But we might have enemies following us. Tonight, it’s the smartest course of action. By the way, Seth, your grandma sent you this.” She opened a small ice chest between the front seats and removed a little bottle of milk.

“Now you tell me, after I missed the dullion.” He accepted the milk and drank it. “What’s the difference between a dullion and a golem?”

“Quality, mostly,” Vanessa said. “Dullions are a bit easier to create. Although I haven’t seen one in ages. Like golems, they’re nearly extinct. Whoever was after you has unusual resources.”

They drove in silence for a moment. Kendra folded her arms. “I’m sorry we wrecked your beautiful car.”

“It wasn’t your fault,” Vanessa said. “Believe it or not, I’ve given cars bigger bruises than that one.”

Kendra frowned. “I feel so stupid for letting Errol take advantage of us.”

“Your grandfather filled me in,” Vanessa said. “You were trying to do the right thing. It was a textbook Society infiltration—setting up a threat, then making it look like they helped you solve the problem in order to build trust. I’m sure they also cut off your communication with Stan. Speaking of Stan . . .”

Vanessa flipped open a small cell phone. Kendra and Seth sat in silence while Vanessa reported to Grandpa that they were on the road and all right. She briefly related the incident with Errol and the dullion, then snapped the phone shut.

“What did I steal from Grandpa’s friend?” Seth asked.

“A demon called Olloch the Glutton,” Vanessa said. “I’m assuming you fed it?”

“Errol said it was the only way to move it,” Seth said wretchedly.

“Errol was right,” Vanessa said. “You broke the spell that bound it. It bit you?”

“Yeah, is that bad?”

“They’ll tell you more about it at Fablehaven,” Vanessa promised.

“Did it poison me?”

“No.”

“Am I going to turn into a frog or something?”

“No. Wait until Fablehaven. Your grandparents have much to share with you.”

“Please tell me now,” Seth said.

“I’ll check the wound when we stop for gas.”

“Wouldn’t *you* want to know?” Seth pleaded.

She paused. “I suppose I would. But I told your grandparents I would let them deliver the news, and I like to be true to my word. There is some danger involved, but nothing immediate. I’m sure we will get it resolved.”

Seth fingered the tiny scabs on his hand. “Okay. Is there anything you *can* tell us?”

They reached the on-ramp for the interstate. “Keep those seat belts fastened,” she replied.



New Arrivals

When the car finally slowed and pulled onto the gravel driveway, Kendra was fighting to keep her eyes open. She had learned that even rocketing along the freeway at one hundred and forty miles per hour became monotonous after a while. It did not take long to lose the sense of how fast you were going. Especially in the dark.

After they left the highway, the road curved more, and Vanessa slowed considerably. She had warned that if there were another ambush, it would most likely come near the entrance to Fablehaven.

As they crunched over the gravel, a single headlight came toward them from around a bend. It belonged to a four-wheeler. Dale rode on it, and waved when he saw them.

“All clear,” Vanessa said. They followed Dale past the No Trespassing signs and through the tall, spiked, wrought-iron gates. He stopped to close the gates behind them while Vanessa proceeded to the house.

Kendra felt a vast sense of relief to be back at Fablehaven. Part of her had wondered whether she would ever return. At times, the previous summer seemed unreal, like a long, strange dream. But there was the house, lights shining in the windows. The stately gables, the weathered stonework, and the turret on the side. Come to think of it, she had never found her way into the turret, even though she had accessed both sides of the attic. She would have to ask Grandpa about it.

Amid the shadowed shrubs of the garden, Kendra noticed the colorful twinkle of fairies flitting about. They were rarely out in great numbers after sundown, so she was mildly surprised to see at least thirty or forty drifting throughout the yard—flickering in red, blue, purple, green, orange, white, and gold. Kendra supposed the unusual quantity could be explained by the increased fairy population resulting from the hundreds of imps she had helped restore to fairy form the previous year.

It was sad to think that her friend Lena would not be there to welcome her. The fairies had returned the housekeeper to the pond from which Patton Burgess had lured her years ago. Lena had not seemed eager to go back, but then the last time Kendra had seen her, Lena had tried to pull her into the pond. Even so, Kendra felt determined to find a way to free her friend from her watery prison. She remained convinced that, deep down, Lena preferred life as a mortal to life as a naiad.

Vanessa brought the damaged sports car to a stop in front of the house. Grandma Sorenson started walking from the front porch to the driveway. Kendra climbed out and pulled the seat forward to release Seth from his confinement. He scrambled out, then paused to stretch.

“I’m so relieved to see you’re all right,” Grandma said, giving Kendra a hug.

“Except my legs are numb,” Seth groaned, rubbing his calves.

“He means we’re happy to see you, too,” Kendra apologized.

Grandma embraced Seth, who seemed a little reluctant. “Look at you,” she said. “You’ve grown a mile.”

Dale skidded to a stop on the four-wheeler, leapt off, and helped Vanessa take the suitcases out of the trunk. Seth hurried over to help. Kendra reached into the backseat and retrieved the duffel bags.

“Looks like you took quite a hit,” Grandma said, surveying the gash in the roof of the otherwise streamlined vehicle.

“She still handled surprisingly well,” Vanessa said, picking up Seth’s suitcase. Seth reached for it.

“We’ll cover any costs for repairs,” Grandma said.

Vanessa shook her head. “I spend a fortune on insurance. Let them foot the bill.” She rewarded Seth’s persistence by relinquishing his suitcase.

Together they walked to the front door and entered the house. Grandpa sat in a wheelchair in the entry hall. His left leg was in a cast that went from his toes to the top of his shin. A second cast covered his right arm from wrist to shoulder. Fading bruises marked his face, yellowish and gray splotches. But he was grinning.

A pair of men flanked Grandpa. One was a hulking Polynesian with a broad nose and cheerful eyes. His tank top revealed massive, sloping shoulders. A thorny green tattoo wreathed his thick upper arm. The other man was an older fellow a few inches shorter than Kendra, thin and wiry. His head was bald except for a gray tuft in the middle and a fringe around the sides. He wore several trinkets around his neck, affixed to leather cords or dull chains. He also wore a couple of braided bracelets and a wooden ring. None of it looked valuable. The pinky finger was missing from his left hand, as was part of the ring finger.

“Welcome back,” Grandpa cried, beaming. “It’s so good to see you.” Kendra wondered if he was trying to compensate for his injured appearance with exuberance. “Kendra, Seth, I would like you to meet Tanugatoa Dufu.” Grandpa gestured at the Polynesian man with his unbroken arm.

“Everyone calls me Tanu,” he said. He was soft-spoken, with a deep voice and clear enunciation. His playful eyes and mild voice went a long way toward offsetting his otherwise intimidating appearance.

“And this is Coulter Dixon, a name Kendra has heard before,” Grandpa said.

Coulter regarded them with a measuring gaze. “Any friend of Stan’s is a friend of mine,” he said, sounding less than sincere.

“Nice to meet you,” Kendra said.

“Any friend of Grandpa’s . . .” Seth added.

Dale and Vanessa collected the bags Kendra and Seth were holding and started up the stairs.

“And of course the two of you have met Vanessa Santoro,” Grandpa said. “Tanu, Coulter, and Vanessa have joined us here at Fablehaven to help with the workload. As you can see, I took a tumble last week, so their assistance has become even more valuable in recent days.”

“What happened?” Seth asked.

“We’ll reserve that discussion, and many others, for tomorrow. Midnight is long gone. You’ve had an eventful day. Your room is ready and

waiting. Get some sleep, and we'll make sense of the situation in the morning."

"I want to know what bit me," Seth said.

"Tomorrow," Grandpa promised.

"I don't think I could sleep now," Kendra said.

"You may surprise yourself," Grandma said from behind, ushering Kendra and Seth toward the stairs.

"Morning will come soon enough," Grandpa said. As Kendra started up the stairs, Tanu wheeled Grandpa in the direction of the study.

Kendra ran her hand along the smooth finish of the banister. She had seen this house in ruins after Seth had foolishly opened the attic window on Midsummer Eve. And she had seen it restored after an army of brownies had repaired it overnight, making unpredictable improvements in much of the furniture. As Kendra entered the attic playroom, it felt familiar and safe, in spite of the night when she and her brother were pinned inside a circle of salt by ferocious invaders.

"Here's your things," Dale said, indicating the bags beside the beds. "Welcome back."

"Sweet dreams," Vanessa said, exiting the room with Dale.

"Can I offer you anything?" Grandma asked. "Some warm milk?"

"Sure," Seth said. "Thanks."

"Dale will bring it up momentarily," Grandma said. She gave each of them a hug. "I'm so glad you arrived safely. Have pleasant dreams. We'll catch up properly in the morning." She left the room.

Seth dug into his suitcase. "Can you keep a secret?" he asked.

Kendra crouched to unzip her duffel bag. "Yes, but you can't, so I'm sure you'd tell me either way."

He pulled a jumbo pack of size C batteries from his suitcase. "I'm going to leave here a millionaire."

"Where'd you get those?"

"I picked them up a long time ago," Seth said. "Just in case."

"You think you're going to sell them to the satyrs?"

"So they can watch TV."

Kendra shook her head. The satyrs they had met in the woods after stealing soup from the ogress had promised Seth gold if he would bring

them batteries for their portable television. “I’m not sure I would trust Newel and Doren to pay up.”

“That’s why all payments have to be made in advance,” Seth said, replacing the batteries in his suitcase and taking out the oversized T-shirt and shorts that he used as pajamas. “We’ve already talked about it.”

“When?”

“Last summer, while you were sleeping forever after the fairies kissed you—during one of those rare moments when somebody wasn’t scolding me. I’ll be in the bathroom.” He headed out the door and down the stairs.

Kendra took advantage of the opportunity to change into her nightclothes. Not long after she changed, there came a soft knock at the door. “Come in,” she said. Dale entered with two mugs of warm milk on a tray. He left the drinks on the nightstand.

Pulling back her sheets, Kendra climbed into bed and began sipping at her milk. Seth came into the room, picked up his mug, and chugged the contents. Wiping his mouth on his arm, he walked over to the window. “There’s lots of fairies out tonight.”

“I bet they’ll be happy to see you again,” Kendra said. Seth had started a feud with the fairies during their previous visit after he had captured one and inadvertently turned her into an imp.

“They forgave me,” he said. “We’re friends now.” He switched off the light and jumped into bed.

Kendra finished her milk and placed the empty mug on the nightstand. “You’re not going to do anything stupid this time, are you,” she said.

“I’ve learned my lesson.”

“Because it sounds like something bad is going on,” Kendra said. “They don’t need you making it worse.”

“I’ll be the perfect grandchild.”

“Once you get your gold from the satyrs,” Kendra said.

“Yeah, after that.”

She lay back, letting her head sink into the feathery pillow, and stared up at the sharp angles of the attic ceiling. What would Grandpa and Grandma tell them in the morning? Why had Errol taken such an interest in them? Why had he ambushed them? What had bitten Seth? What about Vanessa, Tanu, and Coulter? What were their stories? Where had they come

from? How long would they stay? Why replace Lena with three people? Wasn't Fablehaven supposed to be a big secret? Even though it was late and she felt drowsy, her mind was too full of questions for sleep to find her quickly.

* * *

The next morning, Kendra awoke with Seth shaking her shoulder. "Come on," he said, hushed and excited. "It's time for answers."

Kendra sat up. She blinked several times. She wanted answers too. But why not sleep in a little first? It was this way every Christmas—Seth awakening the whole house at the crack of dawn, anxious and impatient. She swung her legs out of bed, grabbed her duffel bag, and walked down the stairs to the bathroom to freshen up.

When Kendra finally descended the stairs to the entry hall, she found Vanessa carrying a tray laden with steaming scrambled eggs and dark toast. Once again, Vanessa was dressed in a stylish outfit and her makeup was applied with subtle artistry. She looked too sophisticated to be holding a tray of food like a maid. "Your grandparents want you to join them in the study for a private breakfast," Vanessa said.

Kendra followed Vanessa into the study. Another tray with drinks, jam, and butter was already on the desk. Grandpa sat in his wheelchair, Grandma sat in the chair behind the desk, and Seth sat in one of the oversized armchairs in front of the desk. An empty plate rested on his lap. Kendra noticed a cot in the corner where Grandpa now apparently slept.

The study was an eye-catching room, full of odd knickknacks. Strange tribal masks lined a shelf, golfing trophies crowded another, a collection of fossils vied for attention on a third. Half of a large geode glittered in a corner. Plaques, certificates, and a framed display of medals and ribbons decorated a portion of one wall. The savage head of a boar hung mounted not far from the window. Younger versions of Grandpa and Grandma Sorenson grinned from multiple pictures, some black and white, others in color. On the desk, inside a crystal sphere with a flat bottom, floated a fragile skull no bigger than Kendra's thumb. She settled into the other leather armchair.

"Thank you, Vanessa," Grandma said.

Vanessa nodded and exited.

“We take turns cooking meals these days,” Grandma said, spooning eggs onto her plate. “Come dish up before it gets cold. Nobody can match Lena, but we try our best. Even Stan was in the rotation before the accident.”

“Even Stan?” Grandpa blustered. “Have you forgotten my lasagna? My omelets? My stuffed mushrooms?”

“I meant because you’re so busy,” Grandma soothed. She raised a hand to partly hide her mouth, as if confiding a secret to her grandchildren. “He’s been a bit crabby since the accident.”

Grandpa was visibly biting his tongue, probably because another indignant outburst would only confirm Grandma’s words. Under his bruises, his face was reddening. Kendra scooped some eggs onto her plate while Seth buttered a piece of toast.

“What happened to you?” Kendra asked Grandpa.

“Mom said you fell off the roof,” Seth said, “but we weren’t buying it.”

“That would take us into the middle of the story,” Grandpa said, regaining his composure. “Better to start at the beginning.”

“You’ll get to the part about what bit me?” Seth verified hopefully.

Grandma nodded. “But first a question for Kendra. Did Errol ever indicate that he knew anything about what transpired between you and the fairies?”

“Yeah,” Kendra said, sitting back down and picking up a piece of toast. “That was partly how he convinced me to trust him. He said that he knew I had been fairystruck, and offered the information as proof that he knew Grandpa’s friend Coulter.” She put some eggs onto her toast and took a bite.

“The imp,” Grandpa growled, drumming the fingers of his good hand on his cast. He shared a glance with Grandma.

“What imp?” Seth asked.

“The imp that put him in that wheelchair,” Grandma said.

“I thought all the imps changed back into fairies,” Kendra said.

“Apparently a few imps were not at the chapel when the empowered fairies were curing the others,” Grandpa said. “But we’re getting ahead of ourselves.” He stared at Grandma for a moment. “We tell them, right?”

She gave a single, small nod.

Grandpa leaned forward in his wheelchair and lowered his voice. "What we are about to tell you must not leave this room. You must not discuss it even with others we trust, like Dale, or Vanessa, or Tanu, or Coulter. Nobody should know that you know. Or the danger will only increase. Am I understood?"

Kendra and Seth both agreed.

Grandpa eyed Seth. "I mean nobody, Seth."

"What?" he said, squirming a little in his seat. "I promise I won't tell anyone."

"See that you don't," Grandpa admonished solemnly. "I am taking a risk allowing you to return to Fablehaven after the harm you caused. I do it partly because I trust that you have learned a hard lesson about caution, and partly because it may be necessary for your protection. This is information we would prefer not to share with anyone, let alone children. But your grandmother and I feel that you have become too deeply involved for us not to reveal the whole story. You have a right to understand the hazards you face."

Kendra glanced at Seth. He looked so excited that he could hardly contain himself. Although she was also curious, she dreaded to hear the specifics of any threat so somber and secretive.

"I have already related part of the story," Grandma said. "Last summer, in the attic, before we went to rescue your grandfather, I mentioned some reasons why Fablehaven is different from most other magical preserves. I told you in case your grandpa and I perished and you survived."

"Fablehaven is one of five secret preserves," Kendra said.

"Very good, Kendra," Grandpa said.

"The five secret preserves each have a powerful item hidden on them," Kendra continued. "Not many people know about the secret preserves."

"Very few indeed," Grandma said. "And none know the location of all five."

"One probably does," Grandpa corrected.

"Well, if he does, he has never let on," Grandma replied.

"I've wondered a lot about what you told us," Kendra said. "It seems really mysterious."

Grandpa cleared his throat. He looked almost hesitant to speak. “Did Errol ever allude to Fablehaven as a secret preserve housing a special artifact?”

“No,” Kendra said. Seth shook his head.

“And he did nothing to cajole that information out of you?” Grandpa pursued.

“No,” Seth said. Kendra agreed.

Grandpa leaned back. “That, at least, is a relief.”

“But we must continue with our plan,” Grandma said.

Grandpa waved his hand. “Of course. We’ll proceed as if the secret is out.”

“You think they know?” Kendra asked.

Grandpa frowned. “The Society of the Evening Star should not even be aware that this preserve exists. Enormous efforts have been taken to maintain our anonymity. Yet we know the Society colluded with Muriel and nearly managed to overthrow Fablehaven last summer. And so we must assume that they are aware Fablehaven is a secret preserve, and realize what it contains.”

“What?” Seth asked. “What is the artifact?”

“By itself, an ancient talisman of tremendous power,” Grandpa said. “In connection with the other four, the key to Zzyzx, the great prison where literally thousands of the most powerful demons from every age of this world are incarcerated.”

“None remain who know its location,” Grandma whispered.

“Except, perhaps, the Society,” Grandpa murmured, scowling at the floor. “If the five talismans were ever brought together and used to open Zzyzx, the results would be . . . catastrophic. Apocalyptic. The end of the world.”

“Endless night,” Grandma echoed. “Across all the earth. The mighty fiends inside of Zzyzx would make Bahumat look like an infant. A lapdog. In their absence, we long ago lost the ability to contend with beings of their power. Even the fairy army you summoned would quail before them. Our only hope is to keep them imprisoned.”

The room was silent. Kendra could hear the grandfather clock ticking. “So how do we stop them?” Seth finally said.

“That is the right question,” Grandpa said, jabbing a finger at Seth for emphasis. “I put that same query to the unofficial leader of the Conservators’ Alliance.”

“What’s that?” Seth asked.

“The caretakers of all the preserves around the world, along with their allies, belong to the Conservators’ Alliance,” Grandma explained.

“Each caretaker has an equal say, with none officially presiding,” Grandpa said. “But for centuries we have benefited from the advice and aid of our greatest ally—the Sphinx.”

“Like in Egypt?” Kendra asked.

“Whether he is actually a sphinx, we do not know,” Grandpa said. “Surely he is more than mortal. His service dates back to the twelfth century. I have spoken with him face-to-face only twice, and on both occasions he was in the likeness of a man. But many of the most powerful creatures, like dragons, can assume human form when it suits them.”

“You asked the Sphinx what to do?” Seth asked.

“I did,” Grandpa said. “Face-to-face, as a matter of fact. He suggested we move the artifact. You see, at roughly three hundred years old, Fablehaven is among the youngest preserves. Of the secret preserves, it is by far the newest. One of the secret preserves was compromised not long before Fablehaven was founded. The vault housing the artifact was transported here, and Fablehaven was kept a secret thereafter. So the idea is not without precedent.”

“Have you moved it yet?” Kendra asked.

Grandpa scratched his chin. “We have to find it first.”

“You don’t know where it is?” Seth blurted.

“To my knowledge,” Grandpa said, “none of the caretakers of the secret sanctuaries know where the artifacts on their preserves are hidden. The vaults that hold them were concealed so as to never be found.”

“And they are protected by lethal traps,” Grandma added.

“Which is the true explanation for our visitors,” Grandpa said softly.

“They’re here to find the artifact!” Kendra said.

Grandpa nodded. “I do not envy their task.”

“Have they found anything yet?” Seth asked.

“Vanessa has had some luck poring through the journals of former caretakers,” Grandpa said. “Patton Burgess, Lena’s husband, was fascinated by the secret artifacts. In a coded reference in one of his journals, he made mention of an inverted tower on the property where he believed Fablehaven’s artifact resides. His notes were inconclusive, but they gave us some idea of where to concentrate our search. We may find the artifact tomorrow. Or it might take many lifetimes.”

“No wonder Vanessa has such an awesome car,” Seth said. “She’s a treasure hunter.”

“They all have different specialties,” Grandpa said. “Tanu is a potion master. Coulter collects magical relics. Vanessa focuses on capturing mystical animals. Their various occupations have taken them to some of the most dangerous corners of the world, and qualify them for this perilous assignment.”

“As caretakers, we hold as an heirloom the key that will allow us to access the vault,” Grandma said. “We keep it safely hidden. Once we discover the location of the vault, the key will allow us the chance to get inside and retrieve the artifact.”

“Even with the key, avoiding the many traps guarding the artifact promises to be no small task,” Grandpa said. “Tanu, Coulter, and Vanessa will need to be in top form.”

“Did they know about Fablehaven beforehand?” Kendra asked.

“None of them,” Grandpa said. “I counseled long with the Sphinx and others to select them. Coulter is an old friend. I know him the best. Tanu has an impeccable reputation. As does Vanessa. The Sphinx and several other caretakers vouched for both of them.”

“Despite their careful selection,” Grandma said, “there is a chance, however small, that the Society could have gotten to one of them. Or that one of them has been an agent for the Society all along. The Society of the Evening Star has an uncanny ability for infiltration. An endorsement from the Sphinx virtually clears them of suspicion, but the Sphinx himself cautioned that we should remain mindful of the possibility.”

“Which is part of the reason we selected three instead of one,” Grandpa said, “along with the desire for extra help. Even with three seasoned experts, finding the artifact is an overwhelming assignment.”

“Together they serve the added benefit of providing extra security around here,” Grandma said, “which is obviously a comfort, considering the recent unrest.”

“There have been reports of unparalleled activity by the Society,” Grandpa said. “Since last summer, two more preserves have fallen, one of them a secret preserve like Fablehaven.”

“So they got one of the artifacts?” Kendra asked, gripping the arms of her chair.

“We don’t know,” Grandpa said. “We hope not. You remember Maddox, the fairy broker? He went into the preserve after it fell to perform reconnaissance. We have not heard back.”

“How long ago?” Seth asked.

“More than three months,” Grandma said.

“The secret preserve was in Brazil,” Grandpa said. “They thwarted an infiltration there two years ago. Then this past February . . . we don’t know what happened.”

“What artifact was hidden there?” Seth asked, wide-eyed.

“Impossible to say,” Grandpa said. “We have a rough idea of what the artifacts are, but no clue which is hidden where.”

“What are they?” Kendra asked.

Grandpa looked at Grandma, who shrugged. “One grants power over space, another over time. A third grants unlimited sight. A fourth can heal any ailment. And one bestows immortality.”

“The details have been deliberately shrouded in mystery,” Grandma said.

“The magic they wield is greater than any we know,” Grandpa said. “For example, there are ways to get from one place to another besides walking, but the artifact that grants power over space does so in ways superior to any known spell or relic or creature.”

“And somehow, used together, they can open the demon prison?” Kendra clarified.

“Exactly,” Grandpa confirmed. “Which is why they must remain apart and out of the hands of our enemies at all costs. One concern is that if the Society could get their hands on one, they could use it to help retrieve the others.”

“But they may already have one,” Seth said.

“We can only hope that the fallen preserve in Brazil was as inhospitable for them as it apparently was for Maddox,” Grandma said. “Others have been sent since Maddox vanished. None have returned. Naturally we must take precautions as if the worst has happened.”

“So where do Seth and I come into all of this?” Kendra asked.

Grandpa took a sip from a tall glass of orange juice. He furrowed his brow. “We’re not entirely sure. We know the Society has taken a serious interest in you two. We worry that they may know something more than we do about the change the fairies wrought in Kendra, something that makes them believe she could be of use to them. They infiltrated your school and tried to win your trust. They used Seth to free a captive demon. Almost certainly they meant to abduct you. Their ultimate goal is hard to divine.”

“The Sphinx himself wants to meet Kendra,” Grandma said.

“He’s here?” Seth exclaimed.

“Nearby,” Grandpa said. “He never stays in one place long. Most recently he was doing damage control in Brazil. But he has become concerned that Fablehaven may be the next target. There have been numerous rumors of Society activity in the area, even beyond what happened with the two of you. I got in touch with him last night. He wants to meet Kendra and see if he can discern why the Society has become so interested in her.”

“I want to meet him too,” Seth said.

“We plan to bring you as well,” Grandpa said, “to see if something can be done about that bite.”

“I’m sick of waiting; what’s the story?” Seth sounded exasperated.

“Olloch the Glutton is a demon enchanted by a peculiar spell,” Grandpa explained. “He remains in a petrified state, inert, until somebody feeds him. He bites the hand that feeds him and, after that, gradually awakens, driven by an insatiable hunger. He eats, and as he eats, he grows. As his size increases, so does his power, and he does not stop eating until he consumes the person who initially awakened him.”

“He’s going to eat me?” Seth cried.

“He’s going to try,” Grandpa said.

“Can he get into Fablehaven?”

“I don’t think so,” Grandpa said. “But the day will soon come when he will prowl our borders, searching for an opportunity to strike, gaining more power every day as he continues to gorge himself. He will be inexorably drawn to you. The only places to hide are those he cannot access.”

“There has to be something we can do!” Seth said.

“That is why I want to bring you to the Sphinx,” Grandpa said. “His wisdom has proven equal to situations more challenging than this. Don’t worry, we won’t let Olloch devour you.”

Seth put his face in his hands. “Why does everything I do go wrong?” He looked up. “I thought I was being helpful.”

“This was not your fault,” Grandma said. “You were being very brave, and trying to do the right thing. Sadly, Errol was taking advantage of you.”

“Do you know anything about Errol?” Kendra asked.

“Nothing,” Grandpa said.

“How did he find out about the fairies?”

Grandpa sighed. “We have a theory. Last week, we found an imp, one of the big kind, passing information to a caped figure through the border fence. We could not catch the person he was informing—the stranger made a hasty retreat. But we managed to apprehend the imp.”

“The rogue would have gotten away if not for your grandpa,” Grandma said.

“Choosing between me and Tanu, the imp tried to get past me,” Grandpa said. “I tackled him, but he was amazingly strong. He hurled me into a gully. I felt my arm snap beneath me, and fractured my tibia. But I managed to slow the brute long enough for Tanu to use a concoction that paralyzed him.”

“Where is he now?” Seth asked.

“In the dungeon,” Grandpa said.

“The basement,” Grandma clarified.

“So that’s what’s down there!” Seth cried.

“Among other things,” Grandpa said. “Unaccompanied, the dungeon is absolutely off-limits to you two.”

“Big surprise,” Seth mumbled.

“Anyhow,” Grandpa said, “the point is, we believe that the imp, and perhaps others, must have leaked the experience Kendra had with the fairies

to the Society. Imps are crafty spies.”

“Are we going to have to hide here for the rest of our lives?” Kendra asked.

Grandpa slapped his hand down on the arm of the wheelchair. “Who said anything about hiding? We’ll be taking action. Finding and moving the artifact. Investigating why the Society is interested in you. Consulting with the Sphinx.”

“And offering you two world-class training from some of the most skilled adventurers anywhere,” Grandma said. “You need to learn about the world you are being drawn into, and you could find no better teachers than Tanu, Vanessa, and Coulter.”

“They’re going to teach us?” Seth asked, eyes shining.

“They will be your mentors,” Grandpa said. “At this point, sitting still would be a mistake. You two will have opportunities to accompany them on some of their outings as they search for the artifact.”

“Not when they do anything truly dangerous,” Grandma amended.

“No,” Grandpa said. “But you’ll get to see a new side of Fablehaven. And learn a trick or two that may help you in the future. Ignorance is no longer a protection for either of you.”

“Coulter may be tough to work with, particularly for Kendra,” Grandma said with a trace of bitterness. “He has a prehistoric outlook on certain issues, and a difficult personality. But he also has a lot to offer. If all else fails, Vanessa has agreed to take up the slack.”

“They do not know the extent of what we have told you,” Grandpa said. “They think we informed you that they are hunting for a hidden relic, and they understand that you are to accompany them when prudence will allow it. They have no idea that we revealed the true nature of the artifact or the fact that Fablehaven is a secret preserve. You must keep those details to yourselves. I don’t want anyone learning how much you know.”

“No problem,” Seth said.

“What do they think we believe the artifact is?” Kendra said.

“A magical relic that will help us in our fight against the Society,” Grandma said. “An unknown talisman rumored to be hidden on the property. We told them we would keep it vague, and that they should do the same.”

“If we find it,” Seth said, “why don’t we use it against Errol and his friends?”

“The artifacts have remained in our possession for millennia precisely because we have not sought to use them,” Grandpa said. “Those watching over them have not even known where they are hidden. If we use them, it will be only a matter of time before we misuse them, and they fall into the wrong hands.”

“That makes sense,” Kendra said. “When will we see the Sphinx?”

“He should let me know shortly,” Grandpa said, dabbing the corner of his mouth with his napkin. “You now know all we know about the new threat we are facing. We have treated you as adults, and expect you to behave accordingly.”

“Get to know our new arrivals,” Grandma said. “Learning from them will be a once-in-a-lifetime experience.”

“When do we start?” Seth asked.

“Immediately,” Grandpa answered.

Chapter 6



Tanu

When Kendra and Seth exited the study, Dale was waiting on the other side of the door. “Ready to start summer school?” he asked.

“If it means we get to see cool monsters, absolutely,” Seth replied.

“Follow me,” Dale said. He led them into the parlor, where Tanu sat reading a leather-bound book. “Your pupils have arrived,” Dale announced.

Tanu stood up. Dale was tall, but Tanu was half a head taller. And much thicker. He wore a rugged, long-sleeved shirt and jeans. “Please have a seat,” he said in his deep, mild voice. Kendra and Seth sat down on a sofa, and Dale departed. “Your grandparents told you about the relic we are hunting?” he asked.

“They weren’t very specific,” Kendra said. “What exactly is it?” She figured that if she didn’t sound curious, it would look suspicious.

“We don’t know many of the details,” Tanu said, his dark eyes flicking back and forth between the two of them. “Only that it is rumored to be quite powerful, and could help us keep the preserves safe from the Society. You two will be helping in the pursuit of this hidden treasure. But first we need to get acquainted.”

Tanu asked them several standard questions. He found out that Seth was going into seventh grade, that he liked to ride his bike and play practical jokes, and that he had once captured a fairy using a jar and a mirror. He learned that Kendra was heading into ninth grade, that her favorite subjects were history

and English, and that she played halfback on the school soccer team. He did not ask Kendra about the fairy army.

“It’s only fair that I now tell you about myself,” Tanu said. “Do you have any questions?”

“Are you from Hawaii?” Seth asked.

“I grew up in Pasadena,” Tanu said. “But my ancestors are from Anaheim.” He flashed a broad smile, showing big white teeth. “I’m Samoan. I’ve only been there as a visitor, though.”

“Have you traveled a lot?” Kendra asked.

“More than my fair share,” he admitted. “I’ve been around the world many times, seen many strange sights. My father made potions, and his father before him, going back many generations. My dad taught me what I know. He retired a few years back. He lives in Arizona in the winter, Idaho in the summer.”

“Do you have a family?” Kendra asked.

“I have my folks, some brothers and sisters, and a bunch of nieces and nephews and cousins. No wife, no kids. Drives my folks crazy. Everybody wants me to settle down. Dad once tried to slip me a love potion to make me fall for some neighbor girl that he liked. He already has seventeen grandkids, but he says he wants some from his eldest. I’ll throw down roots someday. Not yet.”

“You know how to make love potions?” Seth asked.

“And avoid them,” Tanu grinned.

“What else can you make?” Seth asked.

“Potions to cure illnesses, potions to induce sleep, potions that awaken lost memories,” Tanu said. “It all depends on what I have to work with. The toughest part of being a potion master is collecting ingredients. Only magical ingredients yield magical results. I study cause and effect, and I benefit from the studies of many who came before me. I try to figure out how to combine different materials to achieve a desired outcome.”

“Where do you get ingredients?” Kendra asked.

“The most powerful ingredients are usually by-products of magical creatures,” Tanu explained. “Viola, the milch cow, is a potion master’s dream. Her milk, her blood, her dung, her sweat, her tears, her saliva—they all have different magical properties. At an icy preserve in Greenland, on the coast, they get their milk from a gigantic walrus, nearly a thousand years old, one of

the eldest animals on the planet. The derivatives of the walrus have different properties from the cow's. Along with certain similarities."

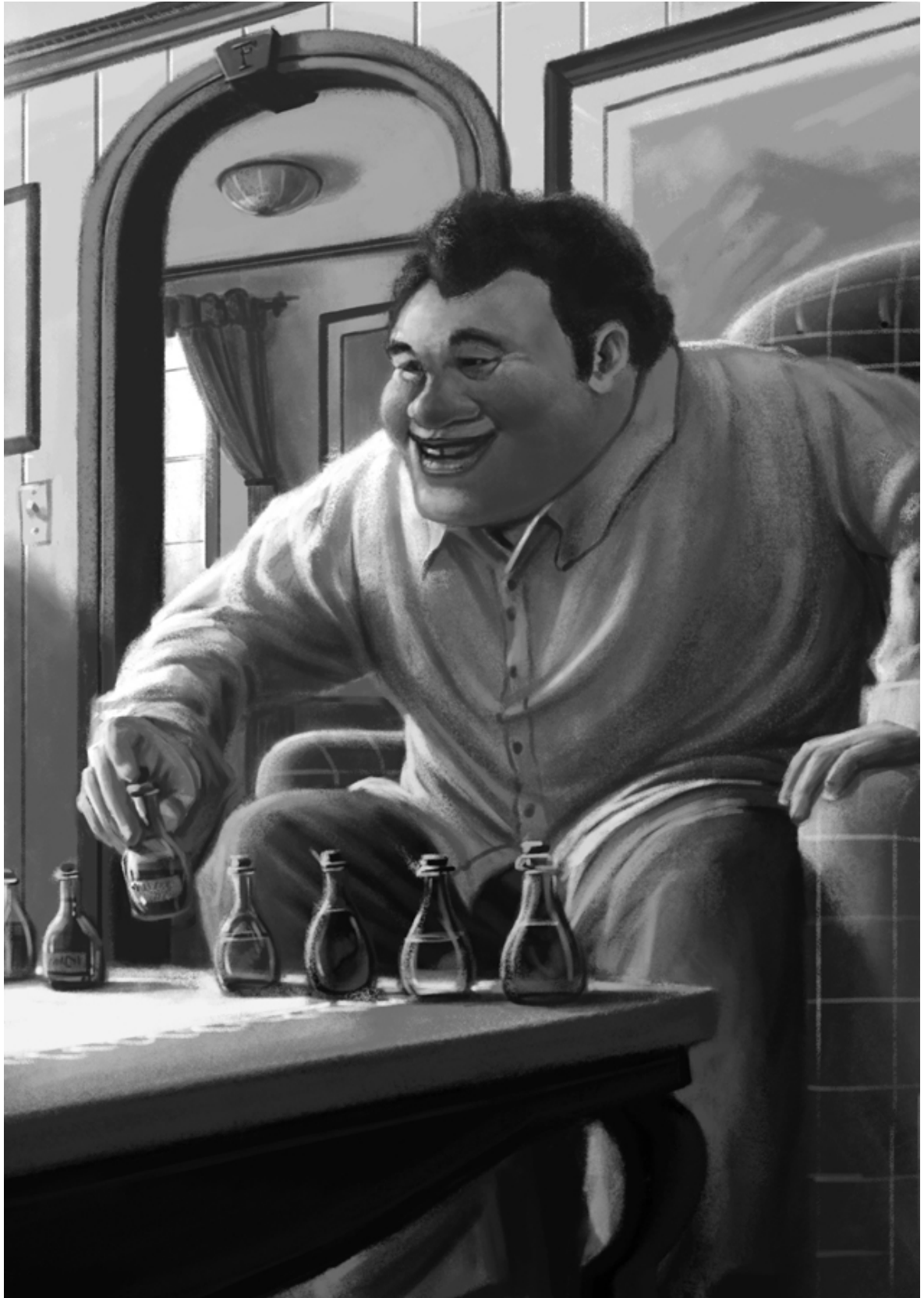
"Cool," Seth said.

"It is fascinating," Tanu admitted. "You never know what skills you'll need. I've climbed mountains, picked locks, ventured deep underwater, and learned foreign languages. Sometimes you can trade for ingredients, or purchase them. But you have to be careful. Some potion makers are unscrupulous. They get their ingredients in horrible ways. Dragon tears, for example. A very potent ingredient, but hard to come by. Dragons cry only when they are in the deepest mourning or when they have committed a terrible betrayal. They cannot fake the tears. There are bad people out there who would capture a young dragon and then murder its dear ones just to collect the tears. You don't want to support that kind of barbarity, so you have to be careful who you trade with, and who you buy from. Most of the best potion makers prefer to find their own ingredients. Which is why some of the best potion makers don't live very long."

"Do you collect your own ingredients?" Seth asked.

"Most of the time," Tanu said. "Every now and again I barter with reputable dealers. I can find much of what I need on preserves. Other items I locate in the wild. My grandfather lived to retirement and died in his sleep. My dad lived to retirement and is still with us. They taught me some good tricks that help keep me safe. Hopefully I can pass some of that knowledge along to you."

Tanu picked up a pouch that was sitting next to his chair. He began removing small bottles with narrow necks and arranging them in a single row on the coffee table. "What are those?" Seth asked.



Tanu glanced up. “Part of a demonstration, to prove that I know my trade. A family specialty—bottled-up emotions.”

“Drinking them will make us feel a certain way?” Kendra asked.

“Temporarily, yes,” Tanu said. “In large doses the emotions can be overpowering. I want each of you to choose an emotion to sample. I’ll mix you a small dose. The emotions will pass quickly. You can try fear, rage, embarrassment, or sorrow.” He removed more items from his pouch—jars, vials, and a small sandwich bag full of leaves.

“Are they all bad emotions?” Kendra asked.

“I can do courage, calm, confidence, and joy, among others. But the negative emotions make better demonstrations. They are more shocking, and less addictive.”

“I want to try fear,” Seth said, coming to stand near Tanu.

“Good choice,” Tanu responded. He unscrewed the lid of a jar and used a tool that looked like a small tongue depressor to scoop out some beige paste. “I’m mixing this so the effect will come and go very quickly, just giving you a brief sample of the emotion.” Removing a small leaf from the bag, Tanu scraped the paste onto the leaf. He then dripped four drops from one of the bottles onto the leaf, added a single drop from a different bottle, and mixed the liquid into the paste with the tongue depressor. He handed the leaf to Seth.

“Eat the leaf?” Seth asked.

“Eat it all,” Tanu said. “Sit down first. When the emotion hits, it will be distressing, much more real than you probably expect. Try to remember that it is artificial and that it will pass.”

Seth sat down on a brocaded armchair. He sniffed the leaf, then popped it into his mouth. He chewed and swallowed quickly. “Not bad. Tastes a little like peanuts.”

Kendra watched him intently. “Is he going to freak out?” she asked.

“Wait and see,” Tanu said, suppressing a grin.

“I feel fine so far,” Seth announced.

“It takes a few seconds,” Tanu said.

“A few seconds for what?” Seth asked, an edge of anxiety creeping into his voice.

“See?” Tanu said, winking at Kendra. “It’s starting.”

“What’s starting?” Seth asked, eyes darting. “Why’d you wink at her? Why are you talking like I’m not in the room?”

"I'm sorry, Seth," Tanu said. "We mean no harm. The effects of the potion are hitting you."

Seth's breathing was becoming ragged. He was shifting in his seat, rubbing his thighs with his palms. "What did you give me?" he said, raising his voice and sounding paranoid. "Why'd you have to mix so much stuff? How do I know I can trust you?"

"It's all right," Kendra said. "You're just feeling the effects of the potion."

Seth looked at Kendra, his face contorting, tears brimming in his eyes. He raised his voice more, sounding hysterical. "Just the potion? Just the potion!" He chuckled bitterly. "You don't get it? He poisoned me! He poisoned me, and you're next. I'm going to die! We're all going to die!" He was curling up on the chair, quivering and hugging his knees. A single tear leaked from one eye and slid down his cheek.

Kendra looked at Tanu, distressed. Tanu raised a calming hand. "He's already coming out of it."

She looked back at her brother. He sat still for a moment, then straightened his legs and sat up, wiping the remnants of the tear from his cheek. "Wow," Seth said. "You weren't kidding! That felt so real. I couldn't think straight. I thought you had tricked me into drinking poison or something."

"Your mind was searching for threats to justify the emotion," Tanu said. "It helped that you knew beforehand the emotion was coming. Had I drugged you by surprise, it would have been much more difficult to make sense of the experience afterwards. Let alone if I used a higher dosage. Imagine if I made that emotion much more intense and longer lasting."

"You have to try it," Seth said to Kendra.

"I'm not sure I want to," Kendra said. "Can't I feel something happy?"

"You should try an emotion you would normally resist if you want to appreciate the potency," Tanu said. "It's alarming in the moment, but you'll feel fine afterwards. In a way, it's cleansing. An occasional foray into negative emotions makes feeling normal that much sweeter."

"He's right, I feel great now," Seth said. "Like the riddle. Why do you hit yourself in the head fifty times with a hammer?"

"Why?" Kendra asked.

"Because it feels so good when you stop!"

"Try an emotion other than fear," Tanu said. "For the sake of variety."

"Pick one for me," Kendra said. "Don't tell me what it is."

“You sure?” Tanu asked.

“Yeah, if I’m going to do it, I want you to surprise me.”

Tanu put another glob of beige paste on a leaf and mixed in drops from three bottles. He gave the leaf to Kendra, and she popped it into her mouth and chewed it up, sitting down on the carpet in the middle of the room. The leaf was a little tricky to chew. It did not taste like something you were supposed to eat. The paste was pretty good. It melted in her mouth and was a little sweet. She swallowed.

Seth edged over to Tanu and whispered something to him. Kendra realized he was probably asking what emotion to expect. Kendra focused on remaining aware that a phony emotion was about to surface. If she concentrated hard enough, she should be able to keep it under control. She’d feel it, but she wouldn’t let it overwhelm her. Tanu whispered something back to Seth. They were both staring at her expectantly. What was their deal? Did she have a piece of the leaf caught in her teeth? Seth whispered something else to Tanu.

“Why are you whispering?” Kendra accused. It came out a little harsher than she intended, but they were being so secretive all of a sudden. Had she whispered to Tanu? No! She had spoken so everyone could hear her. It seemed obvious they were no longer talking about the potion—they were gossiping about her.

Seth laughed at her question, and Tanu grinned.

Tears stung Kendra’s eyes. “Did I say something funny?” she challenged, her voice cracking a bit. Seth laughed harder. Tanu chuckled. Kendra ground her teeth, her face flushing. Once again, she was the outcast. Seth always made friends so quickly. He had already turned Tanu against her. It was fourth grade all over again; she was eating lunch alone, silently hoping for somebody to talk to her. Hoping somebody besides a teacher would notice and include her.

“It’s all right, Kendra,” Tanu said kindly. “Remember, it isn’t real.”

Why was he trying to reassure her? All of a sudden she realized what Seth must have whispered to him. He had pointed out the pimple on her chin! Seth had said that her face was erupting like a volcano, that grime was clogging her pores and turning her into a freakish sideshow. That was why they had laughed! Seth had probably accused her of not washing enough, even though she scrubbed her face every night! But of course Tanu would believe Seth, because the evidence was right there on her chin, as subtle as a lighthouse. And now that Tanu had noticed, the pimple would be all he saw. She hung her head.

Tanu would almost certainly tell Grandpa. And all the others! They'd laugh behind her back. She would never be able to show her face again!

Her cheeks burned. She began to weep. Grudgingly, she glanced up. They both looked astonished. Seth was approaching her. "It's okay, Kendra," he said.

She buried her face in her arms, sobbing. Why did they keep staring at her? Why wouldn't they leave her alone? Hadn't they done enough? Enduring their pity was much worse than suffering their scorn. She wished she could just disappear.

"It'll be over soon," Tanu assured her.

What did he know? This could be just the beginning! She had been lucky so far, with only the occasional pimple now and again, but soon she might be disfigured by vast constellations of acne. Red lumps would pile up until she looked like she had thrust her head into a beehive. Now that Seth had set the tone of mocking her, things would never be the same. From here on out, all she could look forward to were cruel jokes and false sympathy. She had to get away.

Kendra jumped to her feet. "I hate you, Seth!" she yelled, not caring what anyone would think of the outburst. Her reputation was already damaged beyond repair. She ran from the room. Behind her, she heard Tanu telling Seth to let her go. Where could she hide? The bedroom! She raced to the stairs and started charging up them two at a time. And suddenly she realized how ridiculous it would look for her to run away. She stopped, her hand gripping the banister. The situation abruptly seemed much less tragic.

Was she sure Seth had pointed out the pimple to Tanu? Even if he had, was it that big of a deal? Almost every teen got pimples from time to time. Now that she thought about it, was it even likely that Seth had mentioned anything about the pimple? No! She had jumped to that conclusion on her own, with very little evidence. It was the potion! This was just like when Seth assumed he had been poisoned! Even though she had tried to anticipate it, the emotion had blindsided her. It seemed ridiculously obvious now.

Kendra returned to the parlor, wiping away the tears. She had cried a lot. Her sleeves were damp, and her nose was congested. "That was incredible," she said.

"What emotion do you think it was?" Seth asked.

"Embarrassment?" Kendra guessed.

“Close,” Tanu said. “It was shame. A hybrid of embarrassment and sorrow.”

“I thought,” Kendra said, hesitating for a moment to divulge her ridiculous assumption, “I thought that Seth was pointing out the pimple on my chin. And it suddenly seemed like he had revealed the guiltiest secret of all time. I thought you two were making fun of me. Not that I love getting pimples, but it was suddenly blown all out of proportion.”

“Again, your mind was seizing on something to try to make sense of the emotion,” Tanu said. “Can you see the power emotion has to distort our outlook? Makes you wonder, did you *have* a bad day, or did you *make it* a bad day?”

“I thought if I stayed focused I could keep the emotion under control,” Kendra said.

“Not unreasonable,” Tanu said. “We can exert a lot of control over our emotions. But sometimes they run away with us. These bottled-up emotions hit you with a lot of force. It would take a shockingly strong will to resist them. In large enough doses, I don’t see how anybody could.”

“What do you use them for?” Seth asked.

“Depends,” Tanu said. “Sometimes people need a little dose of courage. Other times you want to cheer somebody up. And every now and then, you can avoid an unwanted confrontation with a little fear, or use a mix of emotions to extract information. We save those uses for the bad guys.”

“Can I try some courage?” Seth asked.

“You already have plenty,” Tanu said. “You don’t want to overuse these emotions. Their potency wears thin if they’re overused, plus you can put your natural emotions out of balance. Artificial emotions are useful only in certain situations. They must be combined by an expert. If you drink straight courage, you can become reckless and foolhardy. For a good result, you have to temper the courage with a little fear, a little calm.”

“That makes sense,” Kendra said.

“I know my trade,” Tanu said, vials and jars clinking as he collected them into his pouch. “I hope that you weren’t too shaken up by the experience. An occasional dose of fear or sorrow can be cathartic. Same with a good cry.”

“If you say so,” Kendra said. “I’ll probably pass next time.”

“I’d do the fear again,” Seth said. “It was sort of like a roller coaster. Except so scary, you don’t really like it till after the ride is over.”

Tanu folded his hands on his lap and adopted a more formal air. "Now that I've let you glimpse what I can do, I want to establish some common goals. They are the same goals I have set for myself, and if we're going to work together, I think we should share them. Assuming you want to work with me."

Kendra and Seth both enthusiastically agreed that they were excited to learn from Tanu.

"My first goal is to protect the integrity of Fablehaven," Tanu said. "I want to keep this preserve safe from any dangers without or within. That includes protecting the people who live here. That objective stands as my top priority. Will you commit to help me do that?"

Kendra and Seth both nodded.

"Second," Tanu continued, "I want to find the missing relic. It may be a tedious hunt, but working together I know we will succeed. And in accordance with our top priority, we must find the relic without putting Fablehaven or ourselves at risk. Which means we use sense and caution. Sound good?"

"Yes," Kendra and Seth said together.

"And third, without jeopardizing our other missions, I want to find a cure for Dale's brother, Warren. I understand you two have not met him?"

"Nope," Seth said.

"Grandpa told me about him," Kendra said. "He said Warren vanished into the woods. When Warren showed up a few days later, he was white as an albino, and catatonic."

"Those are the basics," Tanu said. "It happened almost two years ago. Truthfully, I think your grandparents have almost given up on ever healing him. But they are willing to let us try. If anybody can find a cure, I think we're the team to do it."

"Do you know what happened to him?" Seth asked.

"Not yet," Tanu said. "And it is hard to cure a malady without diagnosing the problem. I have put some thought into it, and I remain puzzled, so the cabin where Warren lives will be our main stop today. Dale has been waiting in the other room to take us. Sound like a plan?"

"Sounds perfect," Seth said.

"Then we're agreed on our goals?" Tanu asked.

"All of them," Kendra said.

Tanu grinned. "We have a lot of work ahead of us."

* * *

The June sun glared down as Kendra, Seth, Tanu, and Dale rounded a corner on the grassy cart track. Up ahead, a picturesque log cabin rested on the side of a slope, not far from the rounded crest of a gentle hill. A dilapidated outhouse stood a fair distance from the cabin, and Kendra spotted a hand-operated water pump near the porch. Off to one side of the cabin, the ground had been leveled, and numerous vegetables flourished in tidy rows. As a consequence of the slope, a retaining wall encompassed three sides of the garden, low in the front, high in the back. The area immediately around the cabin had been cleared, but trees bordered the yard on all sides.

“That’s where he lives?” Seth asked.

“Warren doesn’t do well around people,” Dale explained. “He doesn’t respond well to commotion. We’ll want to speak in low voices inside.”

“I thought you said he was catatonic,” Seth said.

Dale stopped. “He hasn’t spoken since he turned albino,” he said. “But you can sometimes read reactions in his eyes. It’s subtle, but I can tell. And he responds to touch. If you guide him, he’ll move around. If you put food to his lips and prod the corner of his mouth, he’ll eat. Left to himself, he’d starve.”

“Tell them about the hoeing,” Tanu prompted.

“That’s right,” Dale said. “One evening I started him hoeing out in the garden. I put the hoe in his hands and started moving his arms. After a while he was doing it on his own. I’d had a long day, so I sat down to watch him. He kept going and going, hoeing and hoeing. I rested my eyes, leaned back against the retaining wall, and fell asleep.

“Next thing I know, I wake up in the dead of night, during the chill before dawn. Warren was still hoeing. He’d churned up the whole garden, and much of the yard beyond. His hands were a bloody mess. I could hardly get the gloves off.”

“How terrible,” Kendra said.

“Can’t say I’m proud of dozing,” Dale said. “But it taught me never to let him do anything unsupervised. Once you get him started at something, he just goes on and on until you stop him.”

“Is it safe for him to be here?” Kendra asked. “I mean, with all the creatures in the woods?”

“The cabin enjoys the same protections as the house,” Dale said. “Although creatures can come into the yard.”

“What if he has to go to the bathroom?” Seth asked.

Dale looked at him as if the question were perplexing. Then the lanky man tipped his head back in realization. "Oh, you mean the outhouse. The cabin has an indoor toilet now."

Dale started walking again. They reached the plank porch of the cabin, and Dale used a key to open the front door. The cabin had a large central room with a door in the rear that led to another room, and a ladder that granted access to a loft. On pegs beside the front door hung a sombrero, a slicker, and an overcoat. A long table dominated the room, surrounded by six chairs. Pyramids of firewood flanked the dark fireplace. A bed stood against the wall, and a man was curled up under the covers, eyes staring flatly toward the door.

Dale crossed to Warren. "You have some visitors, Warren," Dale said. "You remember Tanu. And this is Kendra and Seth Sorenson, two of Stan's grandkids." Dale pulled back the covers and straightened his brother's legs. Then he placed a hand behind Warren's head and guided him into a sitting position. Warren wore a dark orange T-shirt and gray sweatpants. Contrasted against the shirt, his arms looked white as milk. Dale turned him so that he was seated on the edge of the bed. When Dale let go, Kendra half-expected Warren to topple over, but he remained seated upright, eyes vacant.

He looked to be in his twenties, at least ten years younger than Dale. Even with pale skin, white hair, and empty eyes, Warren was unexpectedly handsome. Not quite as tall as his brother, Warren had broader shoulders and a firmer jaw. His features were more finely sculpted. Looking at Dale, she would not picture his brother handsome. Looking at Warren, she would not picture his brother plain. And yet seen together, a family resemblance persisted.

"Hi, Warren," Seth said.

"Pat him on the shoulder," Dale suggested. "He's more aware of touch."

Seth patted Warren. The action elicited no response. Kendra wondered if this was how people acted after a lobotomy.

"I like to think that in some corner of his mind, he might be aware of us," Dale said. "Although he doesn't show much recognition, I suspect he absorbs more than it seems. Left to himself, he curls up into a fetal position. Does it faster if things get too noisy."

"I've tried some doses of different emotions," Tanu said. "I was hoping something might pierce the fog. But that style of therapy looks like a dead end."

Kendra gently patted his shoulder. "Hi, Warren." Warren turned his head and looked at her hand, a slow smile creeping onto his face.

“Would you look at that!” Dale gasped.

Kendra left her hand on Warren’s shoulder, and he kept staring at it. He was not smiling with his eyes, they still appeared far away, but the grin on his face was as wide as it could be. He lifted a hand and placed it over Kendra’s.

“In all this time, this is the biggest reaction I’ve seen,” Dale marveled. “Put your other hand on his shoulder.”

Standing in front of Warren, Kendra rested her other hand on his other shoulder. The action caused Warren to take his eyes off her hand. Instead, he looked up into her face. The grin appeared artificial, but for an instant, Kendra thought she saw a flicker of life in his gaze, as if he almost focused on her.

Dale stood with his hands on his hips. “Wonders never cease.”

“She was fairystruck,” Tanu said. “It must have left a lingering effect that Warren can sense. Kendra, come stand by me.”

Kendra walked over to Tanu. Warren did not follow her with his eyes. He stared directly ahead, unmoving, as if the flicker Kendra noticed had been only her imagination. Once again, Warren looked utterly mindless—except tears were welling up in his eyes. It looked peculiar, those vacant eyes brimming with tears above a slack expression. The tears overflowed and streamed down both white cheeks.

Dale had a fist in his mouth. Warren’s tears stopped flowing, though his cheeks remained damp. Warren made no move to wipe the tears away, showed no evidence he knew he had cried. When Dale pulled his fist from his mouth, there were teeth marks on his knuckles. “What does this mean?” Dale asked Tanu.

“Kendra transmitted something to him by touch,” Tanu said. “This is very encouraging. Somewhere deep inside, I believe his mind is intact. Kendra, take his hand.”

Kendra approached Warren and took his left hand in her right. Again, he came half to life—glancing down at her hand, the dazed smile returning.

“See if you can pull him to his feet,” Tanu said.

Kendra did not have to pull hard before Warren arose.

“I’ll be jiggered,” Dale said. “He never moves so willingly.”

“Lead him around the room,” Tanu said.

Keeping hold of Warren’s hand, Kendra led him around the room. He followed wherever she went, taking shuffling steps.

“She didn’t have to move his legs to get him walking,” Dale murmured to Tanu.

“I noticed,” Tanu replied. “Kendra, lead him over to that chair and have him sit. Keep hold of his hand.”

Kendra did as instructed, and Warren complied woodenly.

Tanu came and stood beside Kendra. “Would you mind giving Warren a kiss?”

The thought of it made her feel shy, mostly because Warren was nice-looking. “On the lips?”

“Just a peck,” Tanu said. “Unless it makes you too uncomfortable.”

“You think it might help him?” she asked.

“Fairy kisses have potent restorative powers,” Tanu said. “I realize you’re not a fairy, but they did work a change in you. I want to see how he responds.”

Kendra leaned in toward Warren. Her face felt warm. She hoped desperately that she wasn’t blushing. She tried to think of Warren as a catatonic patient who needed a strange cure, tried to make the kiss something detached and clinical. But he was cute. It put her in mind of the crush she’d had on a teacher, Mr. Powell, a couple of years ago.

How would she have felt about kissing Mr. Powell, had circumstances ever called for it? About how she felt right now. Secretly excited in a very embarrassing way.

They all crowded around as Kendra gave Warren a quick peck on the lips. He blinked three times. His mouth twitched. He tightened his grip on her hand for a moment. “He squeezed my hand,” Kendra reported.

Tanu had Kendra stroke Warren’s face and lead him around some more. Whenever she stopped touching him, all signs of life would vanish, but he never wept again. Whenever they were in contact, he wore the smile, and occasionally he made simple fidgety motions, like rubbing his shoulder, although all his actions seemed to lack deliberateness.

After having experimented with how Warren reacted to Kendra for more than an hour, they stood outside, watching the albino perform jerky jumping jacks. Dale got him going by patiently moving his arms and legs until Warren began repeating the action on his own. Warren was wearing the sombrero. Dale had explained that Warren sunburned easily.

“This is not what I expected,” Tanu said. “I’m hoping this response to Kendra will help us as we seek a cure. It is the first real breakthrough we’ve had so far.”

“What did those fairies do to me?” Kendra asked.

“Nobody has been fairystruck in a long time, Kendra,” Tanu said. “We know *of* it—we don’t know much about it.”

“What about when the fairies attacked Seth?” she asked. “Was he fairystruck then?”

“That’s different,” Tanu said. “Fairies use their magic all the time, sometimes for mischief, sometimes to beautify a garden. Being fairystruck is when fairies mark you as one of their own and share their power with you. We can’t even be sure that is what happened to you, but the evidence looks very suspicious. The Sphinx should be able to tell you more.”

“I hope someone can,” Kendra said.

“You really think this is a breakthrough?” Dale asked.

“Figuring out what Warren’s condition is, and what variables affect that condition, will be the key to curing it,” Tanu said. “What happened here today is a big step in the right direction.”

“He’ll just keep doing jumping jacks forever?” Seth asked.

“Eventually he’d collapse, I guess,” Dale said. “Otherwise, he’ll go until I stop him.”

“You just leave him out here alone?” Kendra asked.

“Many nights I stay with him,” Dale said. “Some nights Hugo watches over him. An interesting consequence of his condition is that the creatures of Fablehaven never come near him, even when I bring him outside. Foul or fair, they keep their distance. Of course, I’m out here every day, to check on him and feed him and see to his hygiene.”

“If we were all quiet, couldn’t we find him a room back at the house?” Kendra asked.

“I take him there from time to time, like on his birthday. But he never seems comfortable. He curls up more, goes limp more. Out here he seems more peaceful. This is where he stayed before it happened.”

“He lived out here even before he became albino?” Seth asked.

Dale nodded. “Warren enjoyed his privacy. Unlike me, he was never a permanent fixture at Fablehaven. He came and went. He was an adventurer, like Tanu here, or Coulter, or Vanessa. He belonged to a special brotherhood—the Knights of the Dawn. It was all very hush-hush. They worked to combat the Society of the Evening Star. The last time Warren visited, he stayed for quite a while. He was on some sort of secret mission. He didn’t tell me the details; he was always tight-lipped about his assignments until after the fact. I

have no idea if it had anything to do with what turned him white. But he was as good a brother as a guy could hope for. Never hesitated to help me out. Now I get to return the favor, make sure he gets exercise, eats right, stays healthy.”

Kendra watched Warren performing his awkward jumping jacks in the absurd sombrero. He was sweating. It was heartbreaking to picture him as an intelligent adventurer fulfilling dangerous assignments. Warren was no longer that person.

“Want to see something nice?” Dale asked, apparently trying to change the subject.

“Sure,” Kendra said.

“Follow me up to the belvedere,” Dale said over his shoulder.

Leaving Tanu with Warren, Dale led Kendra and Seth back into the cabin and up the ladder to the loft. From the loft, he led them up a second ladder through a hatch in the ceiling. They came out on the roof of the cabin, on a small platform with a low railing. The platform was high enough to see over the nearest treetops down the slope from the cabin, which extended their view quite a distance. The hill was not terribly high, but it was the highest point in the area.

“It’s beautiful,” Kendra said.

“Warren used to like to come up here and watch the sunset,” Dale said. “It was his favorite place to think. You should see it in the fall.”

“Isn’t that where the Forgotten Chapel used to be?” Seth asked, pointing to a lower hill not far away, brilliant with flowers and blossoming shrubs and fruit trees.

“Good eyes,” Dale said.

Kendra recognized the place as well. Up until they had veered off onto the cart track that brought them to the cabin, she knew they had been walking along the same path Hugo had taken them down when they went to rescue Grandpa the previous summer. Her army of fairies had leveled the chapel when they defeated and imprisoned Bahumat and Muriel. Then the fairies had mounded up the surrounding earth over the spot the chapel had occupied and made it bloom as brightly as the gardens back at the house.

“Must look better now without that moldy old church,” Seth said.

“The chapel had a certain charm,” Dale said. “Especially from a distance.”

“I’m getting hungry,” Seth grumbled.

“Which is why we brought food,” Dale replied. “And there is more in the cupboards. Let’s go fetch Tanu and Warren. I bet my brother has worked up an

appetite.”

“What’ll you do if you can’t find a way to cure him?” Seth asked.

Dale paused. “I’ll never know that day has come, because I’ll never stop trying.”

Chapter 7



The Dungeon

The next morning, Kendra, Seth, Grandpa, Grandma, and Tanu sat around the kitchen table eating breakfast. Outside, the sun was rising on a clear, humid day.

“What are we doing today?” Seth asked, using his fork to chop up his omelet.

“Today you’re going to stay here at the house with me and your grandmother,” said Grandpa.

“What?” Seth cried. “Where’s everybody going?”

“And what are we?” Grandpa asked.

“I mean, where are the others going?” Seth restated.

“This omelet is delicious, Grandpa,” Kendra said after swallowing a mouthful.

“I’m glad you’re enjoying it, my dear,” Grandpa replied with dignity, shooting a glance at Grandma, who pretended not to notice.

“They have some unpleasant business to attend to,” Grandma told Seth.

“You mean awesome business,” Seth accused, whirling on Tanu.

“You’re ditching us? What was all that about teamwork yesterday?”

“Keeping you and your sister safe was one of our goals,” Tanu replied calmly.

“How are we ever supposed to learn anything if you only let us do wimpy stuff?” Seth complained.

Coulter entered the room holding a walking stick. The top of the stick was forked and strung with an elastic strap that turned it into a slingshot. “You don’t want to come where we’re going today,” he said.

“How do you know?” Seth said.

“Because *I* don’t want to come,” Coulter said. “Omelets? Who made omelets?”

“Grandpa,” Kendra said.

Coulter suddenly looked cautious. “What is this, Stan? Our last meal?”

“I just wanted to lend a hand in the kitchen,” Grandpa said innocently.

Coulter eyed Grandpa suspiciously. “He must love you kids,” Coulter finally said. “He’s been exploiting those broken bones to stay as far from chores as possible.”

“I’m not okay with being left behind,” Seth reminded everyone.

“We’re going to an unmapped portion of Fablehaven,” Tanu explained. “We’re not sure what to expect, except that it will be dangerous. If all goes well, we’ll bring you next time.”

“You think the relic might be hidden there?” Kendra asked.

“It is one of several possible places,” Tanu said. “We expect to find the relic in one of the less hospitable areas of the preserve.”

“All we’ll probably find are hobgoblins, fog giants, and blixes,” Coulter spat, taking a seat at the table. He shook some salt into his palm and tossed it over his shoulder, then rapped his knuckles on the tabletop. The motions seemed automatic.

Vanessa strolled into the room. “I have some unhappy news,” she declared. She wore a U.S. Army T-shirt and black canvas pants, and had her hair tied back.

“What?” Grandma asked.

“My drumants got loose last night, and I only recaptured a third of them,” Vanessa said.

“They’re loose in the house?” Grandma exclaimed.

Coulter jabbed his fork toward Vanessa accusingly. “I told you no good would come from bringing that menagerie indoors.”

"I can't imagine how they got out," Vanessa said. "I've never had trouble like this before."

"You obviously weren't bitten," Tanu said.

"Think again," Vanessa replied, holding up her arm and displaying three pairs of puncture wounds. "More than twenty bites, all over my body."

"How are you still alive?" Grandpa said.

"These were a special strain of drumants I bred myself," Vanessa said. "I've been experimenting with eliminating the toxicity of venomous whirligigs."

"What's a whirligig?" Kendra asked.

"And what's a drumant?" Seth added.

"Any magical animal of subhuman intelligence is a whirligig," Grandma explained. "It's jargon."

"Drumants look kind of like tarantulas with tails," Tanu said. "Very furry. They hop around, and can warp light to distort their location. You think you see one, and you go to grab it, but you only touch an illusion, because the drumant is actually two or three feet away."

"They're nocturnal," Grandpa said. "Aggressive biters. They normally wield a deadly poison."

"Somehow the door to the cage got open," Vanessa said. "All nineteen escaped. When I woke up, they were all over me. I managed to catch six. The rest scattered. They're in the walls by now."

"Six of nineteen is less than a third," Coulter pointed out while chewing.

"I know I shut and locked the cage," Vanessa said firmly. "To be plain, if I were anywhere else, I would suspect foul play. Nobody knew those drumants weren't poisonous. If they had been, I would be dead right now."

An awkward silence stretched out.

Grandpa cleared his throat. "In your shoes, regardless of where I was, I would suspect sabotage."

Kendra stared at her plate. Had one of the people eating breakfast with her just tried to kill Vanessa? Certainly not her or Grandpa or Grandma or Seth! Tanu? Coulter? She didn't want to make eye contact with anybody.

"Could an outsider have sneaked in?" Vanessa said. "Or could someone have escaped the dungeon?"

“Not likely,” Grandpa said, wiping his hands on a napkin. “Brownies and mortals are the only beings permitted to enter this house freely. Brownies would never cause mischief like that. Besides Dale and Warren, the only mortals free to roam this preserve are in this room. Dale stayed at the cabin last night. Any other mortals would have to get past the gate before they could get to the house, and getting past the gate is nearly impossible.”

“Somebody could have been hiding on the grounds for a long time, and waited until now to strike,” Coulter theorized.

“Anything is possible,” Vanessa said. “But I would swear that I left that cage locked. I haven’t opened it in three days!”

“Nobody saw anything peculiar last night?” Grandpa asked, fixing his stare on everyone in turn.

“I wish I had,” Tanu said.

“Not a thing,” Coulter murmured, narrow eyes thoughtful.

Kendra, Seth, and Grandma shook their heads.

“Well, until we find out more, we have to consider this an accident,” Grandpa said. “But be doubly vigilant. I have a hunch that several pieces are missing from this puzzle.”

“None of the drumants were poisonous?” Grandma asked.

“None,” Vanessa said. “They’ll be a nuisance, but they won’t cause any lasting harm. I’ll put out traps. We’ll get them rounded up. If you sprinkle sawdust and garlic on your sheets, it should help keep them away.”

“Might as well add some broken glass while we’re at it,” Coulter grumbled.

“With all these drumants loose,” Seth said, “maybe we’d be safer going with you guys today.”

“Nice try,” Kendra said.

“Ruth will keep you entertained,” Grandpa said.

“I have some fascinating things to show you,” Grandma agreed.

“Cool things?” Seth asked.

“You’ll think so,” Grandma promised.

Vanessa pulled a white mesh fabric from her pocket. “I’ll leave a few of these around the house. If you spot a drumant . . .” She tossed the fabric and it fell to the floor like a parachute, spreading to cover nearly an eight-

foot diameter. “The lump will tell you where the little rascal is actually hiding. Use the surrounding mesh to scoop him up. If he tries to hop away, he’ll just get tangled. Might take a little practice, but it works. Don’t just take a swat at them or try to pick them up with your bare hands.”

“No worries about that,” Kendra said. “Do you have other animals, too?”

“Several varieties, yes,” Vanessa said.

“Are any of them poisonous?” Kendra asked.

“None are lethal. Although some of my salamanders could put you to sleep. I use their extracts for my darts.”

“Darts?” Seth asked, perking up.

“For my blowgun,” Vanessa said.

Seth was practically jumping out of his seat. “I want to try it!”

“All in due time,” Vanessa said.

* * *

The air felt significantly cooler at the bottom of the long flight of steep stairs to the basement. The iron door looked ominous at the end of the gloomy corridor, illuminated only by the flashlight Grandma Sorenson carried. At the base of the door was the smaller portal the brownies used, matching the other tiny portal in the door at the top of the stairs.

“The brownies get in and out through the dungeon?” Seth asked.

“Yes,” Grandma replied. “At least one visits every night, to see if we left anything for them to fix.”

“Why don’t you let the brownies do all your cooking?” Kendra asked. “They make tasty food.”

“Delicious,” she agreed. “But no matter what ingredients we leave, they try to make everything into a dessert.”

“Sounds good to me,” Seth said. “Have the brownies ever made you brownies?”

Grandma winked. “Where do you think brownies got their name? The little masterminds invented the treat.”

They reached the metal door. Grandma produced a key. “Remember, keep your voices down, and stay away from the cell doors.”

“Do we have to do this?” Kendra asked.

“Are you nuts?” Seth asked. “They’re locked up, there’s nothing to worry about.”

“There is plenty to worry about,” Grandma corrected. “I know you’re just trying to encourage your sister, but never treat the dungeon casually. The creatures down here are imprisoned for a reason. Your grandfather and I bring the keys to the individual cells into the dungeon only when transferring prisoners. That should tell you something.”

“I’m not sure I want to see what’s down here,” Kendra said.

Grandma placed a hand on her shoulder. “Running toward danger is foolhardy. As your brother has hopefully learned. But so is closing your eyes to it. Many perils become less dangerous once you understand their potential hazards.”

“I know,” Kendra said. “Ignorance is no longer a shield, and all that.”

“Good,” Seth said. “That’s settled. Can we go in now?”

Grandma inserted the key and pushed open the door. It squealed a bit. A cool, damp breeze greeted them. “We need to oil those hinges,” Grandma said in a hushed voice, shining the beam of her flashlight down a long corridor. Iron doors with small, barred windows lined the hall. The floor, walls, and ceiling were all made of stone.

They entered and Grandma closed the door behind them. “Why only flashlights?” Seth asked.

Grandma pointed the flashlight beam at a light switch. “From here forward, the dungeon is wired for lighting.” She shone the beam on some naked lightbulbs dangling from the ceiling. “But most of our guests prefer the dark. To be humane, we generally stick to flashlights.”

Grandma walked over to the nearest door. The barred window was about five feet off the ground—low enough for all of them to see into the vacant cell beyond. Grandma pointed to a slot near the base of the door. “The keepers slide in trays of food through the slot.”

“The prisoners never leave their cells?” Kendra asked.

“No,” Grandma said. “And escape is difficult. All of the cells are magically sealed, of course. And we have a few stronger containment areas for more powerful occupants. In the event of a jailbreak, a whisper hound serves as a fail-safe.”

“Whisper hound?” Seth asked.

“It’s not a living creature—just an enchantment,” Grandma said. “Every now and then down here you brush past an icy cold pocket. That is the whisper hound. It becomes quite ferocious if a prisoner breaks out of a cell. I’ve never heard of that happening here.”

“It must be a lot of work feeding the prisoners,” Kendra said.

“Not for us,” Grandma said. “Most of the cells are empty. And we have a pair of keepers, lesser goblins who make and serve the glop and keep things reasonably tidy.”

“Wouldn’t goblins let the prisoners out?” Kendra asked.

Grandma led them down the corridor. “Smart ones might. Our keepers are the type of goblins that have managed dungeons for millennia. Scrawny, servile creatures who live to take and execute orders from their superiors—meaning your grandfather and myself. Besides, they have no keys. They enjoy dwelling in the dark, supervising their dismal domain.”

“I want to see some prisoners,” Seth said.

“Trust me, there are many you don’t want to meet,” Grandma assured him. “Several are quite ancient, transfers from other preserves. Many speak no English. All are dangerous.”

The corridor ended in a T. They could turn left or right. Grandma shone the flashlight both ways. There were more cell doors down both halls. “This hallway is part of a large square. You can go either left or right and end up back here. A few other corridors branch off, but nothing too complex. There are some noteworthy features I want to show you.”

Grandma turned right. Eventually the corridor elbowed to the left. Seth kept trying to peek into the cells they were passing. “Too dark,” he reported quietly to Kendra. Grandma had the light pointed ahead of them.

Kendra peered into one of the windows and saw a wolflike face glaring back at her. What was Seth’s problem? Were his eyes bad? He had just looked into the same cell, reporting he could see nothing. It was dim, but not black. After seeing the wolfman, she did not peek through any of the other barred windows.

Some distance down the hall, Grandma stopped at a door carved out of blood-red wood. “This leads to the Hall of Dread. We don’t ever open it. The prisoners in those cells need no food.” As they continued down the hall, Seth’s eyes lingered on the door.

“Don’t even think about it,” Kendra whispered.

“What?” he said. “I’m dumb, but I’m not stupid.”

The hall angled to the left again. Grandma shone the flashlight into a doorless room where a cauldron bubbled over a low fire. A pair of goblins squinted and held up their long, narrow hands against the light. Short, bony, and greenish, they had beady eyes and batwing ears. One balanced on a three-legged stool, stirring the foul-smelling contents of the cauldron with what looked like an oar. The other grimaced and cringed.

“Introduce yourselves to my grandchildren,” Grandma said, shining the flashlight away from them so it illuminated them indirectly.

“Voorsh,” said the one stirring the cauldron.

“Slaggo,” said the other.

Grandma turned and continued down the corridor. “The food smells awful,” Kendra said.

“Most of our guests rather like glop,” Grandma said. “Humans aren’t normally fond of it.”

“Do any of the prisoners ever get released?” Seth inquired.

“The majority are serving life sentences,” Grandma said. “For many mystical creatures, that is a very long time. Because of the treaty, we have no death penalty for captured enemies. As you may recall, under most circumstances, to kill on Fablehaven property is to destroy all protection afforded you by the treaty and render yourself so vulnerable to retaliation that the only option is to depart and never return. But certain offenders cannot be permitted to roam free. Hence the dungeon. Some lesser offenders are kept here for prescribed periods of time and then released. For example, we have a former groundskeeper imprisoned here for selling batteries to satyrs.”

Seth compressed his lips.

“How long is his sentence?” Kendra prodded.

“Fifty years. By the time he gets out, he’ll be in his eighties.”

Seth stopped walking. “Are you serious?”

Grandma grinned. “No. Kendra mentioned you were planning on doing a little business while you were here.”

“Way to keep a secret!” Seth accused.

“I never said I would,” Kendra replied.

“She was right to tell me,” Grandma said. “She wanted to make sure it wouldn’t endanger you or the preserve. It should be all right, if you keep it simple. Just don’t leave the yard. And don’t let your grandpa know. He’s a purist. Tries hard to keep technology off the grounds.”

As they progressed down the long corridor, they passed a couple of hallways that branched off. At the third, Grandma paused, seemingly deliberating. “Come with me, I want to show you something.”

The hall had no cell doors. It was the narrowest passage they had seen. At the end was a circular room, and in the center of the room was a metal hatch in the floor. “This is our oubliette,” Grandma said. “There is a cell at the bottom for a most dangerous prisoner. A jinn.”

“Like a genie?” Kendra asked.

“Yes,” Grandma said.

“Sweet! Does he grant wishes?” Seth asked.

“Theoretically,” Grandma said. “True jinn are not much like the genies you have heard of in stories, though they are the entities through which the myths arose. They are powerful, and some, like our prisoner, are cunning and evil. I have something to confess.”

Kendra and Seth waited quietly.

“Your grandfather and I were very distraught over what happened to Warren. I took to conversing with the jinn, opening the hatch and calling down to him from up here. As our prisoner, his powers are curtailed, so I did not fear he would escape. I became convinced he could cure Warren. And he probably could have. I talked it over with Stan, and we decided it was worth a try.

“I studied all I could on the subject of bargaining with jinn. If you obey certain rules, you can negotiate with a captured jinn, but you have to take care what you say. In order to open negotiations, you must make yourself vulnerable. They get to ask you three questions, which you must answer fully and with absolute truthfulness. After you answer the questions honestly, the jinn will grant you a favor. If you lie, they are set free and gain power over you. If you fail to answer, they remain captive but get to exact a penalty.

“The one question they are not permitted to ask is your given name, which you must never let them learn by other means. Before asking the formal three questions, the jinn can try to persuade you to agree to a bargain

other than the traditional answering of three questions. The petitioner can only wait patiently and speak carefully, because every word you utter to a jinn is binding.

“To make a long story short, I entered the oubliette, with Stan standing watch, and the jinn and I negotiated. It makes me angry thinking about it—the jinn was so devious. He could have talked the devil into attending church. I was out of my depth. The jinn haggled and flattered and cleverly sought hints to what questions he should ask. He offered many alternatives to the questions, several of which were tempting compromises, but I detected traps in all his propositions. We exchanged offers and counteroffers. His ultimate goal was clearly to secure his freedom, which I could not allow.

“After our conversation had consumed many hours, and I had revealed more about myself than I liked, he finally quit dickering and proceeded to the questions. Stan had spent days changing passwords and other Fablehaven protocols so that I knew nothing vital to our security. I had thought through all the questions he could pose, and felt prepared to answer anything. He used his first question to inquire what he could ask that I would be unwilling to answer. As you may imagine, I had anticipated a question like this, and had prepared myself to be able to respond that I would freely answer any possible question. But in the moment of his asking, perhaps called to my remembrance by some power that permeated the proceedings, I realized a piece of information that I could not reveal, and so chose not to answer the question. It was all I could do to prevent him from being set free. Consequently, I opened myself to retaliation. He couldn’t kill me, but he did turn me into a chicken.”

“That’s how you became a chicken!” Seth exclaimed.

“Yes,” Grandma said.

“What was the secret you couldn’t reveal?” Seth asked.

“Something I cannot share,” Grandma said.

“The jinn is still down there,” Kendra said softly, gazing at the hatch.

Grandma started walking back the way they had come. Kendra and Seth followed. “The hatch to the oubliette requires three keys and a word to open it,” Grandma said. “At least one living person must know the word that opens the hatch, or the spell is broken and the prisoner freed. If any of

the keys are destroyed, the same happens. Otherwise, I would melt the keys and never tell the word to anyone.”

“What’s the word?” Seth asked.

“It’s two words,” Kendra said. “*Dream on.*”

“Kendra’s right. Perhaps one day you’ll be ready for that sort of responsibility.” Grandma patted him on the back. “But probably not before I’m long gone.”

They returned to the main corridor and followed it until it turned left again. Grandma stopped at a floor-to-ceiling alcove and shone the flashlight on a strange cabinet. A bit taller than a person, it looked like the kind of box a magician would use to make people vanish. Fashioned out of glossy black wood with gold trim, the cabinet was simple and elegant.

“This is the Quiet Box,” Grandma said. “It is much more durable than any cell in the entire dungeon. It holds only a single prisoner, but it always holds a single prisoner. The only way to get the captive out is to put another in.”

“Who’s in there?” Seth asked.

“We don’t know,” Grandma said. “The Quiet Box was brought here when Fablehaven was founded, and was already occupied. Word has been passed down from caretaker to caretaker never to open it. So we leave it be.”

Grandma proceeded down the hall. Kendra stayed near her, while Seth lingered in front of the Quiet Box. After a moment, he hurried to catch up. Near the final elbow of the hall, the one that would complete the square, Grandma paused at a seemingly random cell door. “Seth, you said you wanted to see a prisoner. There is the imp who injured your grandfather.”

She shone the flashlight through the little window in the door. Kendra and Seth crowded close to see. The imp stared at them coldly, frowning. He stood nearly as tall as Dale. A short pair of antlers jutted from his brow. Leathery skin sheathed long, muscular limbs. Kendra had seen many imps. Too bad this one had not been changed back into a fairy like the others.

“Go ahead, shine your light, you have no idea the doom hanging over you,” the imp snarled.

“What do you mean?” Kendra asked. Grandma and Seth both looked at her strangely. The imp was staring at her. “What?” Kendra said.

“No light will stave off the coming darkness,” the imp said, eyes on Kendra.

“What darkness?” Kendra replied.

The imp made a choking sound and looked astonished.

“Can you understand his speech?” Grandma asked in wonder.

“Can’t you?” Kendra said. “He’s speaking English.”

Grandma put a hand to her lips. “No, he’s speaking Goblush, the tongue of imps and goblins.”

“You understand me, Stinkface?” the imp tested.

“Is this a joke?” Kendra asked.

“Because I understand you,” the imp said.

“I’ve been speaking English,” Kendra said.

“Yes,” Grandma agreed.

“No,” the imp said. “Goblush.”

“He says I’m speaking Goblush,” Kendra said.

“You are,” the imp said.

“That must be what he hears,” Grandma said.

“You don’t understand him?” Kendra asked Seth.

“You know how imps sound,” Seth said. “No words, just growls and snorts.”

“What are they saying?” the imp asked. “Tell them I’m going to cook their insides on a stick.”

“He’s saying gross things,” Kendra said.

“Say nothing more,” Grandma said. “Let’s get you away from here.”

Grandma hurried them down the hall. The imp called after them: “Kendra, you don’t have long to live. Sleep on that. I’ll be out of here before you know it. I’m going to dance on your grave! On all your graves!”

Kendra whirled. “Well, you’ll be dancing alone, you ugly wart! All the rest of your kind got changed back into fairies, and they’re beautiful and happy. And you’re still a deformed freak! You should hear them laugh at you! Enjoy your glop!”

Silence. And then the sound of something slamming against the cell door, followed by guttural snarling. Knobby fingers protruded from the bars

of the small window in the door. "Come along," Grandma said, tugging Kendra's sleeve. "He's just trying to upset you."

"How can I understand him?" Kendra asked. "The fairies?"

"It must be," Grandma said, walking swiftly. "We should have more answers tomorrow. Your grandfather got through to the Sphinx this morning and set up a meeting for tomorrow afternoon."

"Me too?" Seth asked.

"Both of you," Grandma said. "But keep it between us and your grandfather. We want everyone else to think we're going on an outing into town. They don't know that the Sphinx is currently nearby."

"Sure," Kendra said.

"What was the imp saying?" Seth asked.

"That he was going to dance on our graves," Kendra said.

Seth spun around and cupped his hands beside his mouth like a megaphone. "Only if they bury us in your cruddy cell," he yelled. He glanced at Grandma. "Think he heard me?"

Chapter 8



Coulter

He's not here," Seth said, checking his wristwatch.

"He'll be here soon," Kendra said.

They sat together on a stone bench at the edge of an oval section of lawn with a marble birdbath near the center. The sun had not been up long, but the day was already getting warm. A cluster of fairies played among the blossoms of a nearby shrub. Others hovered over the birdbath, admiring their reflections.

"The fairies haven't been very friendly lately," Seth said.

Kendra scratched her temple. "They probably just need their space."

"They were so friendly before we left last summer, after you led them against Bahumat."

"They were probably just extra excited."

"Try to talk to them," Seth said. "If you can understand imps, I bet you can understand fairies too."

"I tried last night. They ignored me."

Seth glanced at his watch again. "I say we go do something else. Coulter's like ten minutes late. And he picked the most boring spot in all of Fablehaven to make us wait."

"Maybe we're in the wrong place."

Seth shook his head. "This is where he said."

"I'm sure he'll come," Kendra said.

"By the time he does, we'll have to leave to visit the Sphinx."

Coulter suddenly appeared in front of them, standing on the lawn not ten feet away, blocking their view of the birdbath. One instant there was nothing, the next, he had popped into existence, leaning on his walking stick. "I suppose I wasn't meant to hear that," Coulter said.

Kendra shrieked, and Seth jumped to his feet. "Where did you come from?" Seth yelped.

"Take more care what you say out in the open," Coulter said. "You never know who may be listening. I'm sure your grandparents wanted your visit to the Sphinx kept a secret."

"Why were you eavesdropping?" Kendra accused.

"To prove a point," Coulter said. "Believe me, if I weren't on your side, and you had given me that information, I would not have tipped my hand by revealing myself. By the way, Kendra, fairies are jealous by nature. There's no surer way to earn their dislike than to become popular."

"How did you do that?" Seth asked.

Coulter held up a fingerless leather glove, letting it hang limp. "One of my prize possessions. I deal in magical trinkets, tokens, and artifacts. Tanu has his potions, Vanessa has her critters—I have my magic glove. Among other things."

"Can I try it?" Seth asked.

"All in good time," Coulter said, pocketing the glove and clearing his throat. "I understand Tanu got you off to a fine start yesterday. He knows his business. You'd do well to heed him."

"We will," Kendra said.

"Before we begin," Coulter said, shifting his feet as if he were feeling a tad uncomfortable, "I want to make one thing clear." He gave Kendra an uncertain glance. "No matter how careful you are about personal hygiene, it is perfectly natural for a teenage girl to develop an occasional pimple."

Kendra hid her face in her hands. Seth grinned.

"Such things are a natural part of the maturation process," Coulter continued. "You may begin to notice other changes as—"

Kendra raised her head. "I'm not embarrassed about it," she insisted. "It was just the potion."

Coulter nodded patronizingly. “Well, if you ever need to talk about . . . growing up—”

“That’s very kind,” Kendra blurted, holding up both hands to stop him from saying more. “I’ll let you know if I want to talk. Zits happen. I’m okay with it.” Seth looked like he was about to explode with laughter, but he managed to contain himself.

Coulter wiped a hand across the top of his head, flattening his little tuft of gray hair. He had reddened slightly. “Right. Enough said about hormones. Shifting gears.” He paused for a moment, rubbing his hands together. “What do the two of you want me to teach you?”

“How to make ourselves invisible,” Seth said.

“I mean generally,” Coulter clarified. “Why do you want to apprentice with me?”

“So we can learn how to protect ourselves from magical creatures,” Kendra said.

“And so we can help out around here,” Seth said. “I’m sick of staying in the yard.”

Coulter wagged a finger. “A preserve like Fablehaven is a dangerous place. In my line of work, any degree of carelessness can lead to disaster. And by disaster I mean death. No second chances. Just a cold, lonely coffin.”

The new soberness in his tone had quickly changed the mood. Kendra and Seth listened attentively.

“Those woods,” Coulter said, sweeping a hand toward the trees, “are teeming with creatures who would love nothing more than to drown you. To cripple you. To devour you. To turn you to stone. If you let your guard down for a moment, if you forget for a second that every one of the creatures on this preserve is potentially your worst enemy, you won’t have any more chance of surviving than a worm on a henhouse floor. Am I getting through to you?”

Kendra and Seth nodded.

“I don’t tell you this out of cruelty,” Coulter said. “I’m not trying to shock you with exaggerations. I want you to go into this with your eyes wide open. People in my profession die all the time. Talented, cautious people. No matter how careful you are, there is always the chance of running across something more terrible than you are prepared to handle. Or

you might find yourself in a situation you've dealt with a hundred times, but you make a mistake, and you never get a second chance. If either of you expects to venture out into those woods with me, I don't want you clinging to a false sense of security. I've had my close calls, and I've seen people die. I'll do my best to keep you safe, but it is only fair to warn you that on any given day, even doing something that might seem routine, if we're out in those woods, we could all perish. I'll not have you along without making that clear."

"We know it's risky," Seth said.

"Something else I ought to tell you now. If we're all in mortal peril, and it looks like saving you means sacrificing myself, or worse, sacrificing both of us, I'm probably going to save myself. I'd expect you to do the same. If I can protect you, I will; if not . . . you've been warned." Coulter raised his hands. "I don't want your ghosts showing up moaning about how I didn't warn you."

"We've been warned," Kendra said. "We won't haunt you."

"I might haunt you a little," Seth said.

Coulter snorted, hawked up some phlegm, and spat. "Now, I intend to keep us far from situations where our lives are in jeopardy, but there's always a possibility the worst could happen, and if that's a risk you're unwilling to take, speak now, because once we're out in the woods, it may be too late."

"I'm in," Seth said. "I'm still sad I didn't get to go yesterday."

"I'm in too," Kendra said bravely. "But I was fine with yesterday."

"That reminds me," Coulter said, "I'm a little old-fashioned in some ways, and that carries over to this arrangement. Call it outdated chivalry, but there are some places I don't feel women should go. Not because they aren't intelligent or able. I just feel there is a certain respect with which a lady should be treated."

"Are you saying there are places you'd take Seth but not me?" Kendra asked.

"That's what I'm saying. And you hold all the feminist rallies you want, it won't shake my opinion." Coulter spread his hands. "If you want somebody else to take you, and they're willing, I can't do much about that."

"What about Vanessa?" Kendra exclaimed incredulously. "What about Grandma?" Although part of her didn't even want to go to the dangerous

places Coulter was talking about, the idea that her gender would prevent him from taking her was deeply insulting.

“Vanessa and your grandma are free to do as they please, as are you. But I’m also free to do as I please, and there are some places I would rather not take a woman, no matter how capable she might be, Vanessa and your grandmother included.”

Kendra stood up. “But you’d take Seth? He’s two years younger than me and practically brain dead!”

“My brain is not the issue,” Seth said, enjoying the argument.

Coulter pointed at Seth with his walking stick. “At twelve, he’s on his way to becoming a man. There are plenty of places I wouldn’t take either of you, if that brings any consolation. Places none of us would take you until you’re much older and more experienced. There are even places we wouldn’t go ourselves.”

“But there are places you’d take my little brother and not me, just because I’m a girl,” Kendra pressed.

“I wouldn’t have brought it up if I didn’t foresee it happening within the next few days,” Coulter said.

Kendra shook her head. “Unbelievable. You know that Fablehaven wouldn’t be here if it wasn’t for me.”

Coulter shrugged apologetically. “You did a wonderful thing, and I’m not trying to detract from that. I’m not talking about ability. If I had a daughter and a son, there are certain things I see myself doing with one and not the other. I know everybody is busy trying to pretend boys and girls are exactly the same nowadays, but that isn’t how I see it. If it makes you feel better, I’ll share everything I know with both of you, and most places we’ll be going, we can all go.”

“And I’ll get somebody else to take me where you won’t,” Kendra promised.

“That’s your prerogative,” Coulter said.

“Can we move on to something else?” Seth asked.

“Can we?” Coulter asked Kendra.

“There’s nothing else for me to say,” Kendra said, still frustrated.

Coulter acted like he didn’t notice her tone. “As I was telling you before, my specialty is magical items. There are all sorts of magical items in

the world. Many have burned out—they were once magical but have run out of energy and lost their power. Others remain functional but can only be used a limited number of times. And others seem to draw from an endless supply of magical energy.”

“Is the glove limited?” Seth asked.

Coulter held up the glove again. “I’ve been using it for years, and the effects never seem to dwindle. For all I can tell, it will work forever. But like most magical items, it has certain limitations.” He slipped it onto his hand and disappeared. “As long as I hold still, you can see nothing. Different story if I move around.” Coulter began to flicker in and out of view. He was wiggling his head. When he waved an arm, he flashed into clear view until he stopped.

“The glove only works if you’re motionless,” Kendra said.

Coulter was no longer visible. “Correct. I can talk, I can blink, I can breathe. Much more movement than that, and I become visible.” He took off the glove, reappearing instantly. “Which is quite an inconvenience. Once I’ve been spotted, this glove isn’t very handy for getting away. It also doesn’t mask my smell. For maximum effect, I have to slip it on before I’ve been seen, in a situation where I can hold still, and where no being that can discern my presence through senses other than sight is present.”

“That’s why you had us meet you here,” Seth said. “So you could come early and get ready to spy on us.”

“See?” Coulter said to Kendra. “He isn’t brain dead. Naturally, if I were really intent on spying on you, I would have stood behind the bench in the bushes. But I wanted to make a dramatic appearance, so I trusted to luck that you wouldn’t run into me and ruin my surprise.”

“Your footprints must have been obvious on the lawn,” Kendra pointed out.

Coulter bobbed his head. “The grass was newly trimmed, and I stamped around a bit before I chose my spot, but yes, had you been paying proper attention, you could have noticed the imprints of my feet on the lawn. But I guessed right. You didn’t.”

“Can I try out the glove?” Seth asked.

“Some other time,” Coulter said. “Listen. I would prefer that you kept my glove a secret. Your grandparents know, but I would rather keep it from the others. Doesn’t pay to let the world in on your best tricks.”

Seth mimed like he was locking his lips shut and tossing away the key. "I won't tell," Kendra said.

"Keeping secrets is an important skill to master in my line of work," Coulter said. "Especially with the Society out there, always scheming to gather information and exploit weaknesses. I tell my best secrets only to people I know I can trust. Otherwise the secret becomes a rumor just like that." He snapped his fingers. "You practice keeping the confidences I share with you. Believe me, if I learn you've told anyone, you'll never hear another secret from me."

"You better keep an eye on Kendra," Seth said.

"I never promised to keep that secret," she maintained.

"I'll be keeping an eye on both of you. And I'll up the stakes for the test." He held up a small greenish pod. "There is a species of pixie in Norway that loses its wings at the onset of winter. The pixie spends the coldest winter months hibernating in a cocoon like this one. When spring comes, the pixie emerges with a beautiful new set of wings."

Seth wrinkled his nose. "We have to keep that a secret?"

"I haven't finished. After the proper treatments and preparations, these cocoons become valuable items. If I pop this cocoon into my mouth and bite down hard, it will instantly expand and envelop me. I'll be inside an absolutely impervious shelter, completely safe from any external threat. Enough carbon dioxide filters out of the cocoon, and enough oxygen filters into it, to keep me comfortable—even underwater! The moist inner walls are edible. Together with the moisture they absorb from the outside, the cocoon walls could sustain me for months. And despite the impenetrable outer carapace, from inside, with a little work, I can break free whenever I choose."

"Wow," Kendra said.

"This rare, specially prepared cocoon is my insurance policy," Coulter said. "It's my Get Out of Jail Free Card. And it is one of the secrets I guard most carefully, because a day will likely come when it saves my life."

"And you're telling us?" Seth asked.

"I'm testing you. Even your grandparents don't know about this cocoon. You are not to talk about it with anyone, including each other, because you might be overheard. After sufficient time passes, if you keep this secret, I may share others with you. Don't disappoint me."

“We won’t,” Seth vowed.

Coulter bent down and scratched his ankle. “You kids notice any drumants last night?”

They both shook their heads.

“I got nipped a couple of times on the leg,” he said. “Slept right through it. Maybe I ought to try sawdust and garlic after all.”

“Vanessa caught two more,” Kendra said.

“Well, she has eleven to go then,” Coulter said. “I want to show you one more item.” He held up a silver sphere. “You heard your grandparents talking about how no mortals can access Fablehaven through the gates. The entire fence surrounding Fablehaven is reinforced by mighty spells. One of those spells can be illustrated by this ball.”

Coulter walked over to the birdbath. The fairies scattered at his approach. “In my hand the spell remains dormant. But once I release the ball, it becomes protected by a distracter spell.” He plopped the sphere into the birdbath. “Not nearly as strong as the distracter spell protecting the gates, but it should do.”

Coulter returned and stood beside them. “Seth, go get that ball for me, would you?”

Seth studied Coulter suspiciously. “It’s going to distract me somehow?”

“Just go bring it over here.”

Seth trotted over to the birdbath. He stopped and started looking around in all directions. “What did you want?” he finally called back to Coulter.

“Bring me the ball,” Coulter reminded him.

Seth slapped the heel of his hand against his forehead. “Right.” He reached into the water with one hand. Then he put his other hand in and rubbed them together. He stepped back from the birdbath without the ball, shaking droplets from his hands and then drying them against his shirt. He started walking back over to Coulter and Kendra.

“That’s incredible,” Kendra said.

“Forget anything, Seth?” Coulter asked.

He stopped, cocking his head.

“I wanted the ball,” Coulter said.

“Oh, yeah!” Seth cried. “What was I thinking?”

“Come back over here,” Coulter invited. “Now you’ve sampled a distracter spell. One of the spells protecting the fences of Fablehaven does essentially the same thing. Anyone who comes across the fence immediately has his or her attention diverted elsewhere. Simple and effective.”

“I want to try,” Kendra said.

“Be my guest,” Coulter offered.

Kendra walked toward the birdbath. She kept repeating in her mind what she was supposed to do. She even mouthed, “The ball, the ball, the ball,” repeatedly. When she reached the birdbath, she stared into the water at the silvery sphere. She wasn’t distracted yet. She picked it up and brought it back to Coulter. “Here you go.”

He looked flabbergasted. “How did you do that?” he asked.

“I’m as surprised as you are. I thought I was just a girl.”

“No, really, Kendra, that was most unusual.”

“I just focused.”

“On the ball?”

“Yeah.”

“Impossible! The charge must have run out. After all these years . . . go put it back.”

Kendra jogged over to the birdbath and set it inside. Coulter walked over to the birdbath, hands balled into fists. He placed a hand into the water beside the sphere, began rubbing the bottom of the basin, and then quickly snatched the ball. “It still works. I could feel the spell striving to muddle me, potent as ever.”

“Then how did you get it?” Kendra asked.

“Practice,” Coulter said. “If you focus on the ball it will distract you. So you focus on something near the ball. I was focusing on rubbing the bottom of the birdbath, keeping the ball in the back of my mind. Then, as I’m rubbing the bottom of the birdbath, when I notice the ball, I grab it.”

“I concentrated on the ball,” Kendra said.

Coulter tossed the ball toward the bench. It came to a rest on the lawn. “Go get it again. Don’t even try to focus.”

Kendra walked over and picked it up. “Guess I’m immune.”

“Interesting,” Coulter said thoughtfully.

“I bet I could do it now,” Seth said.

“Set it down, Kendra,” Coulter said.

Seth walked toward the ball, stooped to pick some grass, and then went and sat on the bench. “What?” he asked, wondering why they were staring, then slapping his forehead again once they reminded him.

“Must be another side effect from the fairies,” Kendra guessed.

“Must be,” Coulter said thoughtfully. “The mysteries keep piling up around you, don’t they. You’ve reminded me, the fairies have caused some other peculiar effects here at Fablehaven. Let’s move on to the fun stuff. We’ve made a fascinating discovery since your last visit.” He raised his voice. “Hugo, come!”

The massive golem came out from behind the barn, loping toward them with long, pounding strides. When Kendra had last seen Hugo, he was blooming with verdure, thanks to the fairies. Now he looked much more like he had before the fairies had resuscitated him: a primitive body of soil, stone, and clay, more apelike in form than humanlike, a few weeds and dandelions sprouting here and there, but no leafy vines or colorful flowers.

Hugo halted in front of them. The top of Coulter’s head barely reached the middle of the golem’s powerful chest. Hugo was broad, with thick limbs and disproportionately large hands and feet. He looked like he could effortlessly tear Coulter limb from limb, but Kendra knew Hugo would never do something like that. The golem only followed orders.

“You remember Hugo?” Coulter said.

“Of course,” Seth said.

“Watch this,” Coulter said. He picked up a stone and tossed it toward the golem. Hugo caught it.

“What’s that supposed to prove?” Seth said.

“I didn’t tell him to catch it,” Coulter said.

“He must have a standing order to catch things thrown at him,” Kendra guessed.

Coulter shook his head. “No standing order.”

Faintly, Hugo smiled.

“Is he smiling?” Seth asked.

“I wouldn’t put it past him,” Coulter said. “Hugo, do whatever you like.”

Hugo squatted, and then jumped high into the air, raising both arms. He landed with enough force to make the ground tremble.

“He’s doing things on his own?” Kendra asked.

“Little things,” Coulter said. “He’s still totally obedient. He completes all his chores. But one day your grandmother spotted him putting a baby bird back into its nest. Nobody had issued a command; he was simply being kind.”

“You’re saying the fairies did something to him!” Kendra said. “After Muriel destroyed Hugo with a spell, they rebuilt him, but they must have changed him.”

“Near as we can tell, they made him a true golem,” Coulter said. “Manufactured golems, the mindless puppets who exist only to obey orders, were originally created in imitation of true golems, actual living creatures of stone or mud or sand. True golems long ago passed out of all human knowledge. But apparently Hugo is now one. He is developing a will.”

“Awesome!” Seth exclaimed.

“Can he communicate?” Kendra asked.

“Only crudely for now,” Coulter explained. “His comprehension is quite good—it had to be, for him to take orders. And his physical coordination is as precise as ever. But he is only just beginning to experiment with expressing himself and acting on his own. Slowly but surely he has been improving. In time, he should be able to interact with us like a normal person.”

“So right now he’s like a big baby,” Kendra said in wonder.

“In many ways, yes,” Coulter agreed. “One of the jobs I want the two of you to undertake is to engage in an hour of playtime with Hugo every day. He will not be under any order to heed your commands. I will simply leave him with the mandate to enjoy himself. Then you two are free to talk to him, play catch with him, teach him tricks, whatever you like. I want to see if we can get him functioning more on his own.”

“If he gets too smart, will he stop taking orders?” Seth asked.

“I doubt it,” Coulter said. “Obedience to his masters is woven too deeply into his being. It is part of the magic that holds him together. He

could, however, develop into a much more useful servant, capable of making decisions and sharing information. And he could start enjoying a higher state of existence.”

“I like this assignment,” Kendra said. “When can we start?”

“How about now?” Coulter offered. “I don’t think we have enough time for a real foray into the woods today. You need to be here after lunch so you can go into town with your grandmother. I have no idea what you might be doing there.” Imitating Seth, Coulter pantomimed like he was locking his lips and throwing away the key. “Hugo, I want you to play with Kendra and Seth. Feel free to do whatever you want.”

Coulter strode away toward the house, leaving Kendra and Seth with the massive golem. For a moment the three stood in silence. “What should we do?” Seth asked.

“Hugo,” Kendra said. “Why don’t you show us your favorite flower in the garden?”

“Favorite flower?” Seth complained. “Are you trying to bore him to death?”

Hugo raised a finger and then waved for them to follow. He stomped off across the lawn in the direction of the swimming pool. “Picking favorites gives him a chance to practice making choices,” Kendra explained as they ran to keep up with Hugo.

“Fine, then how about favorite weapon or monster or something cool?”

Hugo stopped beside a hedge with a flowerbed at the base. He pointed at a large blue and white flower with a trumpet-shaped blossom and vivid, translucent petals. It was delicate and exquisite.

“Good pick, Hugo, I like that one,” Kendra complimented.

“Great,” Seth said. “You’re very sensitive and artistic. Now, how about we have some fun? Want to go jump in the pool? I bet you could make the best cannonballs!”

Hugo crossed and uncrossed his hands, indicating that he did not like the idea.

“He’s made of dirt,” Kendra said. “Use your brain.”

“And rock and clay . . . I thought it would just make him sort of muddy.”

“And clog up the filter. You should have Hugo throw you in the pool.”

The golem turned his head toward Seth, who shrugged. “Sure, that would be fun.”

Hugo nodded, grabbed Seth, and, with a motion like a hook shot, flung him skyward. Kendra gasped. They were still thirty or forty feet away from the edge of the pool. She had pictured the golem carrying Seth much closer before tossing him. Her brother sailed nearly as high as the roof of the house before plummeting down and landing in the center of the deep end with an impressive splash.

Kendra ran to the side of the pool. By the time she arrived, Seth was boosting himself out of the water, hair and clothes dripping. “That was the freakiest, awesomest moment of my life!” Seth declared. “But next time, let me take off my shoes.”



The Sphinx

Kendra stared out the window at a huge, derelict factory as the SUV idled at a stoplight. Rotting boards crisscrossed the lower windows. The yawning upper windows were nearly devoid of glass. Wrappers, broken bottles, crushed soda cans, and weather-worn newspapers littered the sidewalk. Cryptic graffiti decorated the walls. Most of the spray-painted words looked sloppy, but a few had been expertly rendered with gleaming metallic letters.

“Can I take off my seat belt yet?” Seth complained, squirming.

“One more block,” Grandma said.

“The Sphinx isn’t staying in a very nice part of town,” Kendra said.

“He has to keep a low profile,” Grandma said. “Often that translates to less than ideal accommodations.”

The light turned green, and they drove through the intersection. Kendra, Seth, and Grandma had been on the road quite a while in order to reach the coastal city of Bridgeport. Grandma took a much more leisurely approach to driving than Vanessa, but despite the gentle pace and pleasant scenery, the prospect of meeting the Sphinx had kept Kendra on edge for the entire ride.

“Here we are,” Grandma announced, activating the left blinker and turning into the parking lot of King of the Road Auto Repair. The run-down auto shop looked abandoned. There were no cars in the small lot, and all the shop windows were obscured by dust and grime. Grandma avoided a lone, rusty hubcap lying on the asphalt.

“What a dump!” Seth said. “You sure this is the place?”

The SUV was just coming to a stop when one of the three doors to the garage slid upwards. A tall Asian man in a black suit waved them inside. He was lean, with wide shoulders and a humorless face. Grandma pulled into the garage, and the man yanked the door down behind them.

Grandma opened her door. “You must be Mr. Lich,” she said. The man lowered his chin briefly, a motion halfway between a nod and a bow. Mr. Lich gestured for them to exit the vehicle.

“Come along,” Grandma said, descending from the SUV. Kendra and Seth got out as well. Mr. Lich was walking away. They hurried to follow him. He led them out a door into an alley where a black sedan was waiting. Bland features neutral, Mr. Lich opened the back door. Grandma, Kendra, and Seth ducked inside. Mr. Lich got up front and started the car.

“Do you speak English?” Seth asked.

Mr. Lich fixed him with a steady stare in the rearview mirror, put the car in drive, and started down the alley. None of them made further efforts at conversation. They followed a disorienting series of alleys and side streets before finally reaching a main road. After a U-turn, they were back on side streets, until Mr. Lich brought the sedan to a stop in a dirty alley beside a row of dented garbage cans.

He got out and opened the door for them. The alley smelled like taco sauce and rancid oil. Mr. Lich escorted them to a grimy door that read *Employees Only*. He opened it and followed them inside. They passed through a kitchen into a dimly lit bar. Blinds covered the windows. There were not many patrons. Two guys with long hair were playing pool. A fat man with a beard sat at the bar next to a skinny blonde with a pockmarked face and frizzy curls. Wispy strands of cigarette smoke twisted in the air.

Grandma, Seth, and Kendra entered the room first. The bartender was shaking his head. “No patrons under twenty-one,” he said. Then Mr. Lich appeared and pointed toward a stairway in the corner. The demeanor of the bartender changed instantly. “My mistake.” He turned away.

Mr. Lich ushered them up the carpeted stairs. At the top, they pushed through a beaded curtain into a room with shaggy, calico carpet, a pair of brown sofas, and four suede beanbag chairs. A heavy ceiling fan spun slowly. A large, old-fashioned radio stood in the corner, softly playing big band music, as if tuned to a station broadcasting out of the past.

Placing a hand on Grandma’s shoulder, Mr. Lich motioned toward the couches. He did the same for Seth. Turning to Kendra, he gestured toward a

door on the other side of the room. Kendra glanced at Grandma, who nodded. Seth flung himself onto a beanbag.

After crossing to the door, Kendra hesitated. The silent car ride and unusual environment had already made her uncomfortable. The prospect of facing the Sphinx by herself was unsettling. She looked over her shoulder. Both Grandma and Mr. Lich motioned for her to enter. Kendra knocked softly. “Come inside,” said a deep voice, barely loud enough to be heard.

She opened the door. A red curtain fringed with gold tassels and embroidery blocked her view. She pushed through the velvet curtain into the room beyond. The door closed behind her.

A black man with short, beaded dreadlocks stood beside a Foosball table. His skin was not merely a shade of brown—it was as close to truly black as Kendra had ever seen. He was of average height and build, and wore a loose gray shirt, cargo pants, and sandals. His handsome face had an ageless quality—he could have been in his thirties or his fifties.

Kendra glanced around the spacious room. A large aquarium held a vibrant collection of tropical fish. Numerous delicate, metallic mobiles dangled from the ceiling. She counted at least ten clocks of eccentric designs on the walls, tables, and shelves. A sculpture made of garbage stood beside a life-sized wooden carving of a grizzly bear. Near the window was an elaborate model of the solar system, intricate planets and moons held in place by wire orbits.

“Would you join me in a game of Foosball?” His accent made Kendra think of the Caribbean, although that was not quite right.

“Are you the Sphinx?” Kendra asked, bewildered by the unusual request. “I am.”

Kendra approached the table. “Okay, sure.”

“Would you prefer cowboys or Indians?”

Spitted on rods were four rows of Indians and four rows of cowboys. The cowboys were all the same, as were the Indians. The cowboy had a white hat and a mustache. His hands rested on his holstered six-guns. The Indian had a feathered headdress, and his reddish-brown arms were folded across his bare chest. The feet of each cowboy and Indian were fused together to better strike the ball.

“I’ll be Indians,” Kendra said. She had played some Foosball at the rec center back home. Seth usually beat her two out of three games.

“Let me forewarn you,” the Sphinx said, “I am not very good.” There was a mellow quality to his voice that evoked images of old-time jazz clubs.

“Neither am I,” Kendra admitted. “My little brother usually beats me.”

“Would you like to serve the ball?”

“Sure.”



He gave her the bright yellow ball. She put her left hand on the handle that controlled the goalie, dropped the ball into the slot with her right, and started wildly spinning her nearest Indians as it rolled across the center of the table. The Sphinx controlled his cowboys with more calm, using quick, precise jabs to counter Kendra's reckless spinning. It was not long before Kendra scored the first goal.

"Well done," he said.

Kendra marked the goal by sliding a bead along a bar at her end of the table. The Sphinx took the ball out of his goal and served it through the slot. The ball rolled to his men. He passed it up to his front row of cowboys, but the Indian goalie blocked the shot. The Indians spun madly, mercilessly pounding the ball at the cowboys until they scored a second goal.

The Sphinx slid the ball into the slot. Her confidence boosted, Kendra attacked even more aggressively with her Indians, and ended up winning the game five goals to two.

"I feel like General Custer," the Sphinx said. "Well played. Can I offer you something to drink? Apple juice? Cream soda? Chocolate milk, perhaps?"

"Cream soda sounds good," Kendra said. She was feeling more at ease after trouncing him.

"Excellent choice," the Sphinx said. He opened a freezer and withdrew a frosty mug with ice in it. From a small refrigerator he removed a brown bottle, uncapped it with a little tool, and poured the yellow soda into the mug. It was surprisingly foamy. "Please, sit down." He nodded to a pair of chairs facing each other with a low table in between.

Kendra took a seat and the Sphinx handed her the mug. Her first few sips were all froth. When she finally reached the soda, it was a perfect mix of sweet, creamy, cool, and bubbly. "Thanks, this is delicious," she said.

"The pleasure is mine." A miniature gong sat on the table between them. The Sphinx tapped it with a small hammer. "While the gong vibrates, none can overhear our conversation. I have at least part of the answer you came here seeking. You are fairykind."

"I am very kind?"

"Fairy . . . kind," he said, enunciating carefully. "It is written all over your countenance, woven into your speech."

"What does that mean?"

"It means that you are unique in all the world, Kendra. In my long years and many travels, I have never met anyone who was fairykind, though I am

familiar with the signs and see them expressed plainly in you. Tell me, did you sample the elixir you prepared for the fairies?"

There was a hypnotic gravity to his voice. Kendra felt like she had to snap out of a trance in order to answer the question. "Yes, actually, I did. I was trying to convince them to try it."

The corners of his mouth lifted slightly, showing dimples in his cheeks. "Then perhaps you gave them an incentive," he said. "They had to either make you fairykind or watch you die."

"Die?"

"The elixir you ingested is fatal to mortals. You would have eventually suffered a torturous death had the fairies not chosen to share their magic with you."

"The fairies cured me?"

"They changed you, so that you no longer required curing."

Kendra stared at him. "People have said I was fairystruck."

"I have met individuals who were fairystruck. It is a rare and extraordinary occurrence. This is much more rare, and much more extraordinary. You have been made fairykind. I do not believe it has happened in more than a thousand years."

"I still don't understand what it means," Kendra said.

"Neither do I, not entirely. The fairies have changed you, adopted you, infused you with their magic. A semblance of the magical energy that naturally dwells in them now dwells in you. The diverse effects that could flow from this are difficult to anticipate."

"That's why I don't need the milk to see anymore?"

"And why Warren found himself drawn to you. And why you understand Goblush, along with, I imagine, the other tongues derived from Silvian, the language of the fairies. Your grandfather has been in touch with me regarding the new abilities you have been manifesting." The Sphinx leaned forward and tapped the little gong with the hammer again.

Kendra took another sip from her mug. "This morning, Coulter was showing us a ball protected by a distracter spell. Seth couldn't pick it up; he kept losing focus and getting redirected someplace else. But it didn't work on me. I could grab it just fine."

"You have apparently developed resistance to mind control."

Kendra wrinkled her brow. "Tanu gave me a potion that made me feel ashamed, and it worked just fine."

"The potion would have been manipulating your emotions. Mind control functions differently. Pay close attention to all the new abilities you discover. Report them to your grandfather. Unless I am mistaken, you are only beginning to scratch the surface."

The thought was thrilling and terrifying. "I'm still a human, right?"

"You are something more than human," the Sphinx said. "But your humanity and your mortality remain intact."

"Are you a human?"

He smiled, his teeth shockingly white in contrast to his black skin. "I am an anachronism. A holdover from long-forgotten times. I have seen learning come and go, empires rise and fall. Consider me your guardian angel. I would like to conduct a simple experiment. Do you mind?"

"Is it safe?"

"Completely. But if I am right, it could provide the answer to why the Society of the Evening Star has shown such interest in you."

"Okay."

A pair of short copper rods rested on the table. The Sphinx picked up one and handed it to Kendra. "Hand me the other one," the Sphinx said. After Kendra complied, he held his rod in both hands, one at each end of the rod. "Hold your rod like me," he instructed.

Kendra had been holding the slender rod in one hand. The instant her other hand touched it, she felt a sensation like she was falling backwards through the chair. And then it passed. And she was inexplicably sitting where the Sphinx had been sitting, and he was seated in her chair. They had instantaneously switched places.

The Sphinx released one hand from the rod and then grabbed it again. The moment his hand came back into contact with the rod, Kendra felt her insides lurch again, and suddenly she was sitting back in her former chair.

The Sphinx set the rod down on the table, and Kendra did likewise. "We teleported?" Kendra asked.

"The rods enable users to trade locations over short distances. But that is not what makes what happened unusual. Those rods have been dead for decades, useless, drained of all energy. Your touch recharged them."

"Really?"

“Fairykind are known to radiate magical energy in a unique way. The world is full of burned-out magical tools. Your touch would revitalize them. This amazing ability alone would make you tremendously valuable to the Society of the Evening Star. I wonder how they know. An educated guess, perhaps?”

“Do they have a lot of things that need recharging?”

The Sphinx tapped the gong again. “No doubt, but I refer more directly to the five hidden artifacts your grandparents told you about. The ones on the five secret preserves. If any of them lie dormant, as is likely, your touch would reactivate them. All five would have to be functional in order for the Society to achieve their goal of opening Zzyzx and freeing the demons. Without your gift, reactivating talismans of such monumental power would be most difficult.”

“Here’s what I don’t get,” Kendra said. “Why have keys to the prison? Why not make a demon prison without keys?”

The Sphinx nodded as if he approved of the question. “There is a fundamental principle of magic that applies to many other things as well: Everything with a beginning has an ending. Any magic that can be done, can be undone. Anything you can make, can be unmade. In other words, any prison you can create, can be destroyed. Any lock can be broken. To construct an impenetrable prison is impossible. Those who have tried have invariably failed. The magic becomes unstable and unravels. If it has a beginning, it must have an end.

“The wise learned that rather than attempting to make a prison impenetrable, they should focus on making it extraordinarily complicated to open. The strongest prisons, like Zzyzx, were crafted by those who understood that the goal was to make them nearly impenetrable, as close to perfect as possible without crossing the line. Because there is a way to open Zzyzx, the magic that holds the demons bound remains potent. The principle sounds simple, although the details become quite complicated.”

Kendra shifted in her seat. “So if the Society just destroyed the keys, would that unravel the magic and open the prison?”

“Nimble thinking,” the Sphinx said, dark eyes twinkling. “Three problems. First, the keys are virtually indestructible—note that I say *virtually*; they were made by the same experts who created the prison. Second, if my research is correct, a fail-safe would cause any destroyed key to be reconstituted in a different form in an unpredictable location, and that process could go on almost indefinitely. And third, if the Society were somehow to free

the demons by permanently destroying an artifact, they would become victims like the rest of humanity. The Society must parley with the demons before their release in order to obtain any measure of security, which means they must open the prison properly rather than simply undermine the magic that upholds it.”

Kendra drank the last of her cream soda, ice tumbling against her lips. “So they can’t succeed without the artifacts.”

“Therefore we must keep the artifacts from them. Which is easier said than done. One of the great virtues of the Society is patience. They make no rash moves. They research and plan and prepare. They wait for the ideal opportunities. They understand that they have an unlimited amount of time in which to succeed. To them, it is the same to achieve their aims in a thousand years as it would be to triumph tomorrow. Patience mimics the power of infinity. And nobody can win a staring contest with infinity. No matter how long you last, infinity is just getting started.”

“But they aren’t infinity,” Kendra said.

The Sphinx blinked. “True. And so we attempt to equal their patience and diligence. We do our best to stay far ahead of them. Part of that means moving an artifact once they learn its location, as we fear has happened with the artifact at Fablehaven. Otherwise, somehow, sometime, they will exploit a mistake and lay hands on it.”

“Grandpa mentioned another endangered artifact, in Brazil.”

“Some of my best people are working on it. I believe the artifact remains on the fallen preserve, and I believe we will retrieve it first.” He threw up his hands. “If the Society manages to recover it, we will have to steal it back.”

The Sphinx gazed at Kendra with fathomless eyes. Kendra looked away. “What letter of mine did you read?” he finally asked.

“Letter?”

“All of my letters carry enchantments. They leave a mark upon those who read them surreptitiously. You bear the mark.”

At first Kendra had no idea what he was talking about. When would she have read a letter from the Sphinx? Then she remembered the letter she had read last summer while Grandpa was sleeping after staying up late with Maddox. Of course! It had been signed “S.” For Sphinx!

“It was a letter you sent Grandpa last year. He accidentally left it out in the open. You were warning him about the Society of the Evening Star. I read it

because I thought it might have something to do with my grandma. She was missing.”

“Be glad you did not read it with malicious intent. The letter would have turned into a toxic vapor.” He folded his hands on his lap. “We are nearly finished. Have you any final questions for me?”

Kendra frowned. “What do I do now?”

“You return to your grandfather with the knowledge that you are fairykind. You do your part to keep Fablehaven safe while the artifact is recovered. You take note of any new abilities. You counsel with your grandparents as needed. And you take comfort in the fact that you now know why the Society is interested in you.”

He placed a single finger beside his temple. “One last thought. Though secret, and in many ways quiet, the struggle between the Society of the Evening Star and those who manage the preserves is of desperate importance to the whole world. Whatever the rhetoric on both sides, the problem boils down to a simple disagreement. While the Conservators’ Alliance wants to preserve magical creatures without endangering humanity, the Society of the Evening Star wants to exploit many of those same magical creatures in order to gain power. The Society will pursue its ends at the expense of all humankind if necessary. The stakes could not be higher.”

The Sphinx stood up. “You are an extraordinary young lady, Kendra, with immeasurable potential. The day may come when you want to deliberately explore and channel the power the fairies have granted you. On that day, it would be my pleasure to offer guidance and instruction. You could become a powerful adversary of the Society. I hope we can count on your assistance in the future.”

“Okay, wow, thanks,” Kendra said. “I’ll do all I can.”

He extended a hand toward the door. “Good day, my new friend. Your brother can come see me now.”

* * *

Seth reclined on a beanbag, staring at the ceiling. Grandma sat on a nearby couch, leafing through a thick book. It seemed like all he ever did lately was wait. Wait for somebody to take him into the woods. Wait for the car ride to be over. Wait while Kendra talked forever with the Sphinx. Was the purpose of life learning to endure boredom?

The door opened and Kendra emerged. “Your turn,” she said.

Seth rolled off the beanbag and stood up. "What's he like?"

"He's smart," Kendra said. "He said I'm fairykind."

Seth cocked his head. "Very kind?"

"Fairy . . . kind. The fairies shared their magic with me."

"Are you sure, dear?" Grandma said, one hand over her heart.

"That's what he said," Kendra shrugged. "He acted sure."

Seth tuned them out and hurried over to the door. He opened it and shoved through the curtain into the room. The Sphinx stood leaning against the Foosball table. "Your sister tells me you are quite the Foosball player."

"I'm okay. I don't own my own table or anything."

"I do not play often. Would you care to try your hand against me?"

Seth surveyed the table. "I want to be cowboys."

"Good. They were unlucky for me against your sister."

"Are you really part lion?"

"You mean, am I appearing to you as an avatar? I will tell you if you win. Would you care to serve?"

Seth grabbed the handles. "You can."

"As you wish." The Sphinx pushed the ball through the slot. The cowboys started spinning frantically. The Sphinx got control of the ball, nudged it sideways about an inch, and, with a flick of his wrist, blasted it into Seth's goal.

"Wow!" Seth said.

"Your serve."

Seth put the ball in play. Flailing with his cowboys, he knocked it all the way to the Sphinx's goalie. Using controlled movements, the Sphinx passed the ball across the table, from row to row, until he slammed it into Seth's goal from a tricky angle.

"You're amazing!" Seth said. "Did you say Kendra beat you?"

"Your sister needed confidence. Yours is a different problem. Plus there is no chance of me telling you my secret unless you earn it." Seth put the ball back in play, and the Sphinx swiftly scored again. The same thing happened two more times, the final point coming from a shot that put a spin on the ball so it curved into the goal.

"You skunked me!" Seth cried.

"Do not tell your sister that I went easy on her. Tell her you beat me, if she asks." The Sphinx paused, looking Seth up and down. "You have obviously

been cursed.”

“A demon statue bit me. You can tell?”

“I knew beforehand, but the evidence of the curse is plain. Olloch the Glutton. How does it feel to be on his menu?”

“Not so good. Can you fix me?”

The Sphinx opened the refrigerator. “I offered your sister a drink.”

“You have anything from Egypt?”

“I have apple juice. I suppose Egyptians drink it sometimes.”

“Okay.” Seth roamed the room, looking at the strange knickknacks on the tables and shelves. A miniature Ferris wheel, a collapsible spyglass, a crystal music box, numerous figurines.

The Sphinx popped open a can of apple juice and poured the contents into a frosty mug. “Here you go.”

Seth accepted the mug and took a sip. “I like the frozen cup.”

“I am glad. Seth, I cannot remove the curse. It will remain until Olloch either devours you or is destroyed.”

“So what do I do?” Seth started guzzling his juice.

“You will have to rely on the barrier the walls of Fablehaven provide. The day will come when Olloch shows up at the gates. The insatiable drive that compels him toward you will only increase over time. Worse, the demon is in the hands of the Society, and I suspect they will ensure he makes his way to you sooner rather than later. When Olloch makes his appearance, we will find a way to deal with him. Until that day, Fablehaven will be your refuge.”

“No more school?” Seth asked hopefully.

“You must not leave Fablehaven again until the glutton has been subdued. Mark my words, he will appear before long. When he does, we will discover a weakness and learn a way to exploit it. You should have no problem returning to school by the fall.”

Having finished the juice, Seth wiped his lips with the back of his hand. “No big rush.”

“Our conversation is nearly finished,” the Sphinx said, taking the mug from Seth. “Take care of your sister. Turbulent times lie ahead. The gift the fairies have given her will make her a target. Your bravery can be a powerful asset if you can keep it unspoiled by recklessness. Do not forget that Fablehaven almost fell because of your folly. Learn from that mistake.”

“I will,” Seth said. “I mean, I have. And I’ll keep Kendra’s fairykind thing a secret.”

The Sphinx extended a hand. Seth shook it. “One last thing, Seth. Are you aware that Midsummer Eve is scarcely a week away?”

“Yeah.”

“Might I make a suggestion?”

“Okay.”

“Don’t open any windows.”



An Uninvited Guest

Grandpa leaned back in his wheelchair, tapping his lips with the safe end of a fountain pen. Kendra and Seth sat in the oversized armchairs, and Grandma was behind the desk. Kendra and Seth had not seen Grandpa the previous night—Grandma had taken them to a fondue restaurant after their meeting with the Sphinx, and so they had not returned until well after dark.

“Our story is that you were fairystruck, and that there were some residual effects from the incident,” Grandpa said, ending the contemplative silence. “It sounds perfectly plausible, and will make you less of a target than if word gets out you are fairykind. Obviously we never let on that the diagnosis came from the Sphinx—we do not mention him at all, to anyone.”

“Coulter already knows we went to see him,” Kendra confessed.

“What?” Grandma leaned forward.

“He already told me,” Grandpa said. “Ruth, he was trying to teach the lesson that spies could be anywhere, eavesdropping on conversations, and in the process learned about the Sphinx. The secret will be safe with Coulter. But he need not hear further details. No discussing it outside of this study.”

“So if anyone asks, Kendra was fairystruck,” Seth said.

“If someone knows enough to ask, and deserves an answer, that is our story,” Grandpa reiterated. “Now I hope we can get back to business as

usual. Tanu is off scouting some unexplored territory. Coulter has an outing specifically for Seth. And Kendra can assist Vanessa with research.”

“Research?” Kendra asked. “Here in the house?”

Seth bit the side of his hand. He was choking back laughter, which only served to inflame Kendra’s indignation.

“She’s going through some journals,” Grandpa said. “Following up on some hints left by Patton Burgess.”

“Why can’t I go with Coulter? It’s sexist! Can’t you make him take me?”

“Coulter is one of the most stubborn men I know,” Grandpa said. “I have serious doubts whether anyone could make him do anything. But I’m not sure today need be an issue for you, Kendra. I suspect you would rather skip this outing of your own accord. You see, a certain fog giant shared a valuable lead with us. In return, we promised him a live buffalo. So Coulter, Seth, and Hugo will be handing over a buffalo to the brute to be instantly devoured. It will be a gruesome sight.”

“Awesome,” Seth whispered reverently.

“Okay, well, I guess I don’t mind skipping that,” Kendra admitted. “But I still don’t like the idea of being left out of Coulter’s excursions.”

“Complaint noted,” Grandpa said. “Now, Seth, I don’t want this Olloch the Glutton business keeping you up at night. The Sphinx is right, the walls of Fablehaven will be sufficient protection, and if he says he will help us take care of the glutton once the demon shows up, then I see no cause for worry.”

“Sounds good to me,” Seth said.

“Well, then,” Grandpa said. “Off you go.”

* * *

Seth kept glancing over his shoulder at the buffalo they were leading along the path. Huge shaggy head, short white horns, bulky body, plodding gait. He had never appreciated what large animals they were. Had Hugo not been leading the beast with a bridle, Seth would have scrambled up a tree.

They had started out on paths Seth knew, but quickly turned down unfamiliar roads. Now they had reached lower, wetter terrain than Seth had

ever seen at Fablehaven. The trees had more moss and vines, and the first shreds of unexpected mist eddied close to the ground.

Seth clutched his emergency kit. Alongside the more conventional contents, Tanu had added a small potion that would boost his vigor if he became exhausted. This morning Coulter had added a lucky rabbit's foot and a medallion that was supposed to repel the undead.

"Is this rabbit's foot really lucky?" Seth asked, fingering it.

"We'll see," Coulter responded, eyes scanning the trees.

"Are you superstitious?"

"I like to cover my bases," he said softly. "Keep your voice low. This is not a hospitable area of the preserve. Now might be a good time to put on that medallion."

Seth fished the medallion out of his emergency kit and slipped the chain around his neck. "Where did Hugo find a buffalo in the first place?" he asked quietly.

"There's a complex of corrals and stables on the preserve," Coulter said. "Not filled to capacity, but with plenty of animals for Fablehaven to remain self-sufficient. Hugo does most of the upkeep. He brought the buffalo from there this morning."

"Do you have any giraffes?"

"The most exotic it gets are ostriches, llamas, and buffalo," Coulter said. "Along with more traditional livestock."

The mist was getting thicker. The air remained warm, but the cloying smell of decay was increasing. The terrain became soupier. Seth began spotting clusters of fuzzy mushrooms and rocks slick with slime.

Coulter pointed to a path diverting off to one side. "Normally in Fablehaven you are relatively safe if you stay on the path. But that is only true of the real paths. That path, for example, was created by a swamp hag to lead the unwary to their doom."

Seth stared at the narrow trail meandering off into the mist, trying to memorize it so he would never make the mistake of following it. They did not go much farther before Coulter stopped.

"We are now at the edge of the great marsh of Fablehaven," he whispered. "One of the most perilous, least explored areas of the preserve. A likely region for the inverted tower to be hidden. Come."

Coulter stepped off the path onto muddy ground. Seth squelched after him, with Hugo and the ill-fated buffalo bringing up the rear. Up ahead, through the shroud of white mist, a geodesic dome came into view. The grid of triangles that comprised the dome appeared to be composed of glass and steel. In form, the structure was similar to the domes of interlocking metal bars Seth had seen on playgrounds.

“What’s that?” Seth asked.

“A safe hut,” Coulter said. “Glass domes strategically placed in some of the more threatening areas of the preserve. They provide the kind of refuge we enjoy back at the main house. Nothing can enter uninvited.”

They walked about ten yards past the hut. “Hugo, picket the buffalo here,” Coulter ordered. “Then stand watch from behind the hut.”

Hugo produced a stake the size of a fence post and thrust it deep into the ground with a single powerful motion. The golem then fastened the buffalo to the stake. Coulter shook something from a pouch into his palm, then cupped his hand near the buffalo’s muzzle. “This will anesthetize him,” Coulter explained. Next he produced a knife and slashed the buffalo on the shoulder. The buffalo tossed its heavy head.

A deep roar came echoing out of the mist. “To the hut,” Coulter murmured, wiping the knife clean before stowing it. He tossed the rag that he had used to wipe the knife near the buffalo.

The symmetry of the glass dome was broken only by a small hatch in one side, also made of glass and framed in steel. Coulter opened the hatch and crawled in after Seth. The hut had no floor—just the bare earth. Hugo waited outside.

“We’re safe in here?” Seth asked.

“As long as we don’t break the glass from the inside, no creature can get us, even a fog giant in a blood frenzy.”

“Blood frenzy?”

“You’ll see,” Coulter assured him. “Fog giants go mad around blood. Worse than sharks. This tribute is the price we agreed to pay for information Burlox gave us about the marshland. After the tribute, he has promised us one more piece of information.”

“Burlox is the giant?”

“The most approachable of them, yes.”

“What if the wrong giant takes the buffalo?”

Coulter shook his head. “Fog giants are highly territorial. Another would not encroach on Burlox’s domain. Their borders are clearly defined.”

Despite the condensation on the glass and the intervening mist, Seth had a good view of the buffalo. It was grazing. “I feel bad for the buffalo,” Seth said.

“Like most livestock, it was born to be slaughtered,” Coulter said. “If not by a fog giant, by your grandfather. The anesthetic will dull its senses. The fog giant will administer a quick death.”

Seth frowned, staring through the glass. What had sounded like fun back at the house was no longer very appealing, now that he recognized the buffalo as an actual living thing. “I guess I eat hamburgers all the time,” he finally said.

“This isn’t much different,” Coulter agreed. “Somewhat more dramatic.”

“What about the rules of the treaty?” Seth asked. “Won’t you get in trouble for killing the buffalo?”

“I won’t be doing any killing; that will be the giant,” Coulter explained. “Besides, the rules are different for animals. The treaty was meant to keep sentient beings from committing murder and casting spells on each other. The same protection does not extend to animals of a lower order of intelligence. When the need arises, we can slaughter animals for food with no repercussions.”

Another roar sounded, much closer and more intense. A gargantuan shadow loomed beyond the buffalo. “Here he comes,” Coulter breathed.

Seth’s mouth went dry. As the fog giant emerged from the mist, Seth found himself scooting back to the far side of the small dome. Burlox was enormous. Seth was not much taller than his knee. Hugo was shorter than his hip. The buffalo suddenly looked like a house pet.

The fog giant had the proportions of a heavyset man. He wore tattered, matted furs, and his body was smeared with oily muck. Beneath the filth, his skin was a sickly bluish gray. His long hair and beard were tangled in slime. In one hand he bore a crude, heavy club. The overall impression was that of a fierce, battle-weary Viking who had lost his way in a swamp.

The giant stopped near the buffalo. He turned and looked toward the dome, giving a single nod and leering. Seth was acutely aware that a single

swing of the huge club could bash the hut to smithereens. Burlox tossed the club aside and then pounced at the buffalo, tearing off the bridle and hoisting the flustered animal into the air.

Seth looked away. It was too much. He heard a noisy combination of bones crunching and flesh tearing before clamping his hands over his ears. Part of him wanted to watch, but instead he kept his head down and his ears covered.

“You’re missing it,” Coulter eventually said, kneeling at his side.

Seth peeked. The buffalo no longer looked much like a buffalo. Sections of the hide had been cast aside, and jutting bones were visible. Seth tried to pretend that the leg Burlox was mauling was a gigantic spare rib, and that the feasting giant was drenched in barbecue sauce.

“Not something you get to see every day,” Coulter said.

“True,” Seth conceded.

“Look at him, munching away—he can’t eat it fast enough. He rarely gets meat of this quality. He ought to slow down and savor it. But the brute can’t help himself.”

“It’s pretty disgusting.”

“Just one beast consuming the meat of another,” Coulter said.

“Although I’ll admit I glanced away at the start myself.”

“It was sadder than I expected.”

“Look at him going after the marrow. He doesn’t want to waste a thing.”

“I can’t imagine eating something raw like that,” Seth said.

“He can’t imagine cooking it,” Coulter replied.

They watched as the giant picked the bones clean and sucked them dry. “Here it comes,” Coulter said, rubbing his hands. “You’d think he’d be satisfied, but no matter how much fresh meat you give them, it just whets their appetite.” The fog giant began rooting around on the ground, apparently lapping up what he could from the mud. Soon his face was masked with sludge, and limp vegetation dangled from his lips. He began hammering his mighty fists against the soggy turf and throwing fragments of bone into the mist. He tossed back his head and let out a long, angry cry.

“He’s going berserk,” Seth said.

The fog giant wheeled toward the dome, scowling. He picked up his club and charged, eyes ablaze. Seth felt totally exposed. With glass on all sides, held together by narrow strips of metal, it felt worse than no cover whatsoever. One swing of the club and the dome would explode toward him like a thousand daggers. He recoiled and raised his arms to shield his face from flying glass. Coulter sat calmly beside him, as if watching a movie.

Racing at full speed, the giant lifted the club high above his head and brought it down with terrible force. Just before the club connected with the surface of the dome, it rebounded sharply, making an unnatural pinging sound, and sailed out of the giant's grasp. Burlox's forward momentum instantly reversed, and the giant pitched violently backwards.

Shaken and seething, the fog giant arose and staggered away from the dome. As a hulking silhouette in the mist, Burlox began brutalizing a tree. He tore down huge limbs, and was soon pounding his fists against the sturdy trunk. Groaning and growling, he seized the trunk in a terrible embrace, twisting and wrenching and wrestling until the bole began to split. With a final mighty heave accompanied by a tremendous crack, he toppled the entire tree and knelt panting, hands on his knees.

"Incredible strength," Coulter commented. "He should be cooling down by now."

Sure enough, after a few moments, the giant trudged over and retrieved his club. Then he came and stood towering over the dome. Much of the mud had fallen from his face. After the food and the exertion, his complexion was ruddier. "More," he demanded, pointing at his mouth.

"We agreed on a single buffalo," Coulter called to him.

Burlox grimaced, revealing weeds and bark and fur in his teeth. He stamped a massive foot. "More!" It came across as a roar rather than a word.

"You said you knew a place Warren had been exploring before he turned white," Coulter said. "We had a deal."

"More after," Burlox grunted threateningly.

"If we give you anything else, it will be out of kindness, not obligation. A deal is a deal. Was the buffalo not delicious?"

"Four hills," the giant spat, before pivoting and stalking away.

"The four hills," Coulter repeated softly, watching the enormous figure vanish into the mist. He clapped Seth on the back. "We just got what we

came here for, my boy. A bona fide lead.”

* * *

Kendra reached into the sack and then sprinkled raisins into the glass cylinder. The orange mass at the bottom oozed toward the raisins like living pudding, covering them and slowly darkening to a deep red. “You have gross pets,” Kendra said.

Vanessa lifted her gaze from the journal she was studying. “Wizard slime looks unappetizing, but no other substance can equal its ability to draw out the poison from infected tissue. All of my darlings have their uses.”

Unusual animals occupied most of Vanessa’s room. Cages, buckets, aquariums, and terrariums contained a stunning variety of inhabitants. Whether they looked like reptiles, mammals, arachnids, amphibians, insects, sponges, fungi, or something in between, all were magical. There was a colorful lizard with three eyes that was nearly impossible to pick up because it could see slightly into the future and avoid your every move. A hairless mouse that transformed into a fish if you dropped it in water. And a bat who shed her wings biweekly—if the discarded wings were quickly pressed against another creature, they would take hold and grow. Vanessa had used them to create a flying rabbit.

Aside from the dozens of life forms in their respective containers, stacks of books dominated the room. The majority were bulky reference books and leather-bound journals of previous Fablehaven caretakers. Bookmarks protruded from the journals, marking pages of interest Vanessa had discovered during her research.

“I’m not sure I could sleep surrounded by so many freaky animals,” Kendra said.

Vanessa closed the journal she was reading, marking the page with a silk ribbon. “I’ve rendered the truly dangerous whirligigs harmless, like the drumants. None of the creatures I brought into Fablehaven could cause anyone serious harm.”

“I got nipped last night,” Kendra said, holding out her arm to show the bite marks in the crook of her elbow. “Slept right through it.”

“I’m sorry,” Vanessa said. “I have fifteen in the cage now.”

“Which means four are running loose,” Kendra said gruffly, imitating Coulter.

Vanessa smiled. “He means well.”

“He’s not winning any points by taking off with Seth and leaving me behind. If he gave me the choice, I would probably volunteer to skip some excursions. I mean, I could probably go my whole life without seeing a buffalo eaten alive and be just fine. But being told to stay behind feels different.”

Vanessa stood up and crossed to a chest of drawers. “I suspect I would feel the same way.” She opened a drawer and started rummaging. “It seems only fair that I should share a secret with you.” She removed a candle and what looked like a long, translucent crayon.

“What are those?” Kendra asked.

“In rain forests around the world, you can find tiny sprites called umites that make honey and wax like bees. In fact, they dwell in almost hivelike communities. This marker and candle are both composed of umite wax.” Vanessa wrote on the front of the drawer with the clear waxen marker. “See anything?”

“No.”

“Watch.” Vanessa struck a match and lit the candle. Once a flame burned on the wick, the entire candle glowed yellow, as did the marker, as did a vivid message on the front of the drawer:

Hi Kendra!

“Cool,” Kendra said.

“Try to wipe it off,” Vanessa said.

Kendra tried to wipe away the words to no avail. As soon as Vanessa blew out the candle, the message vanished. Vanessa handed the crayon and the candle to Kendra. “For me?” Kendra asked.

“I have spares. Now we can send each other secret messages, and none of the boys will know. I always carry one of those markers on me. They write surprisingly well on nearly any surface, the messages are difficult to erase, and only those with a properly enchanted umite candle can read them. I’ve used umite wax to mark myself a trail, to send a sensitive communiqué to a friend, and to remind myself of important secrets.”

“Thanks, what a great gift!”

Vanessa winked. “We’re pen pals.”

* * *

Seth watched Coulter mount the steps to the back porch and enter the house. He knew his window of opportunity might be brief, so he hurried past the barn to a tree beside a path into the woods. It was the same path that led to the greenhouse where he and Kendra had harvested pumpkins the previous year. That morning, before anyone was awake, Seth had left a note at the base of that tree under a rock.

The year before, after Kendra had saved Fablehaven and while she slept for two days straight, Seth had held a private meeting with the satyrs, Newel and Doren. Most of the inhabitants of Fablehaven were not permitted in the yard uninvited, so the satyrs had stood at the edge of the yard and beckoned Seth over. They had agreed that when Seth returned to Fablehaven, he would bring size C batteries and leave a note under the rock. Newel and Doren would recover the note and leave instructions for a meeting, where they would exchange gold for the treasured batteries that would bring new life to their portable television.

Seth squatted at the base of the tree. Even though he had left the note in the morning and it was now late afternoon, it was almost too much to hope that the satyrs would have already responded. Who knew how often they would check? Knowing them, maybe never. Seth picked up the rock. On the back of his note the satyrs had scrawled a message:

If you get this today, follow this path, take your second left, first right, keep on until you hear us. You’ll hear us. If you get this tomorrow, it will say something else!

Excited, Seth stuffed the note in his pocket and set off down the path. He had eight size C batteries in the bottom of his emergency kit. After he sold those, and the satyrs were hooked, he figured he could sell the rest for even more. If everything panned out, he would be retired before reaching high school!

Walking briskly, Seth took about six minutes to reach the second left, and about four more to reach the next right. At least, he hoped it was the

next right. It was a scant trail, less inviting than the fake one Coulter had shown him in the swamp. But the satyrs had said “first right,” so they must have meant this little trail. He wasn’t too far from the yard, so Seth felt confident it would be safe.

The farther he went, the thicker the woods and undergrowth around the little trail became. He was beginning to consider doubling back and waiting for a second message from the satyrs when he heard shouting up ahead. It was definitely the goatmen. He jogged forward. The closer he got, the more clearly he could hear them.

“Are you out of your skull?” one voice griped. “That was right on the line!”

“I’m telling you, I saw daylight between the line and the ball, and it’s my call,” a strident voice answered.

“Is that fun for you? To win by cheating? Why even play?”

“You aren’t going to guilt me out of my point, Newel!”

“We better arm wrestle for it.”

“What would an arm wrestle prove? It’s my call, and I say it was out.”

Seth had drawn even with the argument. He could not see the satyrs, but he could hear that they were not far off the path. He started shoving through the undergrowth.

“Your call? Last time I checked, it takes two to play. I’m ahead; maybe I’ll quit right now and declare myself champion.”

“Then I’ll declare myself champion too, because that would be an indisputable forfeit.”

“I’ll show you an indisputable forfeit!”

Seth pushed between some bushes and stepped onto a level, well-trimmed grass tennis court. The court had neatly chalked lines and a regulation-style net. Newel and Doren stood at the far side of the court, faces red, each clutching a tennis racket. They looked like they were about to come to blows. As Seth emerged onto the court, they turned to face him.

Both of the satyrs were shirtless, with hairy chests and freckled shoulders. From the waist down they had the furry legs and hooves of a goat. Newel had redder hair, more freckles, and slightly longer horns than Doren.

“Glad you found us,” Newel said, trying to smile. “Sorry you happened by when Doren was being a knucklehead.”

“Maybe Seth can solve this one,” Doren said.

Newel closed his eyes in exasperation. “He wasn’t here to see the point.”

“If you both think you’re right, do it over,” Seth said.

Newel opened his eyes. “I could live with that.”

“Me too,” Doren agreed. “Seth, your new nickname is Solomon.”

“You mind letting us finish this game?” Newel asked. “Just so we can keep momentum? No fun to start again cold.”

“Go ahead,” Seth said.

“You be line judge,” Doren said.

“Sure.”

The goatmen trotted into position. Newel was serving. “Forty-fifteen,” he called, tossing a ball into the air and hitting it briskly into play. Doren hit a hard crosscourt forehand, but Newel was in position and hit it back with a gentle slice that took a soft bounce with a lot of spin. It looked unreachable, but Doren dove and managed to get his racket under the ball before the second bounce, popping it over the net. Newel had read the situation well and was already charging forward. As Doren scrambled up, Newel slammed the ball into the far corner of the court, bouncing it deep into the bushes.

“Go fetch it, nitwit!” Doren said. “You didn’t have to wail it into the woods. You had an open lane.”

“He’s sore because I just went up five games to three,” Newel explained, twirling his racket.

“I’m sore because you’re trying to show off for Seth!” Doren said.

“You’re saying you wouldn’t have slammed it if I’d hit you a pathetic lob?”

“You were at the net! I would have just tapped it at a brutal angle. Better to win with finesse than to hunt for balls in the shrubbery.”

“You’re both really good,” Seth said.

The two goatmen looked pleased by the compliment. “You know, satyrs invented tennis,” Newel said, balancing his racket on the tip of his finger.

“They did not,” Doren said. “We learned about it on TV.”

“I like your rackets,” Seth said.

“Graphite, light and strong,” Newel said. “Warren got us our equipment. Back before he went all Boo Radley on us. The net, the rackets, a few cases of balls.”

“We built the court,” Doren said proudly.

“And we maintain it,” Newel said.

“The brownies maintain it,” Doren corrected.

“Under our supervision,” Newel amended.

“Speaking of tennis balls,” Doren said, “most of ours are flat, but with the supply dwindling, it always kills us to open a new can. If our battery arrangement works out, think you might be able to score us some new balls?”

“If this works out, I’ll get you whatever you want,” Seth promised.

“Then let’s get down to business,” Newel said, setting down his racket and rubbing his palms together. “You have the merchandise?”

Seth scrambled through his emergency kit and pulled out eight batteries, lining them up on the ground.

“Would you look at that,” Doren marveled. “Have you ever seen such a gorgeous sight?”

“It’s a start,” Newel said. “But let’s face it, they’ll run out before long. I assume there are more where those came from?”

“Lots more,” Seth assured him. “This is just a test run. If I remember right, you said something about batteries being worth their weight in gold.”

Newel and Doren shared a glance. “We think we may have figured out something you’d like more,” Newel said.

“Follow us,” Doren said.

Seth walked with the satyrs over to a little white shed not far from the net. Newel opened the door and ducked inside. He came out holding a bottle. “What do you say?” Newel asked. “A bottle of fine wine for those eight batteries.”

“Potent stuff,” Doren confided. “It’ll put hair on your chest in no time. Good luck getting something like that from your grandparents.”

Seth looked back and forth at the two satyrs. “Are you serious? I’m twelve years old! Do you think I’m an alcoholic or something?”

“We figured something like this might be tough for you to get,” Newel said with a wink.

“Good wine,” Doren said. “Primo.”

“That might be true, but I’m just a kid. What am I going to do with a bottle of wine?”

Newel and Doren shared a nervous glance. “Well done, Seth,” Newel said awkwardly, ruffling his hair. “You . . . passed our test. Your parents would be very proud.”

Newel elbowed Doren. “Yeah, um, sometimes we test people,” Doren said. “And play jokes.”

Newel went back into the shed. He returned holding a blue frog with yellow markings. “Seriously, here is what we really had in mind, Seth.”

“A frog?” Seth asked.

“Not just any frog,” Doren said. “Show him.”

Newel tickled the frog’s belly. Its air sac swelled up to the size of a cantaloupe, and the frog let out a tremendous belching sound. Seth laughed in surprised delight. The satyrs laughed with him. Newel tickled the frog again and the thunderous belching sound repeated. Doren was wiping away mirthful tears.

“So what do you say?” Newel asked.

“Eight lousy batteries for one incredible frog,” Doren said. “I’d take it.”

Seth folded his arms. “The frog is pretty cool, but I’m not five years old. If it’s between gold and a burping frog, I’ll take the gold.”

The satyrs frowned, clearly disappointed. Newel nodded at Doren, who slipped into the shed and returned holding a bar of gold. He handed it to Seth.

Seth turned the bar over and over in his hands. It was about the size of a bar of hotel soap. An “N” was embossed on one side. Otherwise it was a plain, golden rectangle, a little heavier than it looked. Probably enough gold to be worth a lot of money.

“This is more like it,” Seth said happily, placing the gold inside his emergency kit. “What does the ‘N’ stand for?”

Newel scratched his head. “Nothing.”

“Right,” Doren said hastily. “Stands for ‘nothing.’”

“Nothing?” Seth said dubiously. “Why would somebody write an ‘N’ for ‘nothing’? Why not just leave it blank?”

“Newel,” Doren tried. “It stands for Newel.”

“Used to be my favorite belt buckle,” Newel added wistfully.

“You wore pants?” Seth asked.

“Long story,” Newel explained. “Let’s not dwell on the past. Fact is, there are more—um—belt buckles where that came from, all pure gold. You bring us more batteries, we’ll keep trading with you.”

“Works for me,” Seth said.

“This could be the beginning of a spectacular partnership,” Newel said.

Doren raised a cautionary hand, halting the conversation. “You hear that?”

The three of them paused, listening. “Something’s coming,” Newel said, eyebrows knitting together. No matter how the satyrs behaved, they usually had an air about them that everything they said was tongue-in-cheek. That air was gone.

They kept listening. Seth heard nothing. “Are you guys fooling with me?” he asked.

Newel shook his head, holding up a finger. “I can’t place it. You?”

Doren was sniffing the air. “Can’t be.”

“You better scram, Seth,” Newel said. “Get back to the yard.”

“With the gold, right?” Seth suspected they might be trying to trick him out of his reward.

“Of course, but you better hur—”

“Too late,” Doren warned.

A creature the size of a pony burst out of the bushes onto the tennis court. Seth recognized it immediately. “Olloch?”

“Olloch the Glutton?” Newel asked Seth.

“I thought it smelled like a demon,” Doren groaned.

“Yeah,” Seth said. “He bit me.”

Grotesquely toadlike, Olloch reared back and opened his mouth. It looked like the demon had swallowed a squid, so many flailing tongues emerged. Sitting upright, Olloch was nearly as tall as Seth. After a

triumphant roar, the demon lowered his head and charged, advancing in a jerky, scrambling crawl.

Newel grabbed Seth's hand and hauled him away from the demon. "Run!" Newel yelled.

"For television!" Doren cried, brandishing his tennis racket and holding his ground. Olloch pounced at the satyr, but Doren lunged aside, swatting away a pair of tongues with the racket. Several more tongues lashed out, wrenching the racket from Doren's grasp. The tongues pulled the racket into a gaping mouth, and moments later expelled it with the strings missing and a crack in the frame.

Seth had reached the bushes at the edge of the court when Olloch, ignoring Doren, took a huge leap toward him and then charged with frightening speed. Seth knew he wouldn't make it back to the path, let alone to the yard. His mind raced, trying to think if there was anything useful in his emergency kit.

Tongues writhing, the demon sprang. "For batteries!" Newel cried, intercepting the glutton in midair and wrapping both arms around its middle.

"To the shed!" Doren called, retrieving his unstrung racket and running toward the demon.

Seth turned and dashed toward the shed. Growling and slobbering, Olloch squirmed free from Newel and raced after Seth, staying low and gaining quickly. Over his shoulder, Seth glimpsed the demon drawing near, rapidly closing the space between them despite moving with such a choppy gait. The shed was still several steps away.

Jumping into the demon's path, Doren raised his damaged racket. A multitude of tongues snaked around the satyr and slung him aside. His efforts barely slowed Olloch, but bought Seth just enough time to lunge into the shed and slam the door. The demon crunched against the door an instant later. Some of the whitewashed planks split, but they held. The demon crashed against the shed again, rattling the small structure.

"Hang on, Seth," Doren yelled. "Help is coming."

Seth searched for a weapon. The best he could find was a hoe. The door shattered open and Olloch entered, snarling, wet tongues thrashing. Behind the slavering demon, Seth saw Hugo bounding across the tennis court. Grasping tongues stretched toward Seth, and he swung the hoe

viciously. A tongue adroitly coiled around the hoe, ripping it from Seth's grasp. And then Hugo arrived.

The golem grasped the demon from behind with one hand and hurled it away from the shed. Olloch landed, rolled, and came charging back toward Seth, who now stood in the empty doorway alongside Hugo. The golem stepped forward, blocking access to Seth.

Dripping tongues whipped toward Hugo. The golem grabbed several tongues, yanked the demon into the air, and began spinning Olloch above his head. The tongues elongated as the golem whirled the glutton faster and faster, finally releasing him, sending Olloch sailing away over the treetops.

Doren whistled, clearly impressed.

"He'll be back straightaway," Newel said. He had grass stains on his chest and arms.

"You should hurry to the yard," Doren agreed.

"We better get some free batteries out of this," Newel said, brushing himself off.

"And a new racket," Doren added.

"We'll talk about it," Seth said, clutching his emergency kit with the gold inside. Hugo unceremoniously lifted Seth and started running, leaving him no opportunity to say or hear another word. Seth could not believe how fast the golem raced through the trees, massive strides eating up ground. Ignoring trails, Hugo bulldozed his own path through undergrowth and tangled limbs.

Before long, they were back in the yard. Grandma stood there, fists on her hips, along with Coulter, Vanessa, and Kendra. Hugo gently set Seth on his feet in front of Grandma.

"Are you all right?" Grandma asked, grabbing his shoulders and checking him for injuries.

"Thanks to Hugo."

"You're lucky Hugo was in the yard," Grandma said. "We heard something roaring in the woods and found you missing. What were you doing in the woods?"

"I was playing tennis with the satyrs," Seth said. "Olloch found me."

"Olloch!" she cried. The others looked shocked as well.

"How could he have gotten onto the preserve?" Coulter asked.

“Are you sure it was Olloch?” Grandma asked.

“I recognized him,” Seth said. “He’s a lot bigger. He has a bunch of tongues. He went right for me, didn’t hardly care about the satyrs.”

They heard something rustling in the woods and turned to face whatever was approaching. Olloch scrambled up to the edge of the yard before stopping. The demon reared up, tongues waving like meaty banners, and let out a mournful bellow. He lunged forward but could not step onto the grass.

“He can’t enter the yard,” Vanessa said.

“Not yet,” Grandma agreed.

“Then how did he get onto the preserve?” Coulter repeated.

“I don’t know, but we better get to the bottom of it quickly,” Grandma said.

“Can Hugo kill it?” Kendra asked.

“Not likely,” Grandma said. “In fact, I expect even at this size, if Olloch put his mind to it, he could devour Hugo piece by piece.”

Ollloch was shaking his head, wagging his tongues, and pawing the ground, obviously furious at having his prey so near yet utterly unreachable. “Now, there’s an unusual sight,” Coulter murmured.

“Incredible,” Vanessa said.

“What do we do?” Seth asked.

“For starters,” Grandma said crossly, “you are officially grounded.”

Chapter 11



Betrayal

Kendra sat on the love seat beside Seth, resting her elbow on the arm of the couch and her chin on her hand. Ever since Hugo had rescued Seth earlier in the day, an uncomfortable new tension had filled the house. Grandpa had been poring over books and making phone calls. Vanessa and Coulter came and went several times, often accompanied by Hugo. There were many hushed conversations behind closed doors. Now it was getting late, but Grandma had informed everyone they had to meet about something that could not wait until morning. Which could not be a good sign.

Kendra's chief consolation was that she was not Seth. Wandering off into the woods without permission had almost gotten him killed. The thought of what had almost happened had terrified everyone, and he was getting an earful as a result. Undoubtedly he would hear plenty more about it in the impending meeting.

Seated in a chair beside Seth, Tanu was showing him potions, explaining what they did and how he marked the bottles to distinguish them from each other. Only Tanu, who had returned not long ago from an all-day excursion, had refrained from reprimanding Seth. Instead, the Samoan seemed intent on distracting him from his misery.

"This one is for an emergency," Tanu was saying. "It's an enlarger, doubles my height, makes me big enough to wrestle an ogre. The ingredients for enlargers are extremely hard to come by. I've only got one

dose, and once I use it, I don't expect to own another. Shrinking is easier. Each of these little vials carries a dose that makes me eight times shorter. I end up just under ten inches tall. Not so helpful in a brawl, but not bad for sneaking around."

Coulter and Vanessa sat on opposite ends of an antique sofa. Dale was perched on a stool he had brought in from another room. Grandma wheeled in Grandpa and took a seat in the last armchair.

Grandpa cleared his throat. Tanu fell silent, returning his potions to his pouch. "Getting to the point, we probably have a traitor among us, so I thought we should talk this through."

Nobody spoke. Kendra made brief eye contact with Vanessa, then with Coulter, then with Tanu. "Ruth and I are fairly certain how Olloch got onto the property," Grandpa continued. "Somebody signed him in on the register within the past two days. He probably waltzed right through the front gate. And he didn't come alone."

"What's the register?" Kendra asked.

"The register is a book that controls access to Fablehaven," Grandma said. "When you come to visit, we write your name in the register, and that action disarms on your behalf the spells guarding the gate. Unless they were signed in on the register, it would be effectively impossible for anyone to get past the fence."

"Somebody signed in Olloch?" Dale asked.

"Between now and two evenings ago, the last time we checked the register, someone signed in Christopher Vogel and Guest," Grandma said. "We blotted out the names, but the damage has been done. Christopher Vogel, whoever that is, came onto the property and turned Olloch loose."

"Therefore we must assume we have two enemies out there," Grandpa said, motioning toward the window. "And one in here."

"Could somebody from outside have gotten to the register?" Dale asked.

"The register was hidden in our room," Grandma said. "Only Stan and I knew where it was. Or so we thought. Now we've moved it. But coming into the house unnoticed after we shut it down for the night is almost as difficult as getting through the gates. Let alone writing in the register right under our noses."

“Whoever wrote in the register is more than likely the same person who released the drumants,” Grandpa said. “Is it possible that somebody outside this room accessed our bedrooms twice? Yes. Probable? No.”

“Can we trace the handwriting?” Coulter asked.

Grandma shook her head. “They used a stencil. Apparently they weren’t in a rush.”

“Perhaps all of us should leave,” Tanu suggested. “The evidence is too glaring to ignore. Kendra and Seth are above suspicion, as are Ruth and Stan. Maybe the rest of us should depart.”

“The thought crossed my mind,” Grandpa said. “But now that we have two foes on the preserve, it is hardly a good time to send away our protectors, even if one is probably a traitor. At least until we can summon replacements. I am stuck in this chair, and the children are young and untrained. The situation is maddening. As I consider each of you individually, you seem above suspicion. Yet someone wrote in the register, and since you all appear equally innocent, you consequently appear equally guilty.”

“I hope we find another explanation,” Grandma said. “For the moment, we must acknowledge the likelihood that one of us is a master deceiver working for our adversaries.”

“It gets worse,” Grandpa said. “The phone lines are down again. We’ve been trying to summon aid via Vanessa’s cell phone, but our chief contact has not been answering. We will keep calling, but none of this bodes well.”

“The other immediate problem is Olloch himself,” Grandma said. “As he gorges himself on whatever edible matter he can find, he will continue to gain both size and power. He quit trying to enter the yard hours ago, which means he realizes that if he gets big enough, he could gain sufficient power to overthrow the treaty, access the house, and claim his prize.”

“Like how Bahumat almost overthrew the preserve last year,” Kendra said.

“Yes,” Grandpa said. “Ollloch could conceivably muster sufficient power to plunge Fablehaven into lawless chaos.”

Kendra glanced at Seth, sitting silently. She had rarely seen him so quiet and contrite. It looked like he wanted to melt away into the love seat and vanish.

“What can we do?” Tanu asked.

“Olloch the Glutton will not stop until he has devoured and digested Seth,” Grandpa said. “Slaying Olloch is well beyond our power. We have an ally who suggested there might be a way to subdue the demon, but we have not been able to reach him. The glutton has already reached a size that will allow him to ingest just about whatever he chooses, and his appetite will not abate. We cannot sit idly by. Our peril is literally growing by the minute.”

“We must assume our benefactor is on the move,” Grandma said. “He is a heavily desired target of the Society. We’ll keep trying to telephone him, and assume that he’ll make himself available as soon as he can. Otherwise, we’re just not sure how to find him. He moves too frequently.”

“How long before Olloch becomes strong enough to countermand the treaty?” Vanessa asked.

Grandpa shrugged. “With the kind of game he can find inside Fablehaven, magical and nonmagical, it is a worst-case scenario. He’ll grow much faster than he would out in the normal world. He must have had help getting to his current size, probably from that Christopher Vogel character. My best guess? A day, more likely two, maybe three. I can’t imagine it would take much longer.”

“Maybe you should just feed me to him,” Seth said.

“Don’t talk nonsense,” Grandma said.

Seth stood up. “Wouldn’t it be better than letting Olloch destroy all of Fablehaven? Sounds like he’ll get me sooner or later. Why should I make him go through all of you first?”

“We’ll find another way,” Coulter said. “We still have some time.”

“He’ll have to eat me to get to you,” Dale said. “Whether you like it or not.”

Seth sat down. Grandpa pointed at him. “Now is not the time to leap to rash solutions. We have not yet spoken with our most knowledgeable ally. Seth, I repeat, you are not culpable for awakening Olloch. You were tricked and are not to blame. You should not have been out in the woods alone—that was a most foolish error in judgment, the exact kind of nonsense I hoped you would have abandoned by now—but you are far from deserving a death sentence. Since the satyrs were involved, I take it you were trading for batteries? I haven’t asked, what did they give you?”

Seth lowered his eyes. “Some gold.”

“May I see it?”

Seth went and retrieved his emergency kit. He pulled out the gold bar. Grandpa examined it. "You do not want to be caught out in the open with this in your pocket," he said.

"Why?" Seth asked.

Grandpa handed the bar back to Seth. "It was clearly stolen from Nero's hoard. What did you suppose the 'N' stood for? He will be scrying for it in his seeing stone. In fact, the presence of the gold could grant him the power to see within the walls of our home. The satyrs must have only recently stolen it, or Nero would have already reclaimed it."

Seth placed a hand over his eyes and shook his head. "When will I do something right?" he moaned. "Should I go chuck it into the woods?"

"No," Grandpa said. "You should go set it on the porch, and we'll return it to its rightful owner as soon as reasonably possible."

Nodding sheepishly, Seth exited the room. "We also have some encouraging news," Grandpa said. "Coulter made an important breakthrough today. We may be close to uncovering the relic we have been seeking. The latest revelation harmonizes with the information we already possess. At this juncture, I believe there is more wisdom in sharing this information openly than in hiding it. No matter which of us is the traitor, the rest of us must continue functioning. Better we make our knowledge common than become paralyzed."

"Not that the traitor will be sharing secrets with us," Vanessa said bitterly.

"All the same, Coulter will disclose his discovery," Grandpa said.

"The fog giant Burlox reported that Warren was investigating the four hills area before he turned white," Coulter said.

"One of the main areas Patton mentioned suspiciously," Vanessa said.

"And the same area I investigated today," Tanu said. "The grove on the north end of the valley is definitely cursed. I did not risk treading there."

Seth came back into the room and reclaimed his spot on the love seat.

"Many areas of Fablehaven carry terrible curses and are protected by ghastly fiends," Grandpa said. "The valley of the four hills is one of the most infamous. At the moment, the evidence seems to suggest a pair of related mysteries. We may very well find not only that the grove contains

the relic we have been seeking, but also that it is guarded by whatever entity transformed Warren.”

“Of course, all that would need to be confirmed,” Grandma said.

“Carefully,” Grandpa admonished. “As with several of the most dread regions of Fablehaven, we have no idea what evil haunts the grove.”

“What is our next move?” Vanessa asked.

“I say we need to focus on Olloch before we try to penetrate whatever secrets lie inside the grove,” Grandpa said. “Exploring the grove safely will require all of our resources and focus. Even under ideal circumstances it is a hazardous assignment.”

“So we wait to see if Ruth can reach your contact?” Coulter asked.

Grandpa was picking at the frayed edge of his cast. “Ruth will keep calling on Vanessa’s cell phone. For now, the rest of us should try to get a good night’s sleep. It may be our last chance for a while.”

* * *

Kendra closed the bathroom door, locked it, and set the sheet of paper on the counter. She had found the blank paper beneath her pillow, but with Seth in the room, she dared not light the candle and give away her secret. Alone in the bathroom, Kendra struck a flimsy match and put the flame to the wick until it caught. Shaking out the match, she watched as glowing words came into view on the formerly empty page:

Kendra,

Sorry we didn’t get to talk much today. Can you believe all the commotion? We need to keep your brother on a leash!

Let me know if this message came through all right.

Your friend,

Vanessa

Kendra blew out the candle, and the luminous words vanished. Folding up the note, she climbed the stairs to the attic bedroom, pondering how she should reply to the secret message. Seth was setting up toy soldiers on the floor. One in front, with two behind him, then a row of three, and another of four. Kendra crossed the room and climbed into bed. Seth walked several paces away and bowled at the soldiers with a softball. He knocked down seven.

“Turn off the light and come to bed,” Kendra said.

“I don’t think I can sleep,” Seth protested, retrieving the softball.

“I know I can’t with you rolling balls around the room,” Kendra said.

“Why don’t you go sleep someplace else?”

“This is where they put us.”

“At home we each have our own room. Here, with way more rooms, we sleep in the same one.” He rolled the softball again, claiming two more soldiers.

“This isn’t the sort of place I’d want to sleep alone,” Kendra admitted.

“I can’t believe they took my gold,” Seth said, setting up the soldiers again, this time placing them closer together. “I bet it was worth thousands of dollars. It isn’t my fault if Newel and Doren stole it from Nero.”

“You can’t just do whatever you want and always get away with it.”

“I’ve been good! I’ve tried hard to be careful and keep secrets and follow all the rules.”

“You went into the woods without permission,” Kendra reminded him.

“Just a little ways. It would have been fine if somebody hadn’t let that demon onto the preserve. Nobody saw that coming. If Olloch hadn’t caught up with me today, he might have caught up with us tomorrow, when we were out with Vanessa, a lot farther from the house. I might have saved our lives.” He rolled the ball again. Missing the front soldier, he still knocked down eight.

“Way to avoid taking any responsibility,” Kendra said, leaning back onto her pillow. “I’m glad they grounded you. If it were up to me, I’d lock you in the dungeon.”

“If it were up to me, I’d give your face plastic surgery,” he said.

“Really mature.”

“Do you think they’ll figure out a way to stop the demon?” Seth asked.

“I’m sure they’ll think of something. The Sphinx seems really smart. He’ll have a plan.”

“He said you beat him at Foosball,” Seth said.

“He wasn’t too good. He didn’t even spin his cowboys.”

Shaking his head, Seth bowled the ball again and picked up the spare. “I don’t think Nero could follow me off the preserve. Maybe I should just take the gold and go. Then everyone will be out of danger.”

“Stop pitying yourself.”

“I’m serious.”

“No you’re not,” Kendra said, exasperated. “If you take off, Olloch will hunt you down and eat you.”

“Better than having everyone hate me.”

“Nobody hates you. They just want you to be cautious, so you’ll be safe. The only reason they get mad is because they care about you.”

Seth arranged the soldiers in the tightest formation yet. “Think I can knock them all down with one roll?”

Kendra sat up. “Of course, you set them up like dominoes.”

Seth took his position and rolled the ball, totally missing all of them. “Looks like you were wrong.”

“You missed on purpose.”

“I bet you couldn’t knock all of them down.”

“I could easily,” Kendra said.

“Prove it.”

She got out of bed, grabbed the ball, and went and stood by her brother. Taking careful aim, she bowled it hard, right down the center, and all the soldiers fell. “See?”

“Almost like I let you win.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Nothing,” he said. “Who do you think is the traitor?”

“I don’t know. It doesn’t seem like any of them.”

“My guess would be Tanu. He’s too nice.”

“And that makes him evil?” Kendra asked, getting back into bed.

“Whoever is guilty would be trying really hard to act nice.”

“Or they would know that everyone would expect that, so they would try to throw us off by acting grumpy.”

“You think it could be Coulter?” Seth turned out the light and jumped into bed.

“He’s known Grandpa for too long. And Vanessa could have handed us over to Errol instead of rescuing us. They all seem innocent. I wouldn’t be surprised if it turned out to be another explanation.”

“I hope so,” Seth said. “They’re all really cool. But keep your eyes open.”

“You do the same. And please stay out of the woods. You’re my only brother, and I don’t want you to get . . . hurt.”

“Thanks, Kendra.”

“Good night, Seth.”

* * *

Seth awoke in the dead of night with a hand covering his mouth. He grabbed at the fingers but was unable to pry them from his lips. “Don’t be alarmed,” a voice whispered. “It’s Coulter. We need to talk.”

Seth turned his head. Taking his hand from Seth’s mouth, Coulter held a finger to his lips, then curled it beckoningly. What was Coulter up to? It was an odd hour for a conversation.

Turning his head the other way, Seth saw Kendra asleep under her covers, breathing evenly. He eased out of bed and followed Coulter to the door and down the stairs to the hall. Coulter took a seat on the last couple of steps. Seth sat down beside him.

“What’s going on?” Seth asked.

“How would you like to set things straight?” Coulter asked.

“Sure.”

“I need your help,” Coulter said.

“In the middle of the night?”

“It may be now or never.”

“No offense,” Seth said. “This seems kind of suspicious.”

“I need you to trust me, Seth. I’m about to try something I can’t do alone. I think you’re the only person with the courage to help me right now.

You have no idea what is really going on.”

“You’re going to tell me?”

Coulter looked around, as if he were nervous that somebody might be spying. “I have to. I need somebody like you on my side here. Seth, the artifact we are looking for is very important. In the wrong hands it could be extremely dangerous. It could even lead to the end of the world.”

That seemed to agree with what Seth had heard from his grandparents. “Go on,” he said.

Coulter sighed and rubbed his thighs, as if hesitant to continue. “I’m taking a big risk here because I believe I can trust you. Seth, I’m a special agent working for the Sphinx. He gave me specific instructions that at all costs, I had to recover the artifact, especially if the integrity of Fablehaven was ever compromised. Now that we’re nearly certain where the artifact is hidden, I’m going to go prepare the way to get it, tonight, and I want you to come with me.”

“Right now?”

“Immediately.”

Seth wiped away an eyelash that was starting to poke his eye. “Why not get help from the others?”

“You heard your grandfather. He wants to wait and take care of Olloch first. That poses a problem because, in a day or two, Olloch could become too powerful, Fablehaven could fall, and the artifact could be placed in extreme jeopardy.”

“How could I come with you?” Seth said. “The second I leave the yard, the demon will be after us.”

“It’s risky,” Coulter conceded. “But Fablehaven is a big place, and the demon is off foraging. Hugo is waiting outside. He’ll take us to the grove and keep Olloch off of us if the glutton makes an appearance.”

“Grandma said the demon could eat Hugo,” Seth said.

“Eventually. Until Olloch gets more powerful, it would take him a long time to best Hugo. I wouldn’t chance this tomorrow. But Hugo handled the demon just fine not so many hours ago. And Hugo is faster than Olloch. If we have to, we’ll just have Hugo escape with us back to the yard.”

“Why me?” Seth asked. “I don’t get it. Part of me thinks I should go tell Grandpa Sorenson right now.”

“I can’t blame that instinct. I know this is unusual. Just let me finish. You know that if you go to your grandpa, he will never let you come with me. And he is in no position to help me himself. I came to you because I’ve spent the evening trying to convince the others to go after the artifact now rather than later, but they are all too afraid to take definitive action. Yet my private mandate from the Sphinx remains—with the threat of Olloch looming, I need to secure the artifact right away.”

“Why me?” Seth repeated.

“Who else can I trust besides your grandfather? Your grandmother is good at a lot of things, but she doesn’t belong on this kind of mission. Neither does Kendra. I can’t do it alone. I think I know what is haunting the grove, a phantom, and I need somebody brave to join me if I’m going to defeat it. You’re my only hope. You’re young, but honestly, Seth, as far as courage goes, in my book, you’ve got all the others beat.”

“What if you’re the traitor?” Seth asked.

“If I were the traitor, I’d already have somebody to help me bypass the phantom. Christopher Vogel and I would be off taking care of business. You and I wouldn’t be having this conversation. Also, we can’t actually get the artifact tonight. We need a key your grandfather has in order to access it. But if we can get rid of the phantom and confirm the location of the artifact, I’m confident that I’ll be able to convince the others to join us in retrieving it tomorrow.”

Coulter’s mention of the key also corresponded with what Seth had heard from his grandparents. Without the key, Coulter couldn’t access the vault. If he couldn’t access the vault, his goal couldn’t be to steal the artifact. And if Coulter harmed Seth, it would blow his cover and prevent him from ever getting Grandpa to hand over the key. Still, even if Coulter was telling the truth, the adventure would certainly be dangerous. Seth knew that his life would depend on whether Coulter really could handle the phantom in the grove. It had been too much for Warren. He wished he could get advice from somebody else, but Coulter was right—if Seth told anyone, from Grandpa to Kendra to Tanu, they would try to stop them.

“I don’t know what to do,” Seth said.

“Once we have the artifact, we can all escape and lock down Fablehaven, trapping Olloch inside until your grandparents and their not-so-secret friend figure out what to do with him. Everybody wins, and we keep

the artifact out of evil hands. I've thought it through, and this is our last chance to set everything right. If we stall, it is going to end badly. By tomorrow night, Olloch will be too strong. I can only do this with your help, Seth. Warren failed because he attempted it alone. If you refuse, we may as well both go back to bed."

"It seems like every decision I make is wrong lately," Seth said. "People keep tricking me. Or I just do stupid things on my own."

"Not everybody is out to fool you," Coulter said. "And bravery is not always a liability. Often it is quite the opposite. I happen to know your grandfather has great admiration for your adventurous spirit. This could be your chance to redeem yourself."

"Or to prove that I'm the most gullible person in the world," Seth sighed. "Hopefully this will end the streak. Do I need to bring anything?"

Coulter beamed. "I knew I could count on you." He patted Seth on the shoulder. "I have everything we need."

"Can I grab my emergency kit?"

"Good idea. Quiet, though. We mustn't disturb the others."

Seth slunk back up the stairs and into the attic bedroom. Kendra had shifted position but was still sound asleep. Crouching, Seth pulled the emergency kit out from under his bed.

He felt uncommonly nervous. Was he making a mistake? Or was he just anxious at the prospect of facing a terrible phantom in a cursed grove with a short old man in the middle of the night? Coulter seemed to be the most cautious of all the adventurers. He had known exactly what to do when they met the fog giant, and he seemed confident that together they could handle the phantom. Seth stared at his emergency kit. If he just followed instructions, he would be fine, right?

Coulter did seem a little desperate to comply with the assignment from the Sphinx. He was probably putting them in a situation more dangerous than he would normally prefer because the stakes were so high. But he was right. The stakes really were high. Fablehaven was once again heading toward destruction. And Seth knew it was mainly his own fault. Last time, Kendra had saved the day. Now it was his turn.

Seth crept down the stairs.

"Ready?" Coulter asked.

“I guess.”

“Let’s get you some milk.”



Peril in the Night

Deadfalls snapped and popped like firecrackers as Hugo pounded through the dark woods. No starlight penetrated the balmy darkness beneath the trees. Hugo maintained an unflagging pace, clutching Coulter under one arm and Seth under the other, like a running back with two footballs.

They emerged from the woods briefly and thumped through a covered bridge spanning a deep ravine. Seth recognized it as the same bridge he had seen when Grandma took him and Kendra to barter with Nero. Not far beyond the bridge, Hugo left the path again, resuming their noisy, loping dash through oblivion. Only the occasional clearing allowed the faint glow of the stars to interrupt the blackness.

Seth remained tense, anticipating the appearance of Olloch. At any minute, he expected a supersized glutton to attack Hugo, splitting the night with a ferocious roar. Instead, Hugo continued tirelessly forward, fluidly dodging obstacles.

When Hugo reached the top of a steep slope, he charged down without hesitation. Seth felt like they were on the verge of tipping over with every step, but the golem never stumbled. When they reached a dead tree leaning against a cliff, without using his hands, Hugo raced up the rotten trunk like a ramp. Seth's stomach lurched as the ground grew distant, and he felt certain they would fall, but although the tree creaked beneath them, the golem did not falter.

At length they reached a large, open valley with a rounded hill at each corner. After the complete darkness of the forest, the starlight proved sufficient to reveal the surrounding terrain. Tall brush covered the ground, mingled with prickly weeds. A dark stand of trees loomed at the far end of the valley, between the two largest hills.

Hugo bounded across the valley, coming to an abrupt stop near the edge of the shadowy grove. "Forward a few more steps, Hugo," Coulter said.

The golem leaned forward, trembling. He rocked back, and the shaking stopped. Slowly Hugo lifted a leg. As he tried to move it forward, he began to shudder.

"Enough, Hugo," Coulter said. "Set us down."

"What's the deal with Hugo?" Seth asked.

"Just as most magical creatures cannot enter the yard back at the house, Hugo cannot enter this grove. There is an unseen boundary here. The ground is cursed. Fortunately, as mortals, we can go wherever we choose."

Seth raised his eyebrows. "We have to go up against the phantom without Hugo?" he said.

"I expected this," Coulter said. "Though I would rather have been mistaken."

"Are we sure we want to go someplace Hugo can't?"

"This has nothing to do with what we want. This is a matter of duty. I don't want to go in there, but I must."

Seth stared at the dark trees. The night seemed suddenly cooler. He folded his arms. "How do you know a phantom is in there?"

"I did some private reconnaissance. I ventured far enough into the grove to read the signs. It's clearly the abode of a phantom."

"How do we stop a phantom?"

Coulter pulled a short, crooked stick from his belt. "You hold this holly wand high. No matter what happens, keep it above your head—change hands if you must. I'll take care of the rest."

"That's all?"

"The holly will protect us while I bind the phantom. No small task, but I've done it once before. The phantom may try to frighten or intimidate you, but if you keep the wand high, we'll both be fine. Now more than ever, whatever you see and hear, you must remain stouthearted."

"I can do that," Seth said firmly. "What if Olloch shows up?"

“Golems make fabulous guardians,” Coulter said. “Hugo, keep Olloch the Glutton out of the grove.”

“Should I wear my medallion?”

“The one to repel the undead? By all means, put it on.”

Seth fished the medallion out of his emergency kit and slipped it around his neck. Coulter turned on a heavy flashlight. The initial glare made Seth squint and blink. The bright beam pierced the darkness of the grove, lighting the space between the trees, allowing Coulter and Seth to see much deeper into the ominous woods. Instead of vague, shadowy trunks, the harsh light revealed the color and texture of the bark. There was almost no undergrowth, just rank upon rank of gray pillars supporting a leafy canopy.

“Find your courage, and hang on tight,” Coulter said.

“I’m ready,” Seth said, holding the holly wand aloft.

“Hugo, if we fall, return to the house,” Coulter said.

“If we fall?”

“Just a precaution. We’ll be fine.”

“You’re not helping my courage a whole bunch,” Seth complained. He started impersonating Coulter. “Seth, we’ll be just fine. Nothing to worry about. Hugo, when we die, please have us buried in a beautiful cemetery by a stream. I’m sorry, Seth, I meant *if* we die. Be brave. When the phantom kills you, don’t scream, even though it’s going to hurt a lot.”

Coulter was smirking. “Are you finished?”

“Sounds like we’re both finished.”

“Everyone copes with nerves differently. Humor is among the better ways. Follow me.”



Coulter stepped forward, beyond the plane Hugo could not cross, and Seth followed closely. The trees cast long shadows. The flashlight beam swayed back and forth, making the shadows swing and stretch, creating the illusion that the trees were in motion. As they passed the first few trees, Seth glanced back at Hugo, waiting in the shadows. His night vision had already been ruined by the flashlight, so he could barely make out the form of the golem in the darkness.

“Can you feel the difference?” Coulter whispered.

“I’m scared, if that’s what you mean,” Seth said softly.

Coulter stopped walking. “More than that. Even if you didn’t know to be scared, you would be. There’s an unshakable sense of foreboding in the atmosphere.”

Seth had goose bumps on his arms. “You’re sort of freaking me out again,” he said.

“I just want you to be aware of it,” Coulter whispered. “It may get worse. Keep that holly wand up high.”

Seth was not sure whether it was simply the power of suggestion, but as they resumed walking, with each step the air seemed to grow colder, and the feeling inside seemed to become darker. Seth grimly studied the trees, bracing himself for the terrifying form of a phantom to appear.

Coulter slowed and then stopped. The hair rose on the back of Seth’s neck. Coulter turned slowly, eyes wide and shimmering. “Uh-oh,” he mouthed.

The fear hit Seth like a physical blow, making his knees buckle. He dropped his emergency kit as he collapsed to the ground, keeping the hand with the holly wand high. Seth was instantly reminded of when he had sampled Tanu’s fear potion. The terror was an irrational, overpowering force that instantly stripped away all defenses. He struggled to rise and to keep his hand up.

He had made it to his knees and was trying to lift a leg when a second wave of fear washed over him, more powerful than the first, much more potent than the potion Tanu had given him. The medallion around his neck dissolved, evaporating into the chilly air. Vaguely, distantly, Seth was aware that the flashlight was on the ground, and that Coulter was on his hands and knees, quivering. The fear intensified steadily, relentlessly.

Seth crumpled. He was on his back. The wand remained above his head, clenched in a frozen fist. His whole body was paralyzed. He tried to call out to Coulter. His lip twitched. No sound came out. He could barely think.

This surpassed the fear of death. Death would be a mercy if it would make the feeling stop, the uncontrollable panic mingling with the mind-scrambling certainty of something sinister approaching, something with no need to hurry, something that would not be so kind as to let him die. The fear was palpable, suffocating, irresistible.

Seth had always pictured his life ending much more heroically.

* * *

Kendra snapped awake. The room was dark and silent. She did not often awaken in the middle of the night, but she felt strangely alert. She turned to glance over at Seth. His bed was vacant.

She bolted upright. "Seth?" she whispered, scanning the room. There was no sign of her brother.

Where could he be? Had the traitor kidnapped him? Had he gone to sacrifice himself to Olloch? Had he taken his gold and left Fablehaven? Maybe he was just using the bathroom. She leaned down and glanced under his bed, where he kept his emergency kit. She could not see it.

Kendra rolled out of bed. She checked more thoroughly, looking under both beds. No emergency kit. Not a good sign. What could he possibly be thinking?

Kendra clicked on the light and hurried to the stairs, descending them quickly. Vanessa's room was nearest. Kendra rapped gently and opened the door. Vanessa was curled up under her covers. Kendra tried not to think about the unusual creatures inhabiting the containers stacked around the room. She switched on a light and crossed to the bed.

Vanessa rested on her side, facing Kendra. She was perfectly still, except her eyelids were fluttering wildly. Kendra knew from school that R.E.M. sleep was a sign of dreaming. The sight was eerie, her face placid, her closed eyes twitching spasmodically.

Kendra put a hand on Vanessa's shoulder and shook her. "Vanessa, wake up, I'm worried about Seth." The eyelids kept fluttering. Vanessa showed no sign of feeling or hearing Kendra. Shaking Vanessa a second time again elicited no reaction. Kendra lifted an eyelid. The eye was rolled back, white and bloodshot. Kendra jumped back. The sight creeped her out.

There was a half-full cup of water on the nightstand. Kendra hesitated only for a moment. It was an emergency. She poured it onto Vanessa's face.

Gasping and sputtering, Vanessa sat up, hand clutching her chest, eyes wide, looking not only startled but almost paranoid. She glanced around, eyes darting, clearly disoriented. Her gaze settled on Kendra. “What are you doing?” She sounded angry and bewildered. Water dripped from her chin.

“Seth’s missing!” Kendra said.

Vanessa inhaled sharply. “Missing?” The anger was gone from her voice, replaced by concern.

“I woke up and he was gone,” Kendra said. “So was his emergency kit.”

Vanessa swung her legs out of bed. “Oh, no, I hope he hasn’t done something rash. Sorry if I sounded harsh; I was having an awful nightmare.”

“It’s okay. Sorry to splash you.”

“I’m glad you did.” Vanessa tied on a robe and led the way into the hall. “You fetch Coulter; I’ll get Tanu.”

Kendra ran down the hall to Coulter’s door. She entered after a quick knock. His bed was empty. Made up. There was no sign of him.

Kendra returned to the hall, where Vanessa was leading a bleary-eyed Tanu. “Where’s Coulter?” Vanessa asked.

“He’s gone too,” Kendra reported.

* * *

On his back in the dark, Seth tried to get accustomed to the fear. If he could get used to it, maybe he could resist it. The feeling most reminded him of the sensation you experience when somebody startles you and makes you jump—a burst of instinctive, irrational terror and panic. Except this feeling was sustained. Instead of coming in a jolt and quickly subsiding into rational relief, the startled feeling not only lingered but intensified. Seth found it tough to think, let alone move, and so he lay frozen, overwhelmed, inwardly struggling, sensing something drawing inexorably closer. His only similar experience had been when Tanu had given him the fear potion, although by comparison that now seemed harmless and diluted. This was the real thing. Fear that could kill.

“Seth,” a strained voice said urgently, “how did we get here?”

Unable to turn his head, Seth shifted his eyes. Coulter lay beside him, leaning up on one elbow. Having something to focus on besides the fear helped, and the fact that Coulter was still able to speak gave him hope. But what kind of pointless question was that? Coulter knew how he had gotten

there. It was his idea. Seth tried to ask what he meant but managed only a groan.

“No matter,” Coulter grunted. He reached a hand toward Seth, moving like a man on a planet where the gravity was much greater than on Earth. “Take it.”

Seth could not see what Coulter held. He tried to move his arm but failed. He tried to sit up and failed again.

“Look,” Coulter said. The flashlight was on the ground near his feet. He kicked it softly, changing the angle of the beam. Then Coulter fell flat.

With the light turned and Coulter lower to the ground, Seth could now see what was drawing nearer through the trees: an emaciated, raggedly dressed man with a large thorn protruding from the side of his neck. His skin looked sickly, leprous, with open sores and blotchy discolorations. Because the flashlight was on the ground, the bottom half of the figure was better illuminated than the top. He had knobby ankles. Dried mud rimmed the cuffs of his tattered trousers. Seth studied his shadowy face. He had a pronounced Adam’s apple, and wore the unnatural smile of a shy man posing for a photograph. The eyes were empty but uncannily aware. His expression did not change. He was still about forty feet away, treading slowly, as if in a trance.

Panting, sweating, Coulter propped himself back up on one elbow. “Revenant,” he growled through clenched teeth. “Talismanic . . . uses fear . . . remove the nail.” He scooted closer to Seth. “Open . . . mouth.”

Seth focused all his attention on his jaw. He could not stop grinding his teeth. Opening his mouth was not a current option. “Can’t,” he tried to say. No sound came out.

Coulter pressed something into his hand. It felt like a handkerchief. “Warn,” Coulter coughed, barely getting the word out. He tried to say more, but it sounded like he was strangling.

Coulter lurched at Seth. Both his hands were on Seth’s face. One brusquely jerked his jaw down. The other thrust something past his lips. When Coulter released him, Seth automatically bit down hard on whatever Coulter had inserted, his jaw clenching involuntarily, flattening the object between his molars.

Suddenly Seth experienced the sensation that his tongue was rapidly inflating. It was like it had suddenly turned into an emergency airbag, exploding out of his mouth. Then his inflated tongue seemed to turn inside out, doubling back and enfolding him. The stark scene before him instantly

vanished. He was shrouded in complete darkness. For the first time since he had begun to feel it, the overwhelming fear was significantly reduced.

He could move again. He was inside spongy darkness, totally encased by something. Seth touched his tongue. It was intact. Normal. His tongue had not actually ballooned; it must have been whatever Coulter had crammed in his mouth. The cocoon! That was the only explanation! Somehow Coulter had found the strength to shove his fail-safe into Seth's mouth. Seth pressed against the confining walls of his snug enclosure. They felt soft at first, but when he pressed hard, they did not budge. According to what Coulter had said, nothing could get to him now. He could survive for months.

Coulter! The older man had sacrificed himself! Though it was now muted, Seth could still feel the fear increasing. Somewhere beyond the pillowy darkness enfolding him, the creature was nearing Coulter. Even he would be petrified by now, no matter how resistant he was to the smothering fear. It had seemed like he'd used his last strength to give away the cocoon.

Seth examined the object Coulter had placed in his hand. It was not a handkerchief; it was a glove with no fingertips, presumably the glove that turned Coulter invisible. It would not come in very handy inside the cocoon, but if he ever got out, it would certainly prove useful.

Seth squeezed the glove. There could be only one reason Coulter had passed it to him. The older man did not expect to survive.

Coulter started screaming. Although the sounds were muffled by the cocoon, Seth had never heard such unrestrained expressions of pure terror. Seth resisted the impulse to start tearing the cocoon apart. He wanted to help, but what could he do? Coulter did not scream long.

* * *

Grandpa sat on the edge of his cot, surrounded by Vanessa, Dale, Tanu, Grandma, and Kendra. His hair was sticking up in a way Kendra had never seen. But his hard eyes were not sleepy.

"The traitor is unmasked," Grandpa said, as if to himself.

"Not Coulter," Grandma said in disbelief.

"They're gone," Tanu said. "He took his gear; Seth took his kit. Glancing at the tracks, it looked like Hugo carried them."

"Can you follow them?" Grandpa asked.

“Easily,” Tanu said. “But they have a good start on us, and Hugo is not slow.”

“What do you suppose he’s up to?” Vanessa asked.

Grandpa glanced worriedly at Kendra. “We’ll discuss that later.”

“No,” Kendra said. “Go ahead. We have to hurry.”

“Coulter is missing an essential object for uncovering the lost relic,” Grandpa said. “Right?”

Grandma nodded. “We still have it.”

“I can only imagine that he has some reason for offering Seth to Olloch,” Grandpa said. “It does not strike me as very strategic, which is unlike Coulter. He may know something we don’t.”

“Time is wasting,” Dale said.

“Right,” Grandpa agreed. “Dale, Vanessa, Tanu, find where Coulter took Seth. Recover Seth and Hugo.”

The three of them ran out of the room. Kendra heard them thumping around the house collecting gear. She stood still, stunned. Was this really happening? Was her brother really gone, kidnapped by a traitor? Was Coulter really going to feed him to Olloch? Or did Coulter have something unforeseeable in mind?

Seth might already be dead. Her mind recoiled at the thought. No, he had to be alive. Tanu and Vanessa and Dale would rescue him. As long as she had room to hope, she should not lose faith. “Is there anything I can do?” Kendra asked.

Grandma rubbed her shoulders from behind. “Try not to worry. Vanessa, Tanu, and Dale will find them.”

“Do you think you could go back to bed?” Grandpa asked.

“Not likely,” Kendra said. “I’ve never felt more awake. And I’ve never wished more that I was dreaming.”

* * *

Merciless silence followed the end of Coulter’s cries. Seth could not tell if it was an aftereffect of the screaming, but the fear seemed to be intensifying again, welling up inside of him. Something jostled Seth’s cocoon. Again. And again.

Seth pictured the gaunt man with the lank hair and the unphotogenic smile rocking the cocoon. “He can’t get in, he can’t get in, he can’t get in,” Seth

repeated softly to himself.

The fear was leveling off. It was uncomfortable, but bearable after what he had sampled outside of the cocoon. What would he do now? He was trapped. Sure, the zombie man could not get in, but Seth could not get out either. The instant he ripped open the cocoon he would become vulnerable. So it was a standoff. He would have to wait to be rescued.

A roar interrupted his thinking. It sounded distant, though it was difficult to be sure how much of that was the cocoon. Seth waited, listening. The next roar was definitely nearer. He knew the sound. It was deeper and fuller in a way that implied bigger, but it was certainly Olloch.

Seth heard another fierce roar. And another. What was going on? A showdown with Hugo? What would happen if Olloch got into the grove? If Olloch had the potential to become as powerful as Bahumat, strong enough to overthrow the foundational treaty of Fablehaven, wasn't it possible that the demon could become stronger than the cocoon?

All Seth could do was wait in the close, soft confines of his enclosure, ignoring whenever it was shaken by the zombie. Actually, Coulter had called the creature a revenant, whatever that meant. Apparently he had been mistaken about the grove being home to a phantom. Coulter had said to remove the nail, which had to be the thornlike thing in the side of the revenant's neck. Easier said than done. Hard to pull out a nail when a fear you can't control has you frozen solid.

An earsplitting roar caught Seth unprepared. He flinched, covering his ears. It sounded like Olloch was right outside the cocoon. And then Seth was harshly flung about. It felt like the cocoon had been catapulted into a web of bungee cords. He was grateful the snug interior was padded.

After Seth had been whipped about until he was unsure which direction was up, the cocoon settled to a stop. A moment later, he felt the cocoon start moving linearly. Then it stopped. Then it started again. The motion was a lot smoother now. It felt like the cocoon was in the back of a pickup truck that kept accelerating, decelerating, and turning. And occasionally hopping.

It did not take long for Seth to deduce what it meant. Olloch had swallowed him, cocoon and all.



The Thief's Net

Kendra slowly stirred her oatmeal. She lifted a glob on her spoon, turned the utensil over, and watched the wet clump plop back into the bowl. Her toast was growing cold. Her orange juice was growing warm. She just wasn't hungry.

Outside the sun was rising, casting a golden glow over the garden. Fairies flitted about, coaxing blossoms into brighter bloom. The mellow, peaceful morning seemed indifferent to the fact that her brother had been kidnapped.

"You should eat something," Grandma said.

Kendra put a bite of oatmeal in her mouth. In other circumstances it would have tasted good, dusted with cinnamon and sweetened with sugar. But not today. Today it was like chewing Styrofoam. "I'm not in the mood."

Grandpa sucked butter from his thumb, having finished another piece of toast. "Eat, even if it feels like a chore. You need your energy."

Kendra took another bite. "You couldn't get the Sphinx last night?" she asked Grandma.

"Nor this morning. It just rang and rang. Which is unfortunate but not uncommon. He answers when he can. I'll try again after breakfast."

Grandpa sat up straight and craned his neck, looking out the window. "Here they come," he said.

Kendra sprang to her feet and ran to the back porch. Tanu, Vanessa, Dale, and Hugo had emerged from the woods and were approaching through the garden. Hugo cradled Coulter in one arm. The golem's other arm was missing. Kendra saw no sign of Seth.

Distressed, Kendra turned to Grandma, who was wheeling Grandpa out to the porch. "I don't see Seth," she said.

Grandma put an arm around her. "Don't jump to conclusions."

As Hugo and the others drew nearer, Kendra realized that Coulter looked different. His expression was blank, and his skin was bleached. His hair, which had been gray, was now white as snow. He had apparently suffered the same fate as Warren.

"What news?" Grandpa asked as the others gathered on the grass beneath the porch.

"Nothing good," Tanu said.

"What about Seth?" Grandpa pressed.

Tanu looked down. The action said it all. "Oh, no," Grandma whispered. Kendra burst into sobs. She tried to stifle them by biting her sleeve. Squeezing her eyes shut did not stop the tears.

"Maybe we should wait," Vanessa said.

"I want to hear," Kendra managed. "Is he dead?"

"All signs suggest he has been consumed by Olloch," Tanu said.

Kendra hunched against the porch railing, shoulders shaking. She tried not to believe what she was hearing, but there was no other choice.

"Tell us everything," Grandma said, voice quavering.

"Hugo was simple to track, though he traversed some rugged terrain," Tanu said. "We met him heading back toward the house, returning along the same route he had used to reach the grove."

"So Coulter did go to the grove," Grandpa said angrily.

"Yes. For the life of me, Hugo looked dejected when we found him. He was missing an arm, had his head hung low, and was trudging slowly. Once we found him, we ordered him to take us to where he had left Coulter."

"And Hugo went directly to the grove in the valley of the four hills," Grandma said.

"Followed his own tracks," Tanu said. "When we got to the grove I studied what evidence I could find. I saw where Coulter and Seth entered

the grove together. It did not appear Hugo was able to join them. Working my way around the perimeter of the grove, I found where Coulter's tracks departed. On the far side of the grove, I discovered where Hugo had scuffled with Olloch. I'm sure that is where Hugo lost his arm. Nearby I saw where Olloch entered the grove. Not far from there, I found where Olloch left the grove. We searched and searched, but located no sign of Seth leaving the grove."

"How could Olloch enter the grove if Hugo couldn't?" Kendra asked.

"Different barriers work in different ways," Tanu said. "My guess is that the grove is less repellent to creatures of darkness. A demon like Olloch would be immune to many black curses."

"Did you go into the grove?" Grandma asked.

"There is a malevolent evil there," Vanessa said.

"We felt unprepared for what we might face below those cursed trees," Tanu said. "We had to physically restrain Dale. In the end, we followed Coulter's departing tracks and found him roaming in the woods as you now see him."

Kendra could hardly listen to the news. She clutched the railing and fought the overpowering grief throbbing inside of her. Each time fresh sobs shook her, she tried to weep quietly. After all that had happened last summer, how close they had all come to losing their lives, it seemed unfair that death should now take Seth so suddenly and unexpectedly. It was unimaginable that she would never see her brother again.

"Could he be alive, swallowed whole?" Kendra asked in a small voice.

Nobody would look at her. "If the demon devoured him, he is no more," Grandpa said gently. "We'll give it a day. If Olloch consumed Seth, he should slow down and return to his dormant state until somebody else makes the mistake of feeding him. I don't mean to give you false hope, but we won't know for certain that Olloch has ingested Seth until we locate the demon in his dormant state."

"Should we look sooner?" Kendra asked, wiping her eyes. "What if Seth's still out there, running?"

"He isn't running," Tanu said. "Believe me, I looked. At best he may have found a place to hide inside the grove."

"Which is unlikely if the demon came and went," Grandma said sadly.

“Can we get anything out of Coulter?” Kendra asked.

“He seems no more responsive than Warren,” Dale said. “Want to see if he reacts to you, Kendra?”

Kendra pressed her lips together. The thought of going near Coulter was revolting. He had killed her brother. And now, like Warren, his mind had flown. But if there was a chance he might reveal something useful, she had to try.

Kendra climbed over the porch railing and dropped to the grass. “Hugo, set Coulter down,” Dale ordered.

Hugo complied. Coulter stood still, looking even smaller and more frail now that he was albino and expressionless. Kendra placed a hand on his white neck. Coulter cocked his head and looked her in the eye. His lips trembled.

“We never got Warren to say anything,” Kendra said.

“Try asking him,” Vanessa said.

Kendra placed a hand on either side of Coulter’s face and stared into his eyes. “Coulter, what happened to Seth. Where is he?”

Coulter blinked twice. The corner of his mouth twitched toward a smile. Kendra pushed him away. “He looks happy about it,” she said.

“I’m not sure you were getting through,” Dale said. “I think he just liked your touch.”

Kendra gazed up at the golem. “Poor Hugo. Can we fix his arm?”

“Golems are resilient,” Grandpa said. “They frequently shed and accumulate matter. Over time the arm will reform. Kendra, perhaps you should come in and lie down.”

“I don’t think I can sleep,” Kendra moaned.

“I could give her a mild sedative,” Vanessa offered.

“That may not be a bad idea,” Grandma said.

Kendra considered it. The idea of falling asleep and temporarily leaving all the heartache behind was appealing. She was not sleepy, but she was weary. “Okay.”

Placing a supportive hand on Kendra’s elbow, Vanessa guided her up to the porch and back into the house. In the kitchen, Vanessa put some water on the stove. She left and returned with a tea bag.

Kendra sat at the table, absently handling a salt shaker. “Seth really is dead, isn’t he?”

“It doesn’t look good,” Vanessa admitted.

“I didn’t picture this happening. It was all starting to feel like a wonderful game.”

“It can be wonderful, but it is definitely not a game. Magical creatures can be deadly. I have lost several loved ones to them.”

“He was always asking for it,” Kendra said. “Always looking for risks.”

“This wasn’t Seth’s fault. Who knows what kind of pressure Coulter might have applied to lure him away?” Vanessa poured warm water into a mug, inserted the tea bag, and stirred in some sugar. “I’m guessing you would prefer your tea drinkable versus scalding.” She pulled out the tea bag and set it on the counter. “This should be plenty potent.”

Kendra sipped at the herbal tea. It was minty and sweet. Unlike the rest of breakfast, it tasted like something she could finish. “Thanks, this is good.”

“Let’s start walking to your room,” Vanessa said. “In a moment, you’ll be glad to be near a bed.”

Kendra continued sipping from the mug as they climbed the stairs and passed down the hall. The drowsiness hit her on the way up the steps to the attic. “You weren’t kidding,” Kendra said, leaning against the wall to steady herself. “I feel like I could just curl up right here and fall asleep.”

“You could,” Vanessa said. “But why not go a few more steps and sleep on your bed.” Vanessa took the mug from Kendra. It was not yet half empty.

The rest of the way to her bed, Kendra felt like she was moving in slow motion. After the painful news about her brother, the numb, detached sensation was welcome. She climbed into bed and instantly faded into a deep sleep, unable to process the final words Vanessa spoke to her.

* * *

Waking up from her drugged slumber was a delicious, gradual process for Kendra, like lazily floating upward out of deep water. The surface was not far off, and when she reached it, she knew she would feel perfectly

rested. No desire to slap a snooze button, no grogginess from sleeping too long. She had never noticed herself awakening so smoothly.

When she was finally fully awake, Kendra hesitated to open her eyes, hoping the contentment would linger. Wasn't there a reason she shouldn't feel so perfect? Her eyes shot open, and she looked over at Seth's empty bed.

He was gone! Dead! Kendra closed her eyes again, trying to pretend it had all been a miserable dream. Why hadn't she awoken when Coulter came and took him? How had Coulter gotten him out of the house so stealthily?

She opened her eyes. Judging from the light, it was late afternoon. She had slept the day away.

Kendra went downstairs and found Grandma in the kitchen, chopping cucumbers. "Hello, dear," she said.

"Any news while I was out?"

"I've tried to contact the Sphinx twice. Still no answer. I hope he's all right." Grandma stopped cutting and wiped her hands on a towel. "Your grandfather wanted to talk to us in the study once you awakened."

Kendra followed Grandma to the study, where Grandpa sat reading a journal. He closed the book as they entered. "Kendra, come in, we need to talk."

Kendra and Grandma sat down on the cot near Grandpa. "I've been thinking," Grandpa said, "and the way everything played out last night doesn't add up. I know Coulter well. He is a cunning man. The more I ponder the situation, the less strategic sense I see to his actions, especially with him ending up an albino like Warren. His behavior was so clumsy that I suspect he was not acting under his own volition."

"You think somebody was controlling him?" Kendra asked.

"Such things are possible in numerous ways," Grandpa said. "I may be wrong, and I have no concrete proof, but I suspect we may have yet to discover our traitor. And so I have set a plan in motion. It may cause some commotion tonight, so I thought it was only fair to warn you. Look under my cot."

Under the cot Kendra saw a six-foot-long, ornately carved box. Grandma peeked as well. "What's in the box?" Kendra asked.

“Less than an hour ago I called in Vanessa, Tanu, and Dale. I told them I believed we had caught our traitor, but that I was worried about Christopher Vogel’s presence on the property, undoubtedly with designs for more mischief. I told them that I had decided to hide the key to the artifact vault under my cot, and that I wanted them to know where it was in case of an emergency. Then we went on to discuss plans for tracking Olloch tomorrow, as well as how we might discover the whereabouts of our other uninvited guest.”

“Big box for a key,” Kendra said.

“It’s no ordinary key,” Grandpa said.

“You’re not actually using the key as bait,” Grandma said, sounding certain he would not be so foolish.

“Of course not. The box contains a thief’s net. The key is hidden elsewhere.”

Grandma nodded approvingly.

“A thief’s net?” Kendra asked.

“If anyone opens the box without deactivating the trap, the net will spring out and wrap them up,” Grandpa explained. “A magical tool for apprehending would-be robbers.”

“Where’s the key?” Kendra asked.

“I’m not sure you should be burdened with that knowledge,” Grandma said. “That kind of information could make you more of a target. Your grandfather and I are the only people aware of the key’s location.”

“Okay,” Kendra said.

Grandpa rubbed his chin. “I’ve debated over whether to send you away, Kendra. On one hand, I strongly suspect that the crisis here at Fablehaven has not ended. On the other, the Society of the Evening Star will start trying to track you down the moment you exit the gates. At least the fences of Fablehaven provide a barrier against them. With the register hidden in a new place, we should have no new undesired visitors.”

“I’d rather stay here,” Kendra said. “I don’t want to put my parents in danger.”

“I think for now that is the best move,” Grandpa said. “I recommend you sleep with your grandmother tonight in our room. I don’t want you

sleeping alone. The attic provides extra protection against magical creatures with bad intentions, but I'm afraid our remaining foes are mortal."

Because Olloch ate Seth and is now out of the picture, Kendra thought morbidly. "Whatever you want," Kendra said.

* * *

Bedtime arrived much too soon for Kendra. Before she knew it, dinner was eaten, painful condolences were shared, and she was lying in a king-sized bed beside Grandma Sorenson. Kendra loved her grandma, but she was becoming aware that she smelled too much like cough drops. Plus she snored.

Kendra tossed and turned trying to find a comfortable position. She tried lying on her side, her stomach, and her back. She bunched the pillow in different ways. It was no use. Having slept all day, she was more ready to go play soccer than she was to fall asleep. It didn't help that she was sleeping with her clothes on in case somebody really did get caught in Grandpa's net during the night.

In her own home she would have watched TV. Or made herself a snack. But the only ones at Fablehaven with a television were the satyrs. And she was afraid to get up for a snack for fear of running into somebody trying to sneak into Grandpa's study.

There was no visible clock, so time began to feel indefinite and endless. She kept trying to construct a scenario in which Seth was not dead. After all, nobody had seen Olloch eat him. They weren't a hundred percent sure. In the morning, after they tracked the demon, it would be more certain, but for tonight, she could still hope a little.

A sudden disturbance downstairs broke the restless monotony. Someone shouted and something clattered. Grandma awoke with a start. Grandpa started calling for help.

Kendra tugged on her shoes and raced into the hall. She turned a corner to the hall that led to the stairway. Grandpa was yelling excitedly from downstairs.

On the stairs Kendra met Vanessa and Tanu. Vanessa carried her blowgun; Tanu held his pouch full of potions. Kendra could hear Grandma right behind her.

After tromping down the stairs, they all dashed across the entry hall and into the study, where Dale lay tangled in a net on the floor. Grandpa sat at the edge of his cot, a knife in his uninjured hand. “We caught somebody with a hand in the cookie jar,” he announced.

“I told you, Stan,” Dale panted. “I don’t know how I got here.”

Tanu put the potion he was holding back into his pouch. Vanessa lowered her blowgun. Grandma engaged the safety on her crossbow.

“Why don’t you explain to everyone?” Grandpa suggested.

Dale was on his stomach. The net was so tight it squished his features and only allowed him to partially turn his head to try to face them. His arms were crossed awkwardly on his chest, and his legs were bound together.

“I went to sleep and woke up like this on the floor,” Dale asserted. “Simple as that. I know it looks bad. Honestly, I had no intention of stealing the key. I must have been sleepwalking.”

Dale looked and sounded desperate. Grandpa narrowed his eyes. “Went to sleep and woke up here,” he repeated thoughtfully. Understanding dawned in his gaze. “The traitor is clever enough to realize that I now know the secret, so it will do no good to pretend otherwise—the clues lead to an obvious conclusion. Trusted friends acting out of character. Drumants released to explain the bite marks. And now Dale asserts that his strange behavior happened in his sleep. I should have connected the dots earlier. I’m afraid this will end in a scuffle. Dale, I’m sorry you’re stuck in a net. Tanu, we mustn’t blow this.”

Grandpa threw his knife at Vanessa. Raising the blowgun to her lips, she arched her body, barely dodging the knife, and fired a dart at Tanu. The large Samoan caught the dart on his pouch. Vanessa lunged gracefully at Grandma, swinging the blowgun like a switch and knocking the crossbow from her grasp. Tanu charged Vanessa. She dropped the blowgun, producing a pair of tiny darts, and pricked Tanu on the forearm as he reached for her. Instantly his eyes went wide and his knees turned rubbery. His potion pouch tumbled from unfeeling hands and he fell hard to the study floor.

Grandma reached for her fallen crossbow, a red welt already rising on her hand. Vanessa sprang at her, stabbing her with the other tiny dart. As Grandma swayed and toppled, Kendra dove, snatched the crossbow, and

tossed it across the room to Grandpa an instant before Vanessa slammed into her.

Grandpa pointed the crossbow at Vanessa, who scrambled behind the desk, putting herself out of his line of fire. Kendra saw Vanessa close her eyes. Her face became serene.

Clutching the crossbow, Grandpa rose from his bed and hopped toward the desk. "Careful, Kendra, she's a narcoblix," he warned.

Moving swiftly, Tanu pulled out the dart lodged in his potion pouch and pounced at Grandpa, tackling him and wrenching the crossbow from his grasp. "Get away, Kendra!" Grandpa cried as Tanu pricked him with the dart. Vanessa remained trancelike on the floor.

Tanu had left the potion pouch behind when he attacked Grandpa. Kendra grabbed the pouch and dashed out the door. She hadn't digested all the details, but it was clear that Vanessa was controlling Tanu. "Run," Grandpa panted groggily.

Kendra raced to the back door and out to the porch. She jumped the railing to the grass below. The yard was dark. Most of the lights in the house were off. Kendra ran away from the porch through the garden. Glancing back, she saw Tanu burst out of the doorway and vault the railing.

"Kendra, don't be rash, come back!" he called.

Kendra offered no reply and ran even faster. She could hear Tanu gaining behind her. "Don't make me hurt you!" he shouted. "Your grandparents are fine; I just put them to sleep. Come back, we'll talk." His voice sounded strained.

Kendra sprinted toward the woods, taking the most direct route she could, tromping through flowerbeds and knifing between blossoming shrubs. The thorns of a rosebush raked her arm. Playing soccer during the previous school year had led to a habit of jogging. She appreciated her added speed and stamina as she reached the woods well ahead of the hulking Samoan and still going strong.

"The woods are deadly at night!" Tanu hollered. "I don't want any harm to come to you! It's pitch black, you're going to have an accident. Come back." His phrasing was labored as he tried to run and yell at the same time.

The woods were dim, but Kendra could see well enough. She jumped a fallen limb and dodged around some thorny briars. There was no way she

was going back. Vanessa had staged a coup. Kendra knew that if she could get away, maybe she could return later with a plan.

Kendra no longer heard Tanu pursuing her. Chest heaving, she paused and looked back. Tanu stood at the edge of the woods, hands on his hips in a feminine stance. He looked hesitant to enter. “I really am your friend, Kendra. I’ll see that no harm comes to you!”

Kendra had her doubts. She stayed low and tried to pick her way more quietly, worried that if she gave away her exact location Tanu might be encouraged and give chase. He held his hands up to his eyes, as if he was having trouble seeing. It was apparently more shadowy where she was walking than where he stood. He did not come after her, and Kendra worked her way deeper into the woods.

She was not on a path. But this was roughly the route she and Seth had taken when they first came upon the naiad pond. If she kept going straight, she would reach the hedge surrounding the pond, and from there she knew how to find a path. Not that she had any idea where she should go from there.

Walking briskly, swerving through the bracken, Kendra tried to piece together what had happened. Grandpa had called Vanessa a narcoblix. She remembered that Errol had told her and Seth about blixes before Seth snuck into the mortuary. There was a type of blix that drained away your youth, and another that could animate the dead. Narcoblixes were the kind that could control people in their sleep.

Which meant that Grandpa was right—Coulter was innocent. He had been under Vanessa’s influence. Vanessa didn’t care if Seth got eaten or if Coulter was turned into a mindless albino. She was just doing reconnaissance on the grove so she could figure out how to get to the artifact. She may have even wanted for Seth to be eaten in order to get Olloch out of the way.

Kendra was seething. Vanessa had killed her brother. Vanessa! She never would have guessed it. Vanessa had saved them from Errol and acted so kindly. And now she had backstabbed them and taken over the house.

What could Kendra do? She considered going back to the Fairy Queen, but something deep inside warned against that course of action. It was hard to explain—it simply felt wrong. She had a quiet certainty that if she returned, she really would end up turning into dandelion fluff, like the ill-

fated man who had ventured to the island in the middle of the pond in the story Grandpa had told her last summer.

Were Grandma and Grandpa really all right? Was Vanessa going to hurt them? Kendra wanted to believe that Vanessa meant it when she said she meant them no harm. There was reason to hope she was sincere. Taking a life on Fablehaven soil would strip Vanessa of the protections afforded by the treaty. She couldn't have that happen if she planned to go after the artifact, right? The need to respect the treaty should protect her grandparents if nothing else. Then again, Vanessa had already indirectly killed Seth by leading him out of the yard. Maybe that didn't count, since Olloch had actually done the killing.

To make matters worse, somewhere Vanessa had an accomplice—the unseen intruder, Christopher Vogel. How long before he found out she had usurped the house and joined her there? Or was he off working some other aspect of a plan more complex than Kendra could guess at?

Kendra had to do something. Where was Hugo? Would he help her if she could find him? He didn't have to take orders from her, but his free will was blossoming, so maybe she could persuade him to lend a hand. On second thought, Vanessa had been authorized to issue commands to Hugo, so chances were the treacherous narcoblix could instantly turn the golem into an enemy if Kendra brought him near.

There was nobody else. Grandpa, Grandma, Dale, and Tanu were captured. Coulter was an albino just like Warren. Seth was dead. She tried not to let the thought derail her.

What were her assets? She had grabbed the potion pouch, although she wasn't very confident which potion was which. She wished she had paid closer attention when Tanu was showing Seth. At least the potions couldn't be used against her.

What about Lena? The thought sent a thrill of hope through her. Kendra was headed toward the pond. She hadn't seen her former friend yet during this return visit to Fablehaven. The last time Kendra had seen her, Lena was a full-fledged naiad again and had tried to drown her. After the full-sized fairies saved Fablehaven from Bahumat, while undoing much of the harm the demon had caused, they restored Lena to her state as a naiad. Decades ago she had voluntarily left the water and married Patton Burgess. The decision had made her mortal, although she had aged more slowly than

he. After he passed away, she toured the world, eventually returning to Fablehaven with plans to end her days at the preserve. Lena had resisted the fairies when they hauled her off to the pond. But once she was back in the water, she had appeared content.

Maybe Lena could be tempted to leave the water if Kendra explained the dire situation! Then Kendra wouldn't have to face the situation alone! It certainly beat having no plan. New purpose entered Kendra's stride.

Before long Kendra reached the tall hedge. She knew that the hedge ringed the pond, and if she followed it she would eventually reach an opening with a path. When she and Seth had first visited the pond, he had found a low opening where they had managed to crawl under the hedge. She kept an eye out for such an aperture, since it would certainly save some time.

She did not travel too far along the thick hedge before she noticed a pronounced indentation. When she investigated more closely, she found it was impassable—the foliage was too dense. The next indentation she noticed was less obvious, but when she crouched she found it went all the way through.

She wriggled through the hedge on her belly, wondering what other animals or creatures used this cramped entrance. At the far side she stood and surveyed the pond. A whitewashed boardwalk connected a dozen wooden pavilions around the dark water. Face tilting toward the sky, Kendra noticed there were no stars, and no moon either. It was overcast. Still, enough light was apparently filtering through the clouds to illuminate the night, for although the clearing was gloomy, she could make out the contours of the lawn and the latticework of the gazebos and the foliage on the island in the middle of the pond.

Kendra crossed the lawn to the nearest gazebo. Somebody certainly took pride in caring for this area. The grass was always tidy, and the paint on the woodwork was never peeling. Maybe it was the result of a spell.

Projecting from the boardwalk below one of the pavilions was a little pier attached to a floating boathouse. The last time Kendra had seen Lena was at the end of that pier, so it seemed as good a place as any to call for her.

Kendra noticed no evidence of life in the clearing. At times she had seen satyrs and other creatures, but tonight all was silent. The tenebrous

water of the pond was still and impenetrable. Kendra tried to walk quietly, out of reverence for the silence. The tranquil night was ominous. Somewhere below the inscrutable surface of the pond waited Kendra's old friend. With the right plea, hopefully Lena would renounce life as a naiad and come to her aid. Lena had decided to leave the pond once—she could do it again.

Walking along the pier, Kendra kept away from the edges. She knew the naiads would enjoy nothing more than to pull her in and drown her. Kendra gazed at the island. Again a sense of foreboding filled her. Returning to the island would be a mistake. The feeling was so tangible that she wondered if it had something to do with being fairykind. Perhaps she could sense what the Fairy Queen considered permissible. Or maybe she was just scared.

Stopping just short of the end of the pier, Kendra licked her lips. She felt hesitant to speak and desecrate the silence. But she needed help, and could not afford to waste time. "Lena, it's Kendra, I need to talk."

The words seemed to die the instant they left her lips. They did not carry or reverberate. The dark pond remained inscrutable. "Lena, this is an emergency, please come speak to me," she tried in a louder voice.

Again, she felt she had spoken for her own ears alone. There was no hint of response from her shadowy surroundings.

"Why is she back again?" a voice said from off to her right. The sound came up out of the water, the words soft but undistorted.

"Who said that?" Kendra asked.

"She's here to show off, what else?" another voice answered from directly below the pier. "Mortals get so proud when they know our language, as if speaking it weren't the easiest and most natural ability."

"I'll allow that it beats her clumsy honking," a third voice giggled. "Barking like a seal."

Several voices giggled from under the obscure water. "I need to speak with Lena," Kendra pleaded.

"She needs to find a new hobby," the first voice said.

"Maybe she should take up swimming," the third voice suggested. Laughter rippled all around her.

“You don’t have to talk like I’m not here,” Kendra said. “I can hear every word just fine.”

“She’s an eavesdropper,” the voice under the pier said.

“She should come closer to the water so we can hear her better,” said a new voice near the end of the pier.

“I’m just fine where I am,” Kendra said.

“Just fine, she says,” said another new voice. “A big clumsy scarecrow glued to the ground, plodding around on stilts.” The comment initiated the longest bout of tittering yet.

“Better than being trapped in an aquarium,” Kendra said.

The pond became silent. “She is not very polite,” the voice under the pier finally said.

A new voice chimed in. “What do you expect? Her feet are probably sore.” Kendra rolled her eyes at the giggles that followed. She suspected the naiads would gladly trade insults all night.

“Fablehaven is in danger,” Kendra said. “The Society of the Evening Star has taken my Grandma and Grandpa prisoner. My brother Seth has been killed. I need to talk to Lena.”

“I’m here, Kendra,” said a familiar voice. It was slightly more light and musical, slightly less warm, but it was definitely Lena.

“Hush, Lena,” said the voice under the pier.

“I’ll speak if I choose,” Lena said.

“What do you care of mortal politics?” one of the earlier voices chided. “They come and go. Have you forgotten what mortals do best? They die. It’s the one talent they have in common.”

“Kendra, come close to the water,” Lena said. Her voice was nearer. Kendra could vaguely see her face beneath the surface of the pond to the left of the pier. Her nose was nearly breaking the surface.

“Not too close,” Kendra said, squatting well out of reach.

“Why are you here, Kendra?”

“I need your help. The preserve is at the brink of falling again.”

“I know you think that matters,” Lena said.

“It does matter,” Kendra said.

“It seems to matter for a moment. Just like a lifetime.”

“Don’t you care about Grandma and Grandpa? They could die!”

“They will die. You’ll all die. And at the time it will seem like it matters.”

“It does matter!” Kendra said. “What do you mean, nothing matters? What about Patton? Did he matter?”

There came no answer. Lena’s face broke the surface of the water, gazing up at Kendra with liquid eyes. Even in the weak light, Kendra could see that Lena looked much younger. Her skin was smoother and more evenly colored. Her hair had only a few strands of gray. The water around Lena sloshed and churned and she vanished.

“Hey,” Kendra said. “Leave her alone.”

“She’s through talking with you,” said the voice under the pier. “You are not welcome here.”

“You pulled her away!” Kendra accused. “You jealous little airheads. Waterheads. What do you do, brainwash her? Lock her in a closet and play songs about living under the sea?”

“You do not know of what you speak,” said the voice under the pier. “She would have perished and now she will live. This is your final warning. Go face your fate. Leave Lena to enjoy hers.”

“I’m not going anywhere,” Kendra said resolutely. “Bring Lena back. You can’t do anything to me if I stay away from the water.”

“Oh, no?” said the voice under the pier.

Kendra did not like the knowing tone of the speaker. Too much confidence. She had to be bluffing. If naiads left the water, they became mortal. Still, Kendra looked around, worried that somebody might be sneaking up on her to push her into the water. She saw nobody.

“Hello?” Kendra said. “Hello?”

Silence. She felt certain they could hear her.

“Don’t say we didn’t warn you,” one of the earlier voices sang.

Kendra crouched, trying to be ready for anything. Were the naiads going to throw something at her? Maybe they could collapse the pier? The night remained quiet and still.

A hand reached up out of the water at the end of the pier. Kendra jumped back, her heart in her throat. A wooden hand. Little golden hooks

served as joints. Mendigo scrambled out of the dark water and crawled onto the pier.

Kendra backed away as Mendigo stood, the wooden limberjack Muriel had changed into a fearsome servant. The overgrown primitive puppet had been pulled into the water by the naiads the year before. It had not crossed Kendra's mind that they might release him. Or even that he would still be functional. Muriel had been imprisoned. She was locked up with Bahumat deep beneath a verdant hill. Apparently nobody had told Mendigo.

The wooden figure rushed at Kendra. Although she had grown since she last saw the limberjack, he was still an inch or two taller. Kendra turned and ran along the pier back to the boardwalk. She could hear him gaining, wooden feet clacking against wooden planks.

He caught up to her at the bottom of the gazebo stairs. Kendra whirled and tried to grab at him, hoping to catch hold of a limb and unhinge it. He nimbly evaded her grasp and caught hold of her around the waist, flipping her upside down. She struggled and he changed his grip, pinning her arms to her sides.

Kendra was caught in a helpless position—facing away from him, upside down, arms immobilized. She tried to wriggle and flail, but Mendigo was alarmingly strong. As the oversized puppet trotted away from the pond, it became apparent she was going wherever he wanted.



Reunion

Seth stripped off another piece of the spongy wall and placed it in his mouth. The texture reminded him of citrus pulp. He chewed until he was left with a small amount of tough, tasteless matter, which he swallowed. Puckering his lips, Seth pressed his mouth against the wall of the cocoon. The harder he kissed the wall, the more moisture flowed into his mouth. Water with a hint of honeydew.

Olooch roared again, and the cocoon shuddered. Seth flopped around as the cocoon lurched from side to side. By the time he braced himself, the movement stopped. Seth was growing accustomed to the roars and the flurries of motion, although the thought that he was listening to a roar from inside a cocoon inside the belly of a demon remained peculiar.

Seth had tried to sleep. When he had first started dozing, the roars had awakened him every time. Eventually, with the help of his mounting fatigue, he had managed a few fitful stretches of slumber.

Time was becoming meaningless in the endless blackness. Only the growls and motion of the demon interrupted the monotony. That and snacking on fragments of the padded walls. How long had he been inside of Olooch? A day? Two days? Three?

At least Seth remained reasonably comfortable inside his womblike enclosure. It fit him rather snugly. There was just enough room to move his arms when he wanted to pick at the walls. Even when he was flung around,

he never got injured, because the walls were soft, and there was not enough room for him to get shaken into dangerous positions.

With so little space, it seemed the air would run out in a matter of minutes, but his breathing remained unstrained. Being swallowed by Olloch had made no difference—the air remained fresh. The closeness of the cocoon made him a little claustrophobic, but in the darkness, when he lay still, he could pretend the enclosure was spacious.

Olloch gave a particularly ferocious roar. The cocoon quaked. The demon emitted a couple of prolonged growls followed by the loudest roar Seth had yet heard. Seth wondered if the demon was in a fight. The snarls and roars continued. It felt oddly like the cocoon was being squeezed, first by his head, then near his shoulders, then at his waist, then at his knees and feet. The vicious growls continued unabated.

The cocoon was jostled one final time and silence followed. Seth lay in stillness, waiting for the turbulence to resume. He waited for several minutes, expecting more roaring at any moment. The growls had been almost desperate. Now all was eerily calm. Could Olloch have been killed? Or perhaps the demon had won a battle and then collapsed in exhaustion. It was easily the longest interval of motionless silence Seth had experienced since being swallowed. Uneventful minutes accumulated until Seth felt his eyelids drooping. He slipped into a deep slumber.

* * *

Mendigo dumped Kendra onto the ground. A thick carpet of wildflowers cushioned her landing. The air smelled of blossoms and fruit. As disoriented as the dash through the woods had left her, Kendra knew where they were: at the site where the Forgotten Chapel once stood. The last order from Muriel to Mendigo must have been to bring Kendra to the chapel.

During the entire run through the woods, Kendra had wriggled and twisted and squirmed. She had kicked Mendigo in the head and tried to unhinge his limbs. But the oversized puppet had just shifted his grip and continued doggedly onward. She had been carried upside down, over his shoulder, and curled up in a ball. No matter how vigorously she struggled, Mendigo had adjusted.

Kendra lay sprawled on a bed of wildflowers beneath a starless sky, the dim night pungent and mild. Mendigo crouched and started digging, clawing at the soil with wooden fingers, tossing stones aside when he encountered them. Somewhere under the hill, Muriel was buried, imprisoned with Bahumat. Apparently the order had not merely been to bring Kendra to the chapel but to bring Kendra to Muriel.

Kendra sprang to her feet and bolted down the hillside. She had not traveled six steps before Mendigo slammed into her from behind, tackling her near the trunk of a peach tree. They rolled and she wrenched her back. Kendra shrieked as Mendigo clung to her with unnatural strength, wrapping her up with his arms and legs.

At least if he was clinging to her, he wasn't digging. What would happen if he tunneled down to Muriel? Would the witch issue new commands to her wooden servant? Would she get in touch with Vanessa and figure out a way to escape?

"You're in a fine predicament," a tiny voice giggled. It was high and musical, like the tinkling of a little bell.

Kendra turned her head. A yellow fairy hovered near her face, emitting a golden glow. She wore a shimmering slip of gossamer and had wings like a bumblebee and a pair of antennae. "I wouldn't mind some help," Kendra said.

"A heroine of your reputation should have no trouble escaping such a feeble adversary," the fairy said airily.

"You'd be surprised how strong he is," Kendra said.

"His magic is weak," the fairy sniffed. "Muriel is sealed in a mighty prison. Her will no longer supports the enchantments she left behind. And yet you can do nothing but beg for help. Forgive me if I am unimpressed."

Mendigo was dragging Kendra up the hill toward the spot where he had started digging. "Obviously I'm having trouble," Kendra said. "I don't know what to do."

The fairy laughed, a twittering sound. "This is priceless! The great Kendra Sorenson being hauled through the dirt by a puppet!"

"You act like I think I'm some big shot," Kendra said. "I think you're projecting. I know I'm just a girl. Without the help of all the fairies I would have died last summer."

"False humility is more insulting than open pride!" the fairy sniffed.

Mendigo picked up Kendra, cradling her in his arms, folding her knees up to her chin and keeping her arms trapped at her sides. He resumed digging with his feet. "Do I look like I could possibly be feeling superior to anyone?" Kendra demanded.

The fairy drifted close, hovering in front of Kendra's nose. "The magic inside you is dazzling. By comparison, he is like a faint star next to the noonday sun."

"I don't know how to use it," Kendra said.

"Don't ask me," the fairy said. "You're the gifted luminary our Queen chose to honor. I can't show you how to unlock your magic any more than you can teach me how to use mine."

"Could you use your magic on him?" Kendra asked. "Change him back into a little puppet?"

"The spell that animates him remains potent," the fairy said. "But the command guiding his actions is weak. With some help, I could probably turn him."

"Oh, please, would you?" Kendra asked.

"Well, I am here to guard the prison," the fairy said. "All of us who were imps take turns as sentries."

"You were an imp?" Kendra said.

"Don't remind me. It was a graceless existence."

"He's trying to dig down to Muriel," Kendra said. "If you're a guard, shouldn't you stop him?"

"I suppose I should," the fairy conceded. "But the plums smell so wonderful right now, and the night is so fine . . . rounding up fairies is such drudgery."

"I'd be so grateful," Kendra said.

"We fairies crave nothing more than your gratitude, Kendra. We look up to you so. One kind word and our little hearts start racing! All we wish for is the love of big, clumsy girls."

"You're terrible," Kendra said.

"I am, aren't I," the fairy said, finally sounding flattered. "Tell you what. It is my responsibility to guard Muriel and Bahumat, you were right about that, so maybe I could check if anybody else is bored enough to lend you a hand."

The little fairy zipped away. Kendra hoped she was really going for help. The fairy didn't sound very reliable. Kendra tried to force the limberjack's arms apart by straightening her legs. The effort strained her back. Mendigo was too strong.

As Mendigo dug deeper, Kendra's hope that the fairy would return began to dwindle. Mendigo was nearly waist deep in a hole before a small group of fairies swarmed around them, glimmering in prismatic colors.

"See, I told you," the little yellow fairy tinkled.

"He's certainly tunneling toward Muriel," another fairy said.

"Not very efficiently," a third chimed in.

"Would you like us to turn him to obey your will?" a fourth fairy asked. Kendra recognized the speaker as the silver fairy who had led the charge when the fairies attacked Bahumat.

"Sure, that would be great," Kendra said.

The fairies hovered in a ring around Mendigo and Kendra. When they began chanting, colors flared and sparked, making Kendra blink. Kendra could no longer comprehend what they were saying. It felt like trying to listen in on multiple conversations at once. All she caught were tangled fragments of meaning that together made no sense.

After a final blazing flash, the fairies fell silent. Most soared away. Mendigo continued digging. "He is now yours to command," the silver fairy reported.

"Mendigo, stop digging," Kendra tried. Mendigo stopped. "Mendigo, set me down." He set her down.

"Thank you," Kendra said to the yellow fairy and the silver fairy, the only two who remained.

"Our pleasure to help," the silver fairy said. Though pitched high, her voice was richer than the others.

The yellow fairy shook her head and buzzed away.

"Why are they hurrying away?" Kendra asked.

"They have done their duty," the silver fairy said.

"None of the fairies have been very friendly," Kendra said.

"Friendliness is not always our forte," the silver fairy said. "Especially to one who was shown kindness by our Queen. You are much envied."

“I was only trying to protect Fablehaven and save my family,” Kendra said.

“And you succeeded, which only elevates your status,” the silver fairy said.

“Why are *you* speaking with me?” Kendra asked.

“I suppose I am peculiar,” the silver fairy said. “I am of a more serious mind than many of the others. I am called Shiara.”

“I’m Kendra.”

“Fortunately for you, we all have an interest in keeping Bahumat imprisoned,” Shiara said. “Otherwise I question whether I would have been able to rally sufficient help to turn Mendigo. Although Bahumat rightly blames you above all others, his vengeance against the fairies would be merciless were he to escape.”

“Couldn’t you just imprison him again?” Kendra said.

“Your elixir augmented our size and our power. Without it we would be no match for a demon like Bahumat.”

“Couldn’t I get the elixir again?” Kendra asked.

“My dear girl, you truly are naïve, which may be partly why our Queen condescended to share her tears with you. Your decision to tread near her shrine would normally have been rewarded with a swift departure from this life. I suspect she spared you because of your innocence, though her reasons are her own.”

“Fablehaven is in danger again,” Kendra said. “I could use some help.”

“Do not seek favors from her again unless she invites you,” Shiara said. “Now that you know better, irreverence will not be tolerated.”

Kendra recalled how she had sensed that going to the island again would be a mistake. “Could you help me?”

“Obviously I could, because I have,” Shiara said, twinkling.

“Have you seen Olloch the Glutton? He’s a demon who is after my brother.”

“The glutton is becoming dormant. He will not bother you.”

Kendra felt a stab of grief at the news. If the demon was slowing down, it meant Seth truly was gone. “There is more to the problem than Mendigo and the demon,” Kendra said. “Bad people have taken over the house. They captured my grandparents and Dale and Tanu. They want to steal something

precious from Fablehaven. If they have their way, they'll release all the demons from their prisons."

"It is challenging for us to mind the affairs of mortals," Shiara said. "Dwelling on such concerns is not in our nature. You made the binding of Bahumat our duty with authority from our Queen. And we continue to attend to that duty. I keep a sentinel stationed here always."

Kendra scanned the surrounding area, her gaze settling on the hill where Warren's cottage sat, some ways off. "Could you help me heal Warren, Dale's brother?"

"The curse upon him is much too strong," Shiara said. "All the fairies in Fablehaven together could not break it."

"What if you had the elixir?"

"That might be another matter. I wonder, why did you fail to return the bowl to the shrine?"

Kendra scrunched her eyebrows. "Grandpa thought it would be more appropriate to toss it onto the water. He thought it would be disrespectful to go back."

"The naiads have claimed it as a tribute," Shiara said. "In the future, bear in mind, if you take something in need, you will not be punished for returning it in gratitude. Such action would not have harmed your standing with Her Majesty."

"I'm sorry, Shiara," Kendra said. "We thought they would return it."

"The naiads fear and respect our Queen, but elected to accept the bowl as a gift freely given," Shiara said. "I sought to retrieve it but they would not yield, blaming you for awarding it to them. Some among the fairies hold you culpable." The silver fairy hovered higher. "It appears the situation here is now under control."

"Wait, please don't leave," Kendra said. "I don't know what to do."

"I will try to make the others mindful of the threat you named," Shiara said. "But do not count on aid from our kind. I admire your goodness, Kendra, and wish you no harm."

Shiara streaked away, vanishing into the night. Kendra turned and studied Mendigo. He stood motionless, awaiting instructions. Kendra sighed. The only person on her side was a big, creepy puppet.

* * *

Groaning, Seth stirred. He tried to stretch but the effort was thwarted by the snug confines of the cocoon. The realization of where he was caused him to snap awake. How long had he been asleep?

Opening his eyes, he was surprised to find the inside of the cocoon illuminated by a soft green glow, as if light were filtering in from outside. The cocoon remained unusually still. Was Olloch sleeping? Why was there suddenly light? Was the light passing through both Olloch and the cocoon?

Seth waited. Nothing changed. Eventually he started yelling and tried to rock the cocoon by flinging himself from one side to the other. There came no roars, no growls, no movement except a slight tilting as he shifted his position. Just silence and the even, muted glow.

Was the cocoon no longer inside Olloch? Had he been coughed up like a hairball? Perhaps the cocoon was indigestible! He dared not hope for such good fortune. But it would explain the lack of growls and the new illumination. Had Grandpa come to his rescue? If so, why wasn't anyone encouraging him to open the cocoon?

Could it be some sort of trick? If he opened the cocoon, would Olloch gobble him up again, this time without a cocoon to impede digestion? Could he still be in the evil grove with the revenant? He didn't think so. He felt no hint of the chilling, involuntary fear.

Seth decided to wait. Acting rashly had gotten him in trouble before. He folded his arms and listened, straining his senses for any indication of what was going on outside the cocoon.

Seth quickly became fidgety. He had never coped well with boredom. When the cocoon had swayed and jostled with the movements of the demon, and when the silence had been interrupted by ferocious growls, Seth had remained on edge, which kept him occupied. The motionless silence was relentless.

How much time had passed? Time always moved slower when he was bored. He could remember certain classes at school where it used to feel like the clock was broken. Every minute felt like a lifetime. But this was worse. No classmates to joke with. No paper to doodle on. Not even the drone of a teacher to give shape to the monotony.

Seth began picking at the wall of the cocoon. He didn't have to break all the way out, he just wanted to see how tough it would be. He ate part of the wall as he went.

Soon he had made a pretty good hole in the wall in front of his face. As he dug deeper, the texture of the wall was changing, becoming goopy, like peanut butter. It was the best-tasting part of the wall so far, reminding him vaguely of eggnog.

After scooping away the eggnog paste, he reached a membrane. It was slick, and it rippled when he prodded it. Seth ruptured the membrane by jabbing it with his fingers, and clear liquid gushed out, soaking him.

Now light was really pouring into the cocoon through the hole. He had reached a hard, translucent shell. Silvery light shone through it, overpowering the green glow. He was obviously no longer inside Olloch. And as he had dug, Seth had neither heard nor felt any indication that Olloch was near.

Who knew if he would get another chance like this? He had to try to escape. The demon might return anytime. Seth began punching at the shell. The blows hurt his knuckles, but the shell began to crack. Soon his hand burst through, and unfiltered sunlight flooded in.

Seth worked furiously to widen the hole. The effort took longer than he liked. Now that his protective cocoon was breached, he wanted to get out as quickly as possible, before some creature came along and cornered him.

Finally the hole was big enough for Seth to squirm through. With his head, shoulders, and arms out of the cocoon, Seth froze. Olloch sat not twenty feet away, back to him. The demon had grown considerably. Olloch was bigger than the elephants Seth had seen at the zoo, not just taller, but much broader as well. No wonder the demon had been able to swallow him. The glutton was immense!

Seth realized he had made the worst mistake of his life, and that now he would die. Why hadn't he waited to open the cocoon? Why was he so impatient?

But Olloch did not turn. The huge demon continued to sit motionless, back to him. Seth began to notice a terrible stench. He looked at the shell of the cocoon. It was smooth, with a luster like mother-of-pearl, except that it was streaked with smelly brown matter. Huge clumps of mushy brown excrement sat on the ground nearby, buzzing with flies.

Suddenly Seth understood. He had passed right through the demon, safe inside the cocoon! It was the only explanation. In one end, and out the other!

Olloch remained still. The demon did not even seem to breathe. He was like a statue. And judging from what Seth could see, the clearing he was in was not the haunted grove.

Seth squirmed the rest of the way out of the cocoon, trying his best to avoid touching the excrement. Once free of the cocoon, he picked his way through the minefield of reeking demon pies, slinking away from the enormous glutton. While he was stepping around one stinking pile, a dry branch cracked loudly underfoot. Seth's entire body tensed. After a breathless moment, he hazarded a glance at the demon. The glutton had not budged, and continued to hold perfectly still.

Deciding he had to confirm that the demon was no longer a threat, Seth started looping around so he could view Olloch from the front, giving the demon a wide berth. Coming around to the front, Seth found the demon seated in the same sitting position as when he had first laid eyes on him in the funeral home. The texture of his skin had changed. The demon was a statue once more. Seth could not help smiling. He was no longer doomed! And until some new victim made the mistake of feeding him, Olloch the Glutton was frozen.

Seth surveyed his surroundings. He was in a small clearing encircled by trees. He realized he could be anywhere on the preserve. He needed to get his bearings.

Seth wished for his emergency kit. He had dropped it back in the grove. His only remaining asset was the glove Coulter had thrust into his hand. Seth had stowed the glove in his pocket. He tugged it out and pulled it on.

The instant he put on the glove, Seth could no longer see himself. It was a strange sensation, like all that was left of him was a pair of transparent eyeballs. He held up his hands in front of his face. When he moved them, his body flickered back into view. But when he held still, he didn't just see right through them, he saw no sign of himself. It was as if he had been completely disembodied.

The glove was a little loose on his hand, but it did not fit him badly. Fortunately it had belonged to Coulter and not Tanu. Keeping it on should afford him some protection as he tried to figure out where he was.

The sun was high in the sky, so for the moment it would be no help determining direction. And since he had no idea where on the preserve he

was, identifying north would not help him much yet anyhow. He needed a landmark. Seth stepped into the center of the clearing, weaving around the piles of dung. The biggest stack was as high as his waist. Seth stood with his hands on his hips. The trees circling the clearing were too tall—he could see nothing beyond them.

He glanced at the demon. Climbing Olloch would give him an extra fifteen feet or so, but he did not want to get anywhere near that mouth.

There were no apparent trails leading out of the clearing, but the undergrowth was not heavy, so he chose a direction and set off. After a while, he became used to how his body would vanish whenever he paused, then reappear as he continued walking. His first priority was to find a landmark or a vantage point that would allow him to get his bearings. For all he knew, each step was carrying him farther from the main house.

He came across a pair of deer. They paused and looked toward him. He held still, vanishing from sight. After a moment they bounded away. Had they caught his scent?

Farther along he glimpsed a great black owl roosting in a tree. The feathery head swiveled toward him, round eyes staring. Seth had never known owls could be so large or so black. Even as he stood motionless and invisible, the golden eyes seemed to stare into his. In that instant, Seth realized he had not consumed any milk. It was a new day, and he had slept. He could not see the true forms of any of the magical creatures. The owl could be anything. The deer could have been anything.

He thought back to Olloch. Had the demon really looked as much like a statue as it had seemed to him? Or was that another illusion?

Seth backed away from the owl, eyeing the large bird as he distanced himself and circled around it. The dark owl did not turn, but the head pivoted, golden eyes trained on Seth until he passed out of sight.

Before long, Seth came to an unusual path. Once it had been a wide road paved with flagstones, though now it was choked with weeds and slender young trees. Many of the paving stones were out of place or hidden beneath vegetation, but plenty were visible to help him follow the road. Seth had never seen a paved path at Fablehaven, and even though the road was in disrepair, he decided that following an old road was probably safer than roaming aimlessly through the forest.

The path was not level, and many of the lichen-covered flagstones were crooked and loose, forcing Seth to watch his step or risk turning an ankle. At one point he stopped as a long snake slithered through the weeds. He held his breath, unsure whether it was really a snake or something more dangerous in disguise. The serpent did not appear to notice him.

Seth passed the decaying remnants of a humble cabin not far off the path to one side. Two walls and a stone chimney remained partially intact. Farther along he spotted the jumbled remnants of a smaller shelter, splintered and rotten beyond recognition. It might have once been a shack or a lean-to.

He passed a few more ruins of crude shelters before the road led him into an open area, where he stood facing an impressive manor, surprisingly undamaged compared to the road and the other dwellings he had passed. The manor was three stories tall, with four large pillars in the front. White walls were now gray, and all the windows were covered by heavy green shutters. Flowering vines twisted around the pillars and climbed the walls. The road formed a circular driveway in front of the manor, doubling back on itself.

Seth remembered hearing about an abandoned mansion somewhere on the property. It had once been the main house at Fablehaven, and the center of a community, of which the dilapidated shelters were probably remnants. He could not recall ever hearing why the mansion had been abandoned.

Given his current situation, one detail about the manor stood out above the rest. It occupied high ground. He suspected that from the roof he would be able to get his bearings.

Did he dare risk entering the house? Normally he would intrude in a heartbeat. He loved exploring. But he knew that barging into an abandoned mansion on Fablehaven property was a risky proposition. Here, ghosts and monsters were not only real, they were everywhere. And the manor had to be vacant for a reason. It was larger and more grand than the house his grandparents occupied.

He had to find out where he was. Although the sun was still fairly high, nightfall would inevitably come, and he didn't want to get caught in the woods after dark. Plus, everybody had to be terribly worried. If entering the house would help him figure out where he was on the property, it would be

worth the risk. Also, it would be cool to see what the manor looked like inside. Who knew? There might even be treasure.

Seth walked cautiously toward the house. He decided to take it slow, keeping himself tensed to bolt at the first sign of trouble. The day was hot and still. Clouds of gnats twirled above the lawn. He could imagine carriages pulling up to the house, being greeted by uniformed servants. Those days were long gone.

He mounted the steps to the front porch, passing the pillars. He had always liked houses with pillars. They seemed so stately, like true mansions. The front door was ajar. Seth went to the nearest shuttered window. The green paint of the shutters was blistered and peeling. When he tugged on the shutters, they rattled but would not swing open.

Seth returned to the front door and eased it open. With the windows shuttered and no other lights on, the house was gloomy. Beyond the cavernous entry hall, he could see into a spacious living room. The furniture looked expensive, even under a heavy layer of dust. Everything was quiet.

Stepping inside, Seth left the door wide open. His passage stirred up dust off the floor. Standing inside the house was barely cooler than standing under the sun outside. It smelled musty, with a hint of mildew. Great sheets of cobwebs hung from the high ceiling and veiled the chandelier. He decided it might be wise to hurry.

A grand staircase led up from the entry hall to the second floor. Seth charged up the stairs, kicking up dust with each step, leaving footprints on the dingy carpeting. At the top of the stairs hung a sepia portrait of a man and a woman. The man looked serious and wore a mustache. The woman was Lena—much younger than when Seth had known her, but even under the film of dust on the glass, her identity was unmistakable. She had a slight, knowing smile.

Seth hurried down the hall until he found another staircase, which granted access to the third level. Climbing to a higher, narrower hall, he tried a random door and found it locked. The next door he tried was locked as well, but the third opened onto a bedroom. He hurried to the window, opened it, and unfastened the shutters. Already he had a good view, but only in one direction, so Seth stepped out onto the roof. The roof was steep enough that if he fell, he could conceivably roll off the edge and fall three

stories to the driveway. Treading gingerly, wood creaking, Seth moved to the crest of the roof.

Standing atop the manor, he found himself just high enough to get a decent view of the surrounding area. Unfortunately, not much looked familiar. He identified the four hills that surrounded the valley where Coulter had led him. But he was not sure from what direction he was looking at the four hills. Slowly he turned, scanning the horizon, searching for clues. In one direction he could see what he suspected was the beginning of the marshland. In another direction he saw a single hill. On the hill, he saw a rooftop peeking above the trees.

Warren's cottage! It had to be. He could barely see the top of it from his current vantage point. He stood on his tiptoes, trying to improve his angle. It was a good distance away, but if he could reach the cottage, he knew how to find his way back to the main house from there.

Sweeping the area with a final look, Seth soaked up all the details he could. Back on the ground the way would not be plain. But the sun was moving, casting enough shadow now for him to feel confident which way was west. And by knowing west, he should be able to maintain his heading as he hiked to the cottage.

He returned to the window and climbed back into the room, closing and latching the shutters. Seth surveyed the room. It was well appointed, but he didn't see anything worth carrying all the way back to the cottage. Of course, now that he had been here, he could probably find his way back. Maybe there was money or jewelry lying around someplace, perhaps in the master bedroom. Might be worth taking a look around for a few minutes before he departed. After all, it wouldn't be stealing since the house was abandoned.

He guessed a good place to start looking would be the second floor, where the rooms had seemed bigger. After quickly checking a few dresser drawers and glancing inside a nightstand, Seth exited the room. He stopped, staring down at the far end of the hall, where the dust on the floor was swirling in a low circle. The sight was unsettling, eddying dust at the height of his shins. Where was the breeze coming from?

The staircase that accessed the second floor was about halfway down the hall toward the swirling dust. Seth found that his mouth was suddenly

dry. He did not want to move toward the dust, but the hall came to a dead end in the other direction.

Seth moved lightly toward the unnatural disturbance. Suddenly the dust began whirling more fiercely, rising in a column from floor to ceiling. Seth ran toward the dust devil as it moved down the hall toward him. Something told him that if he lost the race to the staircase, he would deeply regret it.

His pounding footfalls kicked up dust, but it was hardly noticeable as the wind from the oncoming vortex filled the hall with blinding particles. Seth squinted and tucked his head. When he reached the staircase, the whirlwind was scarcely ten feet away. Wind lashed at his clothes.

Seth darted down the stairway, the whoosh of the vortex close behind. At the bottom of the stairs he turned quickly down the hall toward the grand staircase. It sounded like a hurricane was on his tail. A wave of dust engulfed him from behind as he reached the top of the grand staircase.

Not daring to look back, Seth plunged down the stairs two at a time. Something smashed against the wall just behind him. Howling wind filled his ears. Coughing, Seth felt like he was lost in a sandstorm as decades of dust saturated the air.

At the bottom of the stairs, as he dashed for the front door, Seth glanced back. The vortex had grown. It was floating down toward him across the high entry hall, skipping the stairs and growing taller by the instant. Tentacles of dust stretched out from the center of the whirlwind. An icy gale hurled stinging dust into his eyes.

Seth lunged out the open door and slammed it behind him. Choking on dust, he raced down the steps to the driveway and sprinted across the yard in the direction of the cottage. Only when the manor was out of sight did he relax his pace.

* * *

Kendra sat at the table with Warren, wracking her brains to decide her next move. Mendigo stood guard outside the window. Despite the company of the mute albino and the oversized puppet, she had rarely felt so alone.

Mendigo had proved to be quite useful. After he had gathered fruit for her on the small hill that covered the Forgotten Chapel, the puppet had carried her piggyback to Warren's cottage as dawn began to streak the sky.

But now the day was starting to fade, and she still had no plan, except to keep watch out the window in case Vanessa decided to pay her a visit. Kendra had spread out all the potions from Tanu's pouch on the table. She knew which containers held the bottled-up emotions, but was unsure which emotion was which. The rest of the potions could be just about anything. She had thought about sampling one, but became worried that some might be poisons or otherwise harmful concoctions meant for enemies. Kendra concluded she should save testing random potions as a last resort.

She needed to find a way to free her grandparents. There were tools in the cottage, plenty of items she could use as weapons, but if Vanessa was still controlling Tanu, Kendra had a hard time picturing herself succeeding. Mendigo could help, but Kendra would be surprised if the puppet was able to enter the yard, since he could not enter the cabin. She was pretty sure Grandpa had to grant special permission to any nonmortal visitors. The fairies were permitted in the garden only by his consent.

Mendigo started tapping on the window. She had told him to warn her if anyone approached. What could she do? "Mendigo, protect Warren and me from harm, but stay out of sight until my command."

Mendigo crouched behind a bush near the porch as Kendra made her way to the window. She peeked out, moving her head slowly, and could not believe what she saw. Seth was emerging from the trees, walking up the path to the cottage.

Initially she was shocked. When she recovered, Kendra ran to the door and flung it open, tears of happiness and relief springing to her eyes. "Seth!" she cried.

"Kendra?" he said, stopping in his tracks.

"You're not dead!"

"Sure I am. I'm a ghost. I've been sent back with a warning."

Kendra could not stop smiling. "I thought I'd never hear you say something idiotic again!"

"Who else is with you?"

"Just Mendigo and Warren. Hurry, come inside."

"Ha-ha," Seth said, continuing toward the cottage at a leisurely pace.

"I'm serious," Kendra said. "Come inside. Bad things have happened."

“And I’m serious too,” he said. “Muriel called me back from beyond the grave to deliver a singing telegram.”

Kendra put her hands on her hips. “Mendigo, show yourself.”

The limberjack jumped out from behind the bush. “Holy cow!” Seth exclaimed, recoiling. “What’s he doing here? And why is he taking orders from you?”

“Get inside and I’ll tell you!” Kendra said. “I’ve never been gladder to see anybody. We have a big problem on our hands.”



Satirical Assistance

Seth sat across the table from Kendra, looking totally shell-shocked. After he had told Kendra about the cocoon and passing through Olloch, she had explained how Vanessa had been revealed while he was absent. “So Vanessa was controlling Coulter,” he said. “That was why he suddenly seemed so disoriented. He woke up with the revenant right on top of us, and still managed to save me.”

“If we fall asleep, she may be able to control us,” Kendra said.

“How?” He picked up another cookie from the plate Kendra had left at the center of the table. She had discovered the cookies in a cupboard.

“Since she’s a narcoblix, I think the drumants were a diversion so she could bite us in the night without anybody worrying about the marks. You were bitten by drumants. So was I. So was Coulter. So was Tanu. But who knows if all those bites were actually drumants?”

“I bet you’re right,” Seth said, munching on the cookie. “You know, I fell asleep inside the cocoon a couple of times. Once for quite a while. She might know I’m still alive.”

“To be safe, we better not fall asleep until we solve this problem,” Kendra said.

“You look tired,” Seth said. “Your eyes are getting bloodshot.”

“Vanessa gave me a sleeping drug yesterday, and I slept most of the day. But then I was up all night, and didn’t want to risk napping today.” Kendra yawned. “I’m trying not to think about it.”

“Well, I had a good sleep after Olloch . . . got rid of me, so I should be able to go all night,” Seth said. “I agree we need to free Grandpa and Grandma, but we also need to find the key and keep it away from Vanessa. We have to protect the artifact.”

“For all we know, she may already have the key,” Kendra said. “She might even have the artifact!”

“I doubt it. It will be hard to get past that revenant. I mean, the thing just froze me with pure terror—there was nothing I could do. But maybe Vanessa knows a trick.”

“It can’t be too easy for her,” Kendra said. “I think she sent you and Coulter to the grove as an experiment. I’m not sure she knows what she’s doing.”

“Well, if she sent Coulter, she might send others,” Seth said. “She and that Christopher Vogel guy are here to get the artifact. They’re going to find a way if we don’t stop them. And they might hurt everybody they captured in the process.”

“You think we should go spy on them?”

“Right away. While we still have light. We don’t have time to waste.”

Kendra nodded. “Okay, you’re right.” She stood and put a hand on Warren’s shoulder. “We’re going to the house, Warren. We’ll be back.” He smiled up at her blankly.

“I know some of these potions,” Seth said, indicating the potions on the table.

“Do you know which emotions are which?” Kendra asked.

“I’m pretty sure,” he said. “And I know these ones turn you small. Like under a foot high. And this one is an antidote for most poisons. And this one makes you resistant to fire. Or was that this one?”

“Do you know which one was fear?” Kendra asked. “That might come in handy.”

“This one is fear,” Seth said, picking up one of the bottles. “But we should bring all of them.” He began placing the potions in the pouch. “Oh, and this jar has something important.” Seth unscrewed the lid of a small jar. He dipped his finger in and withdrew it with a pale yellowish paste on it. He sucked the paste off his fingertip.

“What was that?” Kendra asked.

“Walrus butter,” Seth said. “From a walrus on a preserve up in Greenland. Works like the milk. It’s what Tanu uses out in the field.”

“Hopefully they haven’t found the key yet,” Kendra said. “Grandpa hid it in a new place. Of course, we might not be able to find it either.”

“We’ll figure something out,” Seth said. “We can’t really plan until we check out what’s going on. I should be able to use the glove to get a good look.”

Kendra walked to the door, opened it, and spoke to the giant puppet. “Mendigo, obey all the instructions Seth gives you as if I were giving them.” She turned back to Seth. “You ready?”

“Just a second,” Seth said, carefully placing the final potions into the pouch. He kept the fear potion in his hand. “I lost my emergency kit, but gained a bag of magical potions and an invisibility glove. Pretty good trade.”

They went outside. “Mendigo,” Kendra said, “carry Seth and me to the yard as fast and as comfortably as you can, trying not to let us be heard or seen.”

The wooden puppet slung Seth over one shoulder and Kendra over the other. Showing no sign of strain, Mendigo trotted briskly down the path away from the cottage.

* * *

Crouched, choosing their steps carefully, Kendra and Seth approached the yard. Mendigo waited several paces behind them, with orders to retrieve them and retreat to the cottage if they called. Kendra had tried to send him into the yard, but he had been unable to set foot on the grass. The same barrier that had kept Olloch out of the yard was in full effect for the limberjack as well.

Seth squatted behind a leafy shrub near the edge of the woods. Kendra settled in beside him. “Look on the porch,” he whispered.

Kendra raised her head to peek over the shrub, but Seth pulled her down. “Look through the bush,” he hissed. She leaned back and forth until she found a gap that let her see the porch.

“Imps,” she whispered.

“Two of them,” Seth said. “The big kind. How could they get in the yard?”

“That big one looks like the imp from the dungeon,” Kendra said. “I bet they were both prisoners. They didn’t enter the yard from the woods; they came up out of the basement.”

“We’ve seen what they can do,” Seth said, backing away from the shrub. “Imps are tough. We can’t risk them spotting us.”

Kendra retreated with Seth back to where Mendigo stood waiting. The shadows were long as the sun dipped toward the horizon. “How do we get past them?” Kendra said.

“I don’t know,” Seth said. “They’re fast and strong.” He put on the glove and vanished. “I’ll go in for a closer look.”

“No, Seth. They’re on the lookout. They’ll spot you. You can’t hold still and run away at the same time.”

“So we give up?”

“No. Take the glove off.” She didn’t like talking to his disembodied voice.

Seth reappeared. “I’m not sure we have many options. It’s front door, back door, or a window.”

“There’s another way in,” Kendra said. “And we might be able to use it.”

“What way?”

“The brownie doors. They lead in through the dungeon.”

Seth frowned pensively. “But how would we . . . wait a minute—the potions.”

“We shrink ourselves.”

“Kendra, that is the best idea you’ve ever had,” Seth said.

“But there’s a problem,” she said, folding her arms. “We don’t know where the brownies enter. We know they pass through the dungeon and into the kitchen, but we don’t know where to start.”

“My turn,” Seth said. “Let’s go ask the satyrs.”

“You think they’ll help us?”

Seth shrugged. “I have something they want.”

“Do you know how to find them?”

“We can try the tennis court. If that fails, there’s a place where I leave them messages.”

“I wonder if the fairies would tell me,” Kendra said.

“If you can get any to speak to you,” Seth said. “Come on, if we hurry we can get there before sundown. It isn’t far.”

“They really built a tennis court?”

“A nice one. You’ll see.”

Seth ordered Mendigo to pick them up, and then guided the limberjack around the perimeter of the yard to the path that would lead them to the tennis court. Mendigo jogged down the path, hooks jingling. As they neared the court, they could hear arguing.

“I’m telling you, it’s too dark, we have to call the game,” one voice said.

“And you say that makes it a draw?” the other voice replied incredulously.

“That’s the only fair conclusion.”

“I’m up 6–2, 6–3, 5–1! And it’s my serve!”

“Doren, you have to win three full sets to take the match. Count your blessings—I was getting ready to make my move.”

“The sun isn’t even down!”

“It’s below the trees. I can’t see the ball in these shadows. You played some solid games. I’ll grant that you had a fair chance of winning had we continued. Sadly, nature has intervened.”

Mendigo left the path at Seth’s prompting and started through the undergrowth toward the hidden court.

“Can’t we start again tomorrow at the same score?” the second voice tried.

“Unfortunately, tennis is a game of inertia. Restarting cold wouldn’t be fair to either of us. Tell you what. We’ll begin earlier tomorrow, so we can get a full match in.”

“And I suppose if you’re behind and can find a cloud somewhere in the sky, you’ll say there’s a chance of showers and call the game. I’m serving. You’re welcome to return it, or you’re welcome to stand there.”

Mendigo pushed through the bushes at the edge of the tennis court. Doren stood waiting to serve. The racket he had broken while swatting Olloch had been beautifully mended and restrung. Newel stood at the net.



“Hello,” Newel said. “Look, Doren, we have visitors. Kendra, Seth, and . . . Muriel’s weirdo puppet.”

“Would you kids mind if I serve one last game?” Doren asked.

“Course they’d mind!” Newel shouted. “Terribly rude of you to ask!”

“We’re sort of in a hurry,” Kendra said.

“We’ll make it quick,” Doren said with a wink.

“In this blackness, one game could be all it takes to cause a serious injury,” Newel insisted desperately.

“It isn’t very dark,” Seth observed.

“Line judge says we should play on,” Doren said.

Newel shook his fist at Seth. “Okay, one last game, winner take all.”

“Sounds good to me,” Doren said.

“That isn’t fair,” Kendra mumbled.

“No problem,” Doren said. “He hasn’t broken my serve all day.”

“Enough chitchat!” Newel called grumpily.

Doren tossed the ball up and blasted it over the net. Newel returned the blistering serve with a limp lob, allowing Doren to rush forward and hit a winner at a vicious angle. Doren’s next two serves were aces. The fourth serve Newel returned briskly, but after a fierce volley, Doren took the point with a wicked slice that died before Newel could reach it.

“Game, set, match!” Doren trumpeted.

Growling, Newel ran over to the shed and started bashing his racket against the wall. The frame cracked and several strings popped.

“Booooo,” Seth cried. “Poor sportsmanship.”

Newel stopped and looked up. “Has nothing to do with sportsmanship. Ever since the brownies mended his racket, his shots have more zip. I just want to level the playing field.”

“I don’t know, Newel,” Doren said, tossing his racket and catching it. “Takes quite a satyr to handle a racket of this caliber.”

“Relish the moment,” Newel said. “Next time we’ll be playing under the light of day, and we’ll have comparable equipment!”

“Funny you guys should mention brownies,” Seth said. “We need a favor.”

“Does the favor involve demons trashing our shed?” Newel asked.

“I took care of Olloch,” Seth said. “We need to know how the brownies get into the house.”

“Through the little doors,” Doren said.

“He means we need to know where their entrance is so we can get in through the little doors,” Kendra clarified.

“No offense, but it might be a bit of a squeeze,” Newel said.

“We have potions to shrink ourselves down,” Seth said.

“Resourceful kids,” Doren commented.

Newel studied them shrewdly. “Why would you want to get into the house that way? There may be barriers to prevent you. And who says the brownies will grant you access? They keep to themselves.”

“We have to sneak inside,” Kendra explained. “Vanessa is a narcoblix. She drugged my grandparents and took over the house, and will probably try to destroy Fablehaven next!”

“Wait a minute,” Doren said. “Vanessa? As in, smoking-hot Vanessa?”

“As in betrayed-us-all Vanessa,” Kendra said.

“I’m not sure how the brownies would feel about us giving away their secret entrance,” Newel said, rolling his tongue against his cheek and winking at Doren.

“True,” Doren said, nodding sagely. “We’d be violating a sacred trust.”

“I wish we could help,” Newel said, folding his hands. “But a promise is a promise.”

“How many batteries do you want?” Seth asked.

“Sixteen,” Doren said.

“Deal,” Seth said.

Newel elbowed Doren. “Twenty-four, is what he meant.”

“We’ve already got a deal for sixteen,” Seth said. “We could make it less.”

“Fair enough,” Newel said. He gave Seth a sly glance. “I’m assuming you have said batteries on your person.”

“In my room,” Seth said.

“I see,” Newel said, scowling dramatically. “And suppose you get caught and never make it back? We’re out sixteen batteries, and we’ve broken our sacred promise to the brownies. I could live with sixteen up front, but with deferred payment, we’re going to have to up our fee by fifty percent.”

“Okay, twenty-four,” Seth said. “I’ll pay up as soon as I can.”

Newel grabbed Seth’s hand and shook it vigorously. “Congratulations. You just found yourself a secret entrance.”

“So, seriously,” Doren said. “What’s with the puppet?”

* * *

Dusk was deepening when the satyrs, Kendra, Seth, and Mendigo reached the driveway to the main house, not far from the front gates of Fablehaven. Kendra had seen a few twinkling fairies in the woods, but when she tried to get their attention, they darted away.

“Now I’d say it’s getting dark,” Doren said.

“Save it,” Newel replied, kneeling beside a tree and pointing. “Seth, go straight not more than twenty paces, and you’ll find a tree with a reddish hue to the bark. At the base of the tree, between a fork in the roots, you’ll see a good-sized hole. That is the entrance you’re looking for. Don’t blame me if they don’t roll out the red carpet.”

“And don’t tell them we told you how to find them,” Doren said.

“But be a pal and leave this near the entrance,” Newel said, handing Seth his freshly broken racket.

“Thanks,” Kendra said. “We’ll take it from here.”

“Unless you want to help us,” Seth tried.

Newel winced. “Yeah, about that, see, we’ve got a thing—”

“We promised some friends,” Doren said.

“It’s been scheduled for a while . . .”

“We’ve already canceled twice . . .”

“Next time,” Newel promised.

“Take care,” Doren said. “Don’t get eaten by a brownie.”

The satyrs gamboled away and passed out of sight.

“Why’d you even ask?” Kendra said.

“Didn’t think it could hurt,” Seth replied. “Come on.”

They rushed across the gravel driveway. The house was not in sight, so they felt relatively safe from Vanessa and her imps. Mendigo followed a few paces behind them.

They continued in the direction the satyrs had indicated. “That must be it,” Seth said, touching a tree with rosy bark. “There’s the hole. Good thing we found it before it was totally dark.” Seth leaned the broken tennis racket against the tree.

The hole looked big enough to roll a bowling ball into. It fell away at a steep angle. “Get the potions out,” Kendra said.

Seth rummaged in the pouch. He pulled out a pair of small vials. “These should do the trick.”

“You’re sure they’re the right ones?” Kendra verified.

“They’re the easiest to remember—the potion in the smallest bottles makes you small.” He handed one of the vials to Kendra. She frowned at it, her brow furrowed. “Now what?” he asked.

“Do you think our clothes will shrink too?” she asked.

Seth paused. “I hope so.”

“What if they don’t?”

“Tanu said the potions leave him about ten inches tall. So we’d be what, around seven or eight inches? What could we wear?”

“Tanu wraps handkerchiefs around some of his bottles,” Kendra said.

Seth scrabbled through the bag and removed two silk handkerchiefs. “These should do.”

“Hopefully whoever made the potions took clothes into account,” Kendra said.

“Should we sprinkle some on our clothes to be safe?” Seth said. “We have four extra shrinking potions.”

“Couldn’t hurt,” Kendra said.

Seth dug out an extra vial of shrinking potion. “At the same time?” he asked.

“Drink yours first,” Kendra said.

Seth unstopped the vial and downed the contents. “Tingly,” he said. His eyes widened. “Really tingly!”

His clothes suddenly looked very loose. He looked up at Kendra, craning his neck at his much taller sister. He sat down on the ground. His feet slipped easily out of his oversized shoes as his legs shortened. His head sank into his collar. The shrinking accelerated, and he seemed to disappear.

“Seth?” Kendra asked.

“I’m in here,” answered a chipmunk version of his voice. “Could you give me a hankie?”

Kendra placed a handkerchief into the shirt. A moment later Seth emerged, the handkerchief wrapped around his waist like a towel and dragging behind him. He looked up. “Now you really are my big sister,” he shouted. “Sprinkle some on my clothes.”

Removing the stopper from another vial, Kendra sprinkled the contents over Seth's clothes. They waited, but there was no reaction. "Looks like we'll have to save the day wearing handkerchiefs," Kendra sighed.

"They're nice and silky," Seth called.

"You're a nut," Kendra said. She turned to Mendigo. "Mendigo, collect our clothes and our things and watch for us to come out of the house. When we come out, you need to hurry and meet up with us."

Mendigo started tugging at her shirt. "Mendigo, wait to collect my clothes until after I shrink, and leave us with the handkerchiefs."

Mendigo picked up Tanu's pouch and Seth's clothes. "Hey," Seth cried, "let me see if I can carry the glove."

Kendra retrieved the glove from the pocket of Seth's pants, telling Mendigo to leave the glove with them. She handed it to Seth. He draped it over his shoulder and started walking. It looked cumbersome. "Is it too big?" Kendra asked.

"I can handle it," Seth said. "When we turn big we'll be glad we have it. Speaking of which, drink your potion and let's get going. I don't want to turn big and get crushed in the brownie hole."

Kendra unstopped a third vial and drank it. Seth was right, it made her tingle. It felt like her limbs were on pins and needles, as if they had fallen asleep and now feeling was returning most uncomfortably. As she shrank, the tingling sensation intensified. Whenever Seth knew her leg had been asleep, he always tried to poke the tingly limb. It drove her crazy. This was much worse, stinging tingles starting at her fingertips and toes and racing through her whole body.

Before Kendra fully recognized what was happening, her shirt was all around her like a collapsed tent. She crawled to an opening through one of her sleeves. "Close your eyes, Seth," she called, noticing how high and squeaky her voice sounded.

"They're closed," he said. "I don't want nightmares."

Kendra found the other handkerchief, turning it into a makeshift toga. "Okay, you can look."

"You know," Seth said, "if we turn big while we're in the dungeon we'll be trapped down there."

Kendra walked over to one of the empty vials lying on the ground. Grunting and shoving, she tipped it upright. Relative to her new size, it was

nearly as big as a garbage can. “The glass is thick,” Kendra said. “I can barely move this empty one.”

Setting down the bulky glove, Seth tried to lift the bottle. He could barely hold it off the ground. “Too bad we can’t bring a spare,” he said. “We’ll just have to hurry.”

“Mendigo, remember, watch for us and meet up with us when we come out.” Mendigo now looked enormous, like some eerie monument.

Seth slung the glove over his shoulder. “Come on.”

Kendra looked up. Through the gaps in the branches above her, she saw stars coming out. She followed her brother down into the yawning hole.



Brownie Doors

Although the dirt near the opening of the brownie hole was crumbly and loose, the ground soon became smooth and firm as the tunnel sloped downward. Near the entrance Kendra and Seth needed to crouch in some places, but before long the tunnel increased in diameter so they could comfortably walk upright. At first roots poked through the walls and ceiling, but as they descended deeper, roots became scarce, and the floor of the tunnel leveled out. The dirt felt cool against their bare feet.

“I can’t see a thing,” Seth said.

“Your eyes will adjust,” Kendra said. “It’s dim but it isn’t black.”

Seth turned around. “I can see a little light looking back, a very little, but it is pitch black looking forward.”

“You must be going blind, I can see way down the tunnel.”

“Then you take the lead.”

Kendra led them deeper into the tunnel. She wasn’t sure what Seth was talking about. Sure, it was dim, but there was enough light from the entrance even to reveal the texture of the different stones embedded in the tunnel walls.

“Can you still see?” Seth asked.

“Haven’t your eyes adjusted yet?”

“Kendra, it is totally black. No light. I can’t see you. I can’t see my hand. And I can’t see any light looking back.”

Kendra looked over her shoulder. The way back appeared equally as dim as the way ahead. “You see nothing?”

“My night vision is fine, Kendra,” Seth said. “I could see pretty well when I went to the grove, and there wasn’t much light there. If you can still see, then you can see in the dark.”

Kendra thought about the overcast night at the pond when she had assumed light was filtering through the clouds. She remembered seeing into cells in the dungeon that Seth thought were black. And now here she was, deep underground, and despite the dwindling twilight outside, no matter how far they walked from the entrance, it had stopped getting dimmer.

“I think you’re right,” Kendra said. “I can still see pretty well. The light hasn’t faded for a while.”

“I wish those fairies had kissed me a little,” Seth said.

“Just be glad one of us can see. Come on.”

The tunnel wound back and forth several times before Kendra came to a stop. “I see a door up ahead.”

“Does it block the way?”

“Yes.”

“Well, let’s go knock.”

Kendra started forward.

“Just a second,” Seth said. “I lost my handkerchief. No peeking. Here it is. Okay, lead the way.”

A round wall filled the entire tunnel. In the wall was an oval-shaped door. When they got close, Kendra tried the knob. It was locked. So she knocked.

An instant later the door opened swiftly, and she was looking at a thin man about her same height. He had a long nose, leaflike ears, and smooth skin, like a baby’s. He looked Kendra and Seth up and down. “Brownies only,” he said, closing the door.

“What happened?” Seth asked. “Could you understand that?”

“Brownies only,” Kendra translated. “A little guy opened the door, said that, and closed it.” She slapped the door. “Please, we need to get into the house, it’s an emergency!”

The door opened a crack. The little man peered out with one eye. “Now, why would you go and learn Rowian when everyone knows brownies don’t talk to strangers?”

“Rowian?” Kendra asked.

“Don’t play coy with me, young lady. I’ve met a few fairies and nymphs who knew the rudiments of the brownie tongue, but never a miniature human.”

“I’m Kendra,” she said. “I love brownies. You cook wonderful food and you repaired my grandparents’ house after it was ruined.”

“We all do what we do,” the brownie said humbly.

“My brother and I need desperately to get into the house, and this is the only way. Please let us pass.”

“This way is meant only for brownies,” he said. “I may be the least of your troubles. There are magical barriers in place to prevent others from entering the house through our passage.”

Kendra glanced at Seth, who was watching the exchange dumbfoundedly. “But we’re allowed to enter the house, we’re guests there.”

“Curious way for guests to enter.”

“My grandparents are the caretakers of Fablehaven. Somebody has sabotaged them, so we are trying to sneak in to help. We have to hurry. If this potion wears off, we’ll clog up your tunnel.”

“Can’t have that,” the brownie said thoughtfully. “Very well, seeing as you’re brownie-sized, and seeing as you belong to the house, and seeing as you explained yourself so patiently, I see no harm in letting you pass. On one condition. You both must wear blindfolds. You are about to enter a brownie community. Our secrets are our own.”

“What’s he saying?” Seth asked.

“He says we have to wear blindfolds.”

“Tell him to get on with it,” Seth said.

“What’s he saying?” the brownie asked.

“He says he’ll wear a blindfold.”

“Fair enough,” the brownie said. “One moment.” The brownie closed the door. Kendra and Seth waited. She tried the knob. It was locked.

“What’s he doing?” Seth asked.

“I don’t know,” Kendra said.

Just as Kendra was beginning to wonder if she had been abandoned, the door opened. “Two blindfolds,” the brownie said. “And two blankets, more your size. I can’t abide that fine material dragging in the dirt.”

“What’s he saying?” Seth said.

“He brought blindfolds,” Kendra relayed.

“Ask if I have to wear one since I can’t see in the first place,” Seth said.

“Just wear it,” Kendra said. “And he wants us to switch our handkerchiefs for blankets.”

Kendra and Seth traded the handkerchiefs for the blankets, making the exchange in such a way that they remained strategically covered throughout. Then the brownie tied on the blindfolds. “I’ll be your guide, dear,” a female voice said to Kendra. “Put your hand on my shoulder.”

“Tell your friend I’ll be guiding him,” the male brownie said.

“He’s going to guide you, Seth.”

The brownies led them through the door and along the tunnel. Soon the ground became hard. It felt like polished stone. Even with the blindfold on, Kendra could tell that they had entered a lighted area. The brownies gave occasional instructions like “step up” or “duck your head,” which Kendra relayed to Seth. Occasionally she heard murmuring, as if their passage was stirring hushed comments from a crowd.

After they had walked for some time, the glow faded, and the polished floor became dirt once more. The brownies came to a halt. The male brownie removed the blindfolds. They were standing at a door that looked very much like the previous one. “Is it dark?” Kendra asked.

“I can’t see a thing,” Seth said.

“Just follow this passage,” the brownie instructed. “It will lead straight to the dungeon. I suppose you know your way from there. I can’t say whether the barriers will impede you. That risk is yours to take.”

“Thank you,” Kendra said.

“Here are your clothes,” the female brownie said. She held up a lovely dress and a pair of moccasins, all made from the silk of the handkerchief. Kendra accepted the dress, and the female brownie handed Seth a shirt, jacket, pants, and slippers fashioned from the same material.

“Now, that is improvising,” Kendra said. “The clothes look wonderful.”

“We all do what we do,” the female brownie responded with a small curtsy.

The brownies held up the blankets in such a way as to allow Kendra and Seth privacy as they put on their clothes. Kendra could not believe how comfortably the dress fit her.

“Just my size,” Seth said, pulling on the slippers.

Kendra turned the knob and opened the door. “Thanks again,” she said.

The brownies nodded congenially. She and Seth stepped through the door, closed it behind them, and proceeded down the gloomy tunnel. “These are the silkiest clothes ever,” Seth said. “I’m going to use them as pajamas.”

“If you drink a shrinking potion every night,” Kendra reminded him.

“Oh, yeah.”

Eventually the curved dirt walls of the tunnel gave way to stone, and the corridor became more square. The air began to smell less earthy and more dank. “I think we’re getting close,” Kendra said.

“Good—I’m sick of the dark,” Seth said.

“I’m not sure the dungeon will be any brighter,” Kendra said.

“Maybe we’ll find a way to reach a light switch,” he said.

“We’ll see.”

The corridor ended at an elaborately engraved brass door. “I think this is it,” Kendra said. She tried the handle, and the door swung open to reveal a room illuminated by trembling firelight. The source of the light was off to the left along the same wall as the tiny door, so they could not yet see it.

“I can see,” Seth whispered excitedly.

“I think we must have made it past the barriers,” Kendra said.

Seth pushed by her and stepped out into the room. Like the walls, the floor was composed of stone blocks mortared together. Seth stared off to the left. “Hey, it’s the room where they make the—”

A huge, veiny hand suddenly seized him. The glove he was carrying dropped to the ground as Seth was yanked out of sight.

“Seth!” Kendra cried. A second hand shot through the doorway into the tunnel. She tried to dodge the grasping fingers and retreat, but the nimble hand grabbed her without difficulty.

The hand pulled Kendra from the tunnel and lifted her high in the air. At her diminished height, the room looked vast. When she saw the large cauldron bubbling over a low fire, she realized it was simply the room where the goblins prepared the glop. In the wavering firelight, Kendra recognized her captor as Slaggo.

“Voorsh, I caught some strays to sweeten the glop,” Slaggo grated in his guttural voice.

“Are you daft?” Voorsh sneered. “No snatching brownies.” He sat on a table in the corner picking his teeth with a knife.

“I know that, you twit,” Slaggo griped. “They aren’t brownies. Have a smell.”

Kendra was trying to pry apart the fingers that were clutching her. It was no use; they were thicker than her leg and covered in calluses as hard as stone. Slaggo held her up to Voorsh’s snout, and he took a couple of sniffs, slit nostrils flaring.

“Smells like people,” Voorsh said. “Something familiar to the odor . . .”

“We’re Kendra and Seth,” Kendra shouted in her squeaky voice. “Our grandparents are the caretakers of Fablehaven.”

“It speaks Goblush,” Slaggo said.

“Thinks she’s an imp,” Voorsh chuckled.

“You have to help us,” Kendra cried.

“Pipe down,” Slaggo said. “You’re in no position to issue orders. I remember these two. Ruth brought them through here not long ago.”

“Right you are,” Voorsh agreed. “And considering how things have changed . . .”

“What do you mean how things have changed?” Kendra yelled.

“He means seeing as your grandsires are now prisoners in their own dungeon,” Slaggo said, “it might be a fine prank to watch them gobble down their own flesh.”

“You read my mind,” Voorsh gurgled.

“What are they saying?” Seth asked.

“They’re talking about cooking us,” Kendra said. “Grandma and Grandpa are imprisoned here.”

“If you cook us, you’ll pay,” Seth shouted. “You’ll be guilty of murder. Grandma and Grandpa won’t be imprisoned forever!”

“This one speaks like people,” Slaggo grunted.

“It has a point,” Voorsh sighed.

“You can’t cook us,” Kendra called. “The treaty protects us.”

“Trespassers in our dungeon forfeit all protection,” Voorsh explained.

“But the runt may be right about Stan and Ruth,” Slaggo said.

“Course, if Stan and Ruth don’t know, they can’t rightly punish us,” Voorsh mused.

“Why don’t you set my grandparents free?” Kendra proposed.

“They’re the rightful caretakers here. You’ll be rewarded.”

“Vanessa freed the big imps,” Slaggo croaked. “She is master of the situation.”

“Besides, we couldn’t spring Stan even if we wanted,” Voorsh said.

“We have no keys to the cells.”

“So we may as well have a little fun,” Slaggo said, giving Kendra a squeeze that made her ribs creak.

“If you let us go, we may be able to help my grandparents,” Kendra said. “Vanessa has no real authority here. My grandparents will be back in charge sooner or later. And when they are, they will reward you greatly for helping us now.”

“Desperate words from cornered prey,” Slaggo said, striding toward the cauldron of roiling gray sludge.

“Hold, Slaggo, she may be right,” Voorsh said.

Slaggo hesitated at the cauldron. Hot, foul steam fumed up, washing over Kendra. She glanced over at Seth, who returned a worried look. Slaggo turned to face Voorsh. “You think?”

“Stan and Ruth have repaid loyalty in the past,” Voorsh said. “If we spare their spawn, there may be more reward in it than watching the runts boil.”

“A goose?” Slaggo asked hopefully.

“Or better. This would merit much gratitude, and Stan has always dealt with us justly.”

“I’m sure they’d give you huge rewards,” Kendra said.

“You’d say anything at present to save your neck,” Slaggo growled.

“All the same, my ears agree with Voorsh. Stan will likely return to power,

and he has a history of fair rewards.” Slaggo set Kendra and Seth on the floor.

“Could you take us to their cell?” Kendra asked.

Seth looked at her like she was crazy.

“Wouldn’t go over well if the new mistress caught us aiding enemies,” Voorsh said.

“If you take us to the cell, you can be sure Stan will fully appreciate your involvement,” Kendra said. “You can always cut and run if somebody comes.”

“Might not hurt,” Slaggo muttered. “Can you keep your traps shut as we go?”

“Absolutely,” Kendra said.

“Have you lost it?” Seth hissed.

“This could save us lots of time,” Kendra whispered back.

“You’ll deny our involvement if you’re caught,” Voorsh said.

“Of course,” Kendra said.

“Because we could make things very uncomfortable for you if you land us in hot water,” Slaggo snarled.

“If we get caught, we’ll keep you out of it,” Kendra promised.

“Make sure the other one understands,” Voorsh said. “My tongue gets tangled speaking your vile language.”

Kendra explained the situation to Seth, who asserted his compliance. Slaggo stooped and picked them up in one hand.

“Can you hold us a little looser?” Kendra asked.

“Be glad I don’t cripple you,” Slaggo said, slightly relaxing his crushing grip.

“Ask him to grab the glove,” Seth said.

“Could you also get that glove on the floor?” Kendra asked. “We’ll want it when we’re big again.”

“I understood the other one fine,” Slaggo said. “I’ll wager I grasp more languages than the two of you together. What good is a glove?” He bent down and picked it up.

“Better than nothing,” Kendra replied weakly.

Slaggo shook his head. “Be right back,” he said to Voorsh. “Don’t forget to stir the glop.”

“Don’t get discovered,” Voorsh said. “Swallow them if it comes to it.”

Slaggo grabbed a torch and lit it in the fireplace. He exited the room and moved swiftly down the hall. When the hall ended, he rounded a corner and continued. They passed the Quiet Box that Grandma had shown them. Kendra was grateful for each cell they passed, because they were progressing toward the front of the dungeon. If she and her brother returned to their normal sizes before they made it up to the kitchen, they would be trapped underground. Which meant every second counted.

“Here we are,” Slaggo said quietly, setting them down in front of a cell door. “Now, keep your word and don’t cause any trouble for us.” He laid the invisibility glove on the ground beside them. “And if things go well, give credit where it’s due.”

As the goblin scurried away, taking the torch with him, Kendra and Seth wormed through the slot meant for food trays. “Grandma, Grandpa!” Kendra called.

“Is that Kendra?” Grandpa Sorenson said. “What are you doing here?”

“Not just Kendra,” Seth said. “We shrunk ourselves.”

“Seth?” Grandma Sorenson gasped, her voice trembling with emotion. “But how?”

“Coulter woke up just before the revenant got us,” Seth said. “He gave me a magical cocoon that wrapped around me. Olloch swallowed me like a pill. I went in one end and out the other.”

“Which would have satisfied the spell and bound him,” Grandpa said. “What a stroke of good fortune! I can’t say how relieved I am. I have many more questions but little time to ask them. I take it you gained entry through the brownie doors?”

“I got away with Tanu’s potion bag,” Kendra said. “We made ourselves small. Do you know how long it lasts?”

“I can’t say,” Grandpa said.

“Clever children!” Grandma said. “You had better hurry if you hope to enter the house. The spell will not last forever.”

“We want to steal back the artifact key,” Seth said.

“Do they have it?” Kendra asked.

“I’m afraid they do,” Grandpa said. “I was talking with your grandmother, and she does not recall certain recent conversations. Before she was revealed, I believe Vanessa controlled your grandmother to gather information from me. That would explain how she wrote those names in the register. I remember Ruth asking me to confirm where the key to the vault was hidden, as well as to remind her of the combination to access the secret attic.”

“I have no recollection of asking any such questions,” Grandma said.

“With that knowledge, Vanessa should already have the key in her possession,” Grandpa said.

“Do they know where the register is?” Kendra asked. “Can they let more people onto the preserve?”

“I don’t believe they know where the register is now hidden,” Grandpa said. “But they have released at least one of the big imps, a brute who occupied this very cell, the same savage who broke my leg.”

“I thought this was the cell with the imp,” Kendra said. “The one who yelled at me when Grandma showed us the dungeon.”

“That’s right, dear,” Grandma said.

“We had two other giant imps in confinement, so you can bet she released them as well,” Grandpa said. “In addition, she probably has help from Christopher Vogel by now, and I would wager that she is still inhabiting Tanu. You kids will need to use extreme caution.”

“Dale and Coulter are down here in another cell,” Grandma said. “Voorsh was kind enough to confirm that.”

“The goblins almost cooked us,” Seth said. “Then Kendra said that you would reward them if they helped us. So they did. I think they want a goose.”

“I’ll give them ten geese if we get out of this,” Grandpa said. “Quickly, what is your plan?”

“We’re going to get the artifact key and then free you guys,” Seth said. “We have Coulter’s invisibility glove, so when we get big again, we can still be sneaky.”

“At least one of us can,” Kendra said.

“The key to the vault is large, like a staff,” Grandpa said.

“Like five feet?” Seth said.

“More like six,” Grandpa said. “Taller than I am. Vanessa will keep it close. Be on guard; she is most dangerous. Seth, have no illusions: whether or not she is inhabiting Tanu, you stand no chance against her in a fair fight. You have seen the dungeon keys?”

“Yes,” Kendra said.

“We used to keep them on a peg by our bed,” Grandpa said. “She may be keeping those close as well. Depending on how everything plays out, it may be impossible for you to return to us with the dungeon keys. For all but the brownies, there is only one way out of here, so you could easily become trapped down here with us. If worse comes to worst, get the artifact key and flee the preserve. We can hope the Sphinx will find you.”

“If all else fails, leave the artifact key and save yourselves,” Grandma said. She turned to Grandpa. “We had better let them go.”

“By all means,” Grandpa said. “Should the potion wear off before you reach the kitchen, all will be lost.”

“You’ll find that the brownies have a staircase all their own,” Grandma said. “Look for the hole at the base of the stairs.”

“Can you find your way in the dark?” Grandpa asked.

“Kendra can see in the dark,” Seth said.

“I think it’s another fairykind thing,” Kendra said.

“You know the way, then?” Grandma asked.

“I think so,” Kendra said. “Out the door, turn right, then left, then right, then through the door and up the stairs.”

“Good girl,” Grandpa said. “Make haste.”

Kendra and Seth scooted back through the slot in the door. “Good luck!” Grandma called. “We’re very proud.”



Recovering the Key

Kendra held Seth's hand as they raced along the hall. At their current size, the corridor felt as wide as a ballroom. Seth's speed began to flag as they reached the end of the hall where they needed to turn left. "This glove gets heavier and heavier," Seth panted.

"Let me take it for a while," Kendra offered. He handed it over with no protest. The glove was not terribly heavy, but it was hard to hold, like trying to carry a couple of unrolled sleeping bags. Burdened by the glove, she hurried as best she could.

"I wish I had infrared vision like you," Seth said.

"Infrared?"

"Or ultraviolet. Whatever. Is normal light too bright for you now?"

"It's the same as ever. Can we talk later? I'm running out of wind."

They trotted along in silence. The hall seemed endless. Kendra's heart was hammering, and sweat was drenching her silky clothes, making them feel slimy. The bulky glove flopped around as she ran.

"I have to walk for a minute," Kendra gasped finally. They slowed their jog to a walk.

"I can take the glove back," Seth said. Kendra handed it over.

"I still need to walk, just a little," Kendra said. "Hey, I see our last turn up ahead."

“Still a pretty good ways to the door, and then the stairs after that,” Seth reminded her.

“I know, I’ll be good in a second, sorry to slow us down.”

“Are you kidding? I’m tired too, and you carried that glove a long way.” They walked in silence until they reached the hall where they needed to turn right.

“Should we run again?” Kendra asked.

“We’d better,” Seth said.

Kendra was reminded of running laps around the field with her soccer team. She was naturally a pretty good runner, but those first few practices had really tested her. She had almost thrown up a couple of times during the first week. She could run through the stitches in her side and the burning muscles, but once she became nauseated, her willpower to run faded fast. She had been at that point when she asked Seth to stop, and she could feel the unwelcome sensation returning.

She tried to ignore the dank smell of the dungeon. The humid stench alone was enough to make her queasy. She reminded herself that Seth was carrying the glove and doing just fine. The taste of bile rose in her throat. She fought to choke back the sensation until she involuntarily flopped forward, hands slapping the stone floor, and dry heaved.

“That’s sick, Kendra,” Seth said.

“Keep going,” she gasped. Nothing had come up, but she had a foul taste in her mouth. She wiped her lips on her sleeve.

“I think we should stay together,” he said.

“You’ll get big first,” she said. “I’ll catch up.”

“Kendra, I can’t see. I can’t run without you with me. Maybe if you let loose and yack you’ll feel better.”

Kendra shook her head and stood up. “I hate puking. I’m already feeling better.”

“We can walk for a minute,” he said.

“Just for a minute,” she replied.

Before long Kendra was feeling much steadier. She picked up the pace, not charging as hard as before, trying to conserve energy. “I see the door up ahead,” she finally said.

The tall iron door loomed into view. Kendra led Seth to the small opening in the bottom of the door. They passed through the brownie entrance and hustled toward the stairs.

“Do you see the hole Grandma was talking about?” Seth asked.

“Yes, off to the left. It’s small, looks like a mouse hole.”

She led Seth to the hole in the wall near the first step. She had not remembered how steep and numerous the stairs were from the basement to the kitchen. They would barely be able to reach the top of each step. With the glove, scaling the stairs could have taken hours.

Kendra and Seth wriggled through the hole. Inside they found a brownie tunnel like the one they had followed to get into the dungeon, except it was a stairway entirely of stone. The stairs were steep but just the right size for brownies. They started scaling the long staircase two steps at a time. Kendra’s legs soon felt rubbery. “Can we rest for a second?”

They paused, both of them breathing hard. “Uh-oh,” Seth said after a moment.

“What?” Kendra said, looking around, worried he had seen a rat.

“I’m starting to tingle,” he said.

“Give me the glove and run,” Kendra said.

He handed it off and bolted up the stairs. Kendra followed, finding new energy in her desperation. He was ten steps ahead, then twenty, then thirty. Soon he was out of view. Before long she could see where the steps ended. There was a little extra light filtering in through the door from the kitchen.

She reached the top of the long staircase and crammed the glove through the hole ahead of her. Then she squirmed through the hole.

“Kendra, the glove,” Seth hissed from beyond the brownie door. His voice was pitched lower again. She raced to the little door, dragging the glove, and lunged through into the kitchen.

Seth was almost back to his normal size. The clothes the brownies had made lay in tatters. Kendra heard footsteps coming toward them from around the corner. Seth’s face was a mask of panic as he snatched the glove and hastily tugged it on, vanishing instantly. Flashing back into view, he picked up Kendra, and she disappeared as well. They both flickered briefly back into view as Seth grabbed the remnants of the clothes the brownies had made. Then he held still and became transparent.

A second later Vanessa rounded the corner and looked right through them. “Did you hear something?” she asked uncertainly.

“Course not, love,” a male voice answered from around the corner. “You’ve been hearing things all day. The imps are on guard. All is well.” Kendra recognized the voice. It was Errol!

Vanessa frowned slightly. “I suppose I have been on edge.” She walked back out of sight.

Kendra realized she had been holding her breath. It made her feel lightheaded. She started breathing again, as controlled as she could. Seth grabbed a large green dish towel off the counter and wrapped it around his waist.

Suddenly, Kendra started tingling. She slapped Seth’s hand. He held her up to his ear. “I’m tingling,” she whispered.

He tiptoed away from the door. Vanessa had walked away toward the dining room, so he went in the opposite direction. As they entered the living room, Kendra felt the tingling spreading and intensifying. “Won’t be long,” she warned.

He stuck her behind a sofa. As soon as she was out of view, she started pulling off her dress, which was feeling tight. After a couple of moments, the tingling became severe, and she felt herself growing. Before she knew it, she was back to her normal size, her body pushing the sofa away from the wall, the unbearable tingles subsiding.

Seth straightened the sofa. Kendra peeked her head up. “If you hold my hand, will I turn invisible too?”

Seth grabbed her hand and held still. He became invisible, but she did not. “It must just work for small stuff,” he said.

“Try to find me some clothes,” she whispered.

Voices and footsteps were approaching. Seth hushed her, moved to the side of the sofa, and held still.

Errol came striding into the room, wearing the same antiquated suit Kendra and Seth had become familiar with. “A minor setback,” he remarked over his shoulder. “Why not just send Dale?”

Vanessa followed him into the room. “We’re running out of people. Our job here is far from complete. We must conserve. Tanu is a major loss. He was strong as a bull.”

Kendra bit her lip. What had happened to Tanu?

Errol crossed the room and flung himself down on the sofa, kicking off his shoes. "At least now we know what we're up against," he said.

"We should have known last time," Vanessa said. "Kendra awoke me at just the wrong moment, right before I glimpsed what was approaching. Many creatures radiate fear. The feeling was so strong, I suspected a demon. And of course I missed seeing what happened to Seth."

"You're sure he's alive?" Errol said.

"I'm sure I felt him," Vanessa said. "But I couldn't take possession of him. He was slippery, protected. It was like nothing I've ever felt."

Errol laced his hands behind his neck. "Sure he isn't just a mindless albino?"

Vanessa shook her head. "After Coulter and Tanu were attacked by the revenant I lost all contact. It's as if Seth found some kind of shielded area."

"But there was no escape! You saw enough to know that."

"Which is why I'm perplexed," she said. "I know what I felt."

"You haven't sensed him since this morning?"

"True. He could be free, he could be dead, though dead would be a reckless assumption. My instincts tell me something unforeseeable has happened."

"Are you sure you don't want to send the imps out hunting for him and Kendra?" Errol asked.

"Not yet," Vanessa said. "Once the imps pass out of the yard they will not be able to return. If we find the register, that would change things. We mustn't take unnecessary risks. There's too much at stake. I want the imps on guard until we resolve how to handle the revenant. Kendra will surely return to try to help her grandparents. If we are patient and keep careful watch, she will come to us. And if not, she will have to sleep before long."

Kendra fought the urge to leap to her feet and shout at Vanessa. She reminded herself that getting caught would only make matters worse, no matter how satisfying an angry tirade might feel. Not to mention the awkward fact that she had no clothes on.

"You're sure she won't meet up with Hugo?" Errol asked.

"I sent Hugo to the farthest corner of Fablehaven with strict instructions to wait there for at least two weeks. The golem is out of the

picture.”

“Yet the problem of the revenant remains,” Errol mused.

“We know the location, we have the key, we just need to get past the undead guardian,” she said.

“Along with whatever traps protect the tower itself,” Errol added.

“Naturally,” she agreed. “Which is part of the reason I would hate to waste Dale on the revenant as well. I would like to use him to explore the tower.”

Errol sat up. “Then send Stan or Ruth.”

“Or when Kendra falls asleep I can send her,” Vanessa said. “But I don’t want to send anyone until we have a strategy to remove the nail.”

“Can’t you divorce yourself from the situation?” Errol said. “Just focus on the consoling fact that you are not actually in the grove, that you’re just using someone else as a puppet.”

“You’d have to sample the fear to understand,” she said. “It is overwhelming and irrational. It left me utterly paralyzed both times. There is no room for creating intellectual distance. All I intended to do when I was inhabiting Tanu was get a look at the creature and run away, but I lost all bodily control. It poses quite a problem.”

“Perhaps it would do us good to sleep on it,” he said.

“That may be your best idea of the evening,” Vanessa said.

Errol got to his feet. All he had to do was notice that the sofa was pushed a little farther away from the wall than usual, look behind it, and see Kendra lying there utterly exposed. He picked up his shoes. Not five feet away the invisible presence of Seth remained dutifully motionless.

Kendra heard somebody else entering the room. “Still no sign of activity,” a raspy voice reported. It had to be one of the imps.

“Keep a sharp lookout, Grickst,” Vanessa said. “I would not be surprised if Kendra tried to slip into the house under the cover of darkness.”

Kendra could hear Grickst sniffing. “Their stink is everywhere,” he said. “If I didn’t know better, I’d say they were right here in this room, the girl and her brother.”

“They have been, for days on end,” Errol said. “Don’t forget the scent. Keep your nostrils open. Kendra will be getting sleepy and desperate by now.”

“That will be all, Grickst,” Vanessa said. “We are going to turn in. Tell Hulro and Zirt to raise the alarm at any sign of either of the children. Otherwise you can refrain from reporting until sunrise.”

“Very well,” Grickst said. Kendra heard him leaving. Vanessa and Errol were walking away as well.

“Really is a fine house,” Errol remarked. “I rather enjoy lounging in Stan’s bed.”

Kendra could hear them climbing the stairs.

“The shorter our stay, the better,” Vanessa said. “Keep alert. We’ll finalize our plans in the morning.”

Kendra waited quietly, listening to the sounds of Vanessa and Errol moving around on the floor above. She heard a toilet flush, and then the sound of water running in a sink. “We just need to be patient,” Seth whispered.

“Yeah,” Kendra said. “Wait for them to settle down.”

“Do you think Errol is Christopher Vogel?” Seth asked.

“If they haven’t found the register yet, that seems like the only explanation,” she said. “It must be his real name.”

“I’ll be right back,” Seth said.

Before she could protest, he was creeping away. He returned shortly wearing Grandpa’s white bathrobe. He tossed a sheet over the back of the couch, and Kendra wrapped herself in it. “These were in the study,” he whispered. “The cot is still a mess. Nobody will miss the sheet, even if they look. Back in a sec.”

Seth exited the room again. He did not return for a few minutes. When he finally came back, he said, “I checked out the windows. There are twoimps on the back porch, and a big fat one out front. The sides of the house look unguarded. If you slip out through the study window, you might be able to sneak into the woods.”

“We should wait and make a break for it together,” she said. “Nobody is going to look behind the couch between now and when you steal the keys.”

“How long do you think we should wait?” he asked.

“Longer than you think,” Kendra said. “The clock on the wall says 10:47. I say we wait a full hour before you go upstairs, just to be safe.”

“In that case, I’m going to make a sandwich.”

“No way,” Kendra said firmly.

“All I’ve eaten for two days is cocoon pulp,” he said.

“You had snacks at Warren’s,” she said.

“Right, snacks. I wasn’t that hungry then. Now I feel like my stomach is digesting itself.”

“If they hear you rustling around, we could all die. There’s plenty of food at the cabin. I say wait.”

“What if they end up catching us?” Seth asked. “Then we’ll be stuck eating glop! Did you smell that stuff?”

“If we get caught, we’ll have bigger problems than what to eat.”

“I bet I could make a sandwich about ten times quieter than you whisper,” he accused.

“Are you trying to make me angry?”

“Are you trying to make me hungry?”

“Fine,” Kendra said. “Go make a sandwich. We’ve got an hour, maybe you can bake some cupcakes too.”

“I’ve got a better idea. I’ll make us smoothies in the blender. With lots of ice.”

“I wouldn’t be surprised.”

“Fine. You know what? You win, Kendra. I’ll sit here and starve.”

“Good. Starve quietly.”

Time crawled. Seth spent most of the hour sitting invisibly on the couch. Kendra tried to picture what escape route she would use if things went bad. Eventually the hour passed.

“Can I go get the keys?” Seth asked.

“Do we need more of a plan?” Kendra said.

“My plan is to be really quiet and bring the keys downstairs,” Seth said.

“And then only one of us should go to the basement, so at least one of us can get away,” she said. “We don’t want to both get trapped down there.”

“Okay. What if somebody wakes up and sees me?” Seth asked.

“Run for it,” Kendra said. “I’ll play it by ear. Just because they see you won’t mean they’ll know *I’m* in the house. Maybe I can lie low and save the

day after things settle down.”

“Or maybe somebody else will save the day for a change,” Seth said. “Besides, if they find me I bet they’ll search the house.”

“Where’s the best hiding place on this floor?”

“If I were you, I’d hide in the study, like behind the desk. You’ll have quick access to a window that will take you outside. Going out through the side should give you a chance to avoid the imps. If they catch me, you should probably take off. Maybe you can leave the preserve and try to find the Sphinx.”

“We’ll see,” Kendra said.

“Wish me luck. Hopefully my growling stomach won’t give me away.”

Wrapped in her sheet, Kendra walked to the entry hall with her brother. As he started climbing the stairs, staying close to the wall and treading lightly, she went to the study. She unlocked the window and squatted behind the desk. She noticed a letter opener on top of a pile of papers. She picked it up. It felt comforting to have some sort of weapon in her grasp.

All she could do now was wait. Maybe she should be the one wearing the glove and creeping into Vanessa’s room. Seth would never have let her, since sneaking around was more his specialty. But it was an awful lot of responsibility to give to somebody who liked sticking French fries in his nostrils.

* * *

At the top of the stairs, Seth moved stealthily down the hall to Vanessa’s door. A light had been left on in the bathroom, so the hall was fairly bright. The door to Vanessa’s room was closed. There was no light shining underneath it. Cupping his ear against the door, he waited invisibly, but heard nothing.

Gently he turned the knob. It made a faint clicking sound, and he paused. After several slow breaths, he turned the knob the rest of the way and eased the door open. The room was darker and more shadowy than the hall, but he could still see fairly well. Vanessa was lying on her side on the bed beneath her sheet. The blankets were folded at the foot of the bed. Containers full of strange animals were everywhere.

Seth took a slow step toward her bed. A low croak disturbed the silence. Seth froze, turning invisible. Vanessa did not stir. Apparently she was accustomed to animal sounds in the night. That should work in his favor.

Her bed was on the far side of the room. He decided that instead of crossing the center of the room, he would work his way along the perimeter. That way if she woke up, there would be less chance of her accidentally bumping into him.

Seth crept along the edge of the room taking small, quiet steps. The sheet did not cover Vanessa's shoulders, so he could see that she had not changed out of her clothes. Staring at her, he had a hard time picturing her as a traitor. She was so pretty, her dark hair spilling over her pillow.

Seth glimpsed a metal pole under her chin. It had to be the artifact key! She was sleeping right on top of it!

A bird chirped and he halted, watching the narcoblix intently. Satisfied that she remained asleep, he worked his way along the wall, passing numerous cages. Vanessa was facing him. All she needed to do was open her eyes while he was moving and all would be lost. Finally he reached the nightstand beside her bed. Her blowgun lay on the nightstand, along with three small darts. What if he picked up a dart and pricked her? Did narcoblixes have immunity to sleeping potions? It wasn't worth the risk. But he picked up a tiny dart anyhow, for backup.

Another step closer and he was standing over Vanessa. If she stretched out her hand she could touch him. If he reached out his hand he could touch her. There was no way he could get to the artifact key. She was partly on top of it. He would have to wait for her to shift positions.

While he waited, he scanned the room for the dungeon keys. There were many surfaces where they could be resting, on top of cages or terrariums as well as on tables or dressers. He did not see them anywhere. They could be in her pocket. Or tucked away in a secret spot. Or Errol might have them.

Vanessa continued to breathe evenly, showing no sign that she would ever change positions. Maybe narcoblixes were really deep sleepers. She might not move all night. There was simply no possible way he could slide the long key out from under her without waking her up. Most of it was under the sheet with her.

Seth noticed a box of tissues on the nightstand. He removed a tissue. It made a slight sound as he pulled it from the box, but Vanessa did not twitch. Seth stared at the tissue, but it vanished along with the rest of him as he held still.

Wiggling his hand, he stared again at the tissue, figuring out the best way to let it hang. This would be risky. He might very well wake Vanessa up. But he had to make her shift positions. She showed no sign of budging on her own.

Leaning forward, Seth moved the dangling tissue toward her face. Slowly but surely it came closer, until a corner of the tissue brushed her nose. Vanessa smacked her lips and scratched her face. Seth jerked his hand away and held still. Vanessa twisted her head back and forth, hummed softly, and then her regular breathing resumed. She did not alter her position. The key remained mostly beneath her.

Seth waited for a long time. Then he leaned forward with the tissue and again let it gently brush her nose. Vanessa snatched the tissue and her eyes opened suddenly. She had been waiting for it this time! Seth froze, his invisible hand less than a foot from her face. She glanced at the tissue, squinted in Seth's direction, then turned to look the other way. When she looked away, Seth jerked his hand back, flickering momentarily into view. Fortunately her eyes were not on him. It reminded him of playing Red Light—Green Light when he was younger. He and Kendra had to sneak up on their dad while his back was to them. If he caught them moving when he turned around, they got sent back to the start. The stakes were higher, but the game was the same.

Vanessa sat up. "Who's there?" she asked, eyes darting around the room. She looked straight through Seth several times. "Errol?" she called loudly, reaching for her blowgun. On the way to her blowgun, the side of her arm brushed against Seth. She yanked her hand back. "Errol!" she yelled, kicking the sheet off of her.

Striking quickly, Seth jabbed the tiny dart he was holding into her arm. Her eyes widened in surprise when he flashed into view, but she had no time to react. She had been rising out of bed, but instead she hesitated, lips compressed, and then collapsed heavily to the floor. Seth grabbed the long key off the bed. It was quite heavy, and several inches taller than him. He was glad to see that it disappeared along with him when he held still.

Seth could hear Errol thumping down the hall. He leapt away from the bed and stood still as Errol raced through the doorway and saw Vanessa on the floor. “Intruder!” Errol shouted.

Seth realized that Errol would probably suspect he had already fled, so he held perfectly still. Errol briefly surveyed the room, then ran out into the hall. Seth heard the front door opening downstairs, followed by heavy footfalls on the stairs. Would the imp smell him? What should he do?

He heard a door downstairs slam shut. The imp on the stairs grunted urgently. Seth heard Errol dashing down the hall. “In the study!” he shouted. “Bring the intruder to me!”

Seth heard Errol racing down the stairs. Kendra had created a diversion, but now she would have everybody right on her heels. Seth didn’t like her chances. Leaning the key by the door, he picked up a terrarium full of dark blue salamanders and ran down the hall. He could hear them ramming the door to the study.

From the top of the stairs, Seth heaved the terrarium over the banister into the entry hall. He did not stay to watch it hit the floor, but he heard glass shattering like a bomb and Errol shouting. Seth hastily retreated to Vanessa’s room. Picking up the key, he crossed the room, unlocked the window, and threw it open.

Vanessa’s room was above the back porch. Seth dove through the window onto the roof of the porch. He could only hope that the commotion had already brought the imps stationed on the porch into the house. Otherwise he was about to be caught. He closed the window, hoping his pursuers might not be sure where he had gone. For all they knew he could have retreated to any of the rooms, or even gone up to the attic.

He heard Kendra screaming for Mendigo from the side of the house. She sounded desperate. Seth hurried to the edge of the porch roof. The porch was raised above the level of the yard, so even the lowest part of the porch roof was a good ten feet above the ground.

Seth tossed the key onto the grass. Then he found a portion of the roof that stuck out over a thick bush. Turning and crouching, he grabbed the lip of the roof and stepped off, hoping to dangle before dropping. The weight of his body was too much, and he lost his grip, falling awkwardly on his side, but landing in the bush.

Hitting the bush sideways turned out to be a lucky way to fall. He mashed the bush down, and it absorbed the brunt of the impact. Shaken, heart racing, Seth rolled out of the bush, picked up the key, and sprinted for the woods, his oversized bathrobe flapping behind him.

* * *

After waiting in tense silence, Kendra knew they were in trouble when Vanessa started calling for Errol. She opened the window so she would be ready for a quick exit. Then Errol yelled about an intruder, and she realized Seth had not been caught. She heard the front door open and the imp charge up the stairs.

She had to create a distraction. Kendra ran to the study door, opened it, and banged it shut. She locked it and rushed to the window, wishing she had more to wear than a sheet. She put her legs through first, so she was sitting on the windowsill, then turned around and boosted herself backwards. Her bare feet sank into the rich, soft soil of a flowerbed. She dropped the letter opener in the process.

Through the window, she could hear somebody beating on the study door. Wood splintered as the door was rammed with greater force. Not bothering to look for the letter opener, Kendra started running across the grass toward the woods. She heard a tremendous crash behind her from inside the house, like a huge vase shattering. Glancing back, she still saw nobody in the study window.

On the manicured lawn her bare feet did not impede her speed. In fact, she was pretty sure this was the fastest she had ever run, energized by sheer terror. In the woods it would be another story.

She heard something growl behind her. Looking back, she saw a thin, wiry imp in pursuit, having apparently just come through the window. She was about halfway across the yard to the woods, but the imp was running fast.

“Mendigo,” Kendra screamed. “Meet me in the woods and protect me from the imps! Mendigo, hurry!”

Off to her left, Kendra noticed the mellow glow of some fairies, bobbing and weaving in a colorful cluster. “Fairies, please stop the imp!” Kendra called. The fairies stopped moving, as if they were now watching, but did not come to her aid.

At the fringe of the yard, a few paces from the woods, Kendra glanced back again. The wiry imp had gained, but remained twenty paces behind her. Behind the wiry imp, Kendra saw an extremely fat imp scrambling through the window. He barely fit, and fell headfirst into the flowerbed.

Facing forward, Kendra dashed into the outskirts of the woods. “Mendigo!” she cried again. Sharp rocks and sticks jabbed at her bare feet. She crunched through leaves and undergrowth. In some places the ground was squishy.

She heard the imp closing in behind her, snapping twigs and tromping through shrubs. Then she heard a rustling from off to one side. The wiry imp was now only about five paces behind her. Kendra had no hope of outrunning him. She heard footfalls from the same direction she had heard the rustling, only nearer now. Some nearby bushes parted, and Mendigo appeared.

A bundle hit Kendra in the chest, and it took her a moment to realize that it was her and Seth’s clothes along with Tanu’s pouch. Mendigo took flight, launching himself in a flying tackle that leveled the thin imp just a couple of paces from Kendra. They tussled on the ground.

“Mendigo, stop the imp,” Kendra said. “But don’t kill him.”

Looking back toward the yard, Kendra could see that the lumbering, obese imp had almost reached the trees. Mendigo had wrapped up the wiry imp in what looked like a complex wrestling hold. Clutching the bundle of clothes, Kendra tried to decide her next move. What would happen when the fat imp reached them? He was much bigger than the wiry imp. Maybe she could outrun him; he was certainly slower. Neither was the same imp Kendra had seen in the dungeon. Of the three, the imp in the dungeon was the most muscular and looked the most dangerous.

Something else was crashing toward her through the woods from the opposite direction Mendigo had come from. After a moment, she saw that the something was wearing a bathrobe. “Seth!” she cried.

He was carrying a metal staff that had to be the artifact key. He looked at Mendigo wrestling on the ground and then at the rapidly approaching fat imp. “Mendigo,” Seth ordered, “break his arms.”

“What?” Kendra exclaimed.

“We have to stop them somehow,” Seth said.

Mendigo shifted his grip, placing a wooden knee against the wiry imp's back, and then wrenched one of the imp's arms into an awkward position and jerked it briskly. Kendra looked away, but heard the hideous snap. The imp howled. A second crunch followed.

"Mendigo," Seth said, "break his legs, then do the same to the other imp." Kendra heard more disgusting sounds.

She opened her eyes. The wiry imp was writhing on the ground, limbs askew, and the fat imp had almost reached them, plowing through the undergrowth. Mendigo rushed to meet the fat imp. The oversized puppet dodged a punch and flung himself at the creature. The fat imp caught Mendigo in the air and hurled him aside.

Up close, Kendra realized that this imp was not only much broader and thicker than the other imp, he was at least a head taller. Mendigo, scuttling on all fours, dove at the imp's legs, trying to trip him. The big imp stomped at him, then seized Mendigo and slammed him into a tree. One of the puppet's arms came unhinged and spun to the ground.

Seth, who had been invisible, suddenly appeared and bashed the imp in the side of the head with the key. The huge imp staggered sideways and dropped to his knees, releasing Mendigo. The puppet hastily retrieved his arm. The massive imp turned and rose, wheezing, rubbing the side of his head, and glaring with furious eyes. Seth held still, invisible once again.

"Mendigo," Seth said, "use this key to hurt the big imp." Seth flashed into view as he tossed the metal staff to Mendigo. The imp rushed at Seth, but Mendigo sprang into action, swinging the key with much more force than Seth had been able to muster.

The imp raised an arm to block the blow, but his forearm buckled on impact. Whirling, Mendigo clubbed the imp's bulging belly, and then whacked him across the shoulders when he doubled over.

"Mendigo," Seth said, "break his legs, but don't kill him."

The puppet set about bludgeoning the fallen imp, quickly hobbling him. "That's enough, Mendigo," Kendra said. "Only hurt them more if they keep after us."

"You're going to pay for this," the wiry imp snarled through clenched teeth, glaring fiercely at Kendra.

"You asked for it," Kendra said. "Mendigo, pick us up and get us away from the yard as fast as you can."

“And don’t lose the key,” Seth added.

Mendigo hoisted Kendra over one shoulder and slung Seth over the other. The puppet ran away from the scene faster than either Kendra or Seth had seen him run before.

“Mendigo,” Kendra said softly after they had left the crippled imps behind, “take us to back to the cottage as quickly as you can.”

“Did you say the cottage?” Seth asked.

“There’s another imp, and he looked like the worst of the three,” Kendra said.

“Right, but won’t they look in the cottage?” Seth asked.

“Imps can’t enter the cottage,” Kendra reminded him.

“All right,” Seth said. “I knocked Vanessa out with one of her own darts.”

“Then they probably won’t be after us right away. Mendigo, if somebody chases us and gets close, put us down and beat them with the key.”

Mendigo showed no sign that he heard, but Kendra felt sure he had. He continued at a tireless sprint. She did not mind the branches whipping past her and tearing at her sheet. It was much preferable to running barefoot.



Diverging Plans

Kendra and Seth sat at the table with Warren. Seth was finishing a second peanut butter and honey sandwich. Kendra was dumping lemonade powder into a pitcher full of water. She stirred the mixture with a wooden spoon.

The key lay on the table. It was mostly smooth, fashioned out of a dull gray metal. One end had a grip like the hilt of a sword. The other end had little notches and grooves and irregular protuberances. Kendra and Seth could only assume that the complicated end was meant to be inserted into an intricate keyhole.

Outside in the night, Mendigo stood watch, clutching a hoe in one hand and a rusty cowbell in the other. He was under orders to raise the alarm with the bell if any strangers approached, and then to use the hoe to cripple any imps or people who came along.

“We can’t stay here,” Seth said.

“I know,” Kendra replied, pouring lemonade into a glass. “Do you want some?”

“Sure,” Seth said. “I have a plan.”

Kendra started filling a second glass. “I’m listening.”

“I say we go back to the grove, get past the revenant, use the key, and retrieve the artifact.”

Kendra took a sip from one of the glasses. “Just barely too strong,” she said.

Seth picked up the other glass and took a drink. “A little weak, if you ask me.”

“What is your plan again?” Kendra asked, rubbing her eyes. “I’m so tired, I feel like I can barely concentrate.”

“We should go after the artifact,” Seth restated.

“And how do we get past the revenant? I thought it totally froze you.”

Seth held up a finger. “I already figured it out. See, we have that courage potion in Tanu’s pouch. You know, the bottled-up emotion. I think if I take a big enough dose, the courage will counteract the fear from the zombie.”

Kendra sighed. “Seth, he has to mix in all sorts of stuff to get the emotions to balance each other out right.”

“The fear from the revenant will balance it out plenty. You heard Vanessa and Errol. I just have to pull out the nail. I know I can do it!”

“What if you can’t?”

Seth shrugged. “If I can’t, I end up an albino like the others, and you’ll have to make a new plan.”

“After everything that has happened, do you think the riskiest plan imaginable is the best way to go?”

“Unless you have a better one.”

Kendra shook her head and wiped her hands down her face. She felt so weary that it was tough to focus. But obviously they couldn’t just charge off and battle a revenant and then try to survive all the traps guarding the inverted tower. There had to be better alternatives.

“I’m waiting,” Seth said.

“I’m thinking,” Kendra said. “It’s what some people do *before* they talk. Let’s consider the other options besides deliberate suicide. We could hide. I’m not wild about that option, because it just prolongs an actual decision, and I’m not going to be able to keep awake much longer.”

“You have circles under your eyes,” Seth said.

“We could attack. They only have one imp left. Mendigo is a pretty tough fighter. If he had a weapon, he could maybe take out their last imp, and then beat up Errol and Vanessa.”

“*If* we can lure them all out of the yard,” Seth said. “Which I doubt will happen. After they find the injured imps, they’ll be careful. You never know, they might have other tricks up their sleeves. Vanessa could come after us as Dale, for example.”

"I hadn't thought of that," Kendra admitted. "Do you think she's doing that right now?"

"I would be," Seth said. "And this is the first place I would look."

"What if Dale shows up and Mendigo hurts him?" Kendra wondered.

"At this point, if Dale shows up, Mendigo better hurt him. His legs will heal."

"We should probably leave Fablehaven," Kendra said. "Escape and find the Sphinx."

"How? You have his phone number? Know where he hides out?"

Kendra rubbed the side of her head.

Seth looked at her adamantly. "And guess who is probably waiting on the driveway just outside those gates? Your friend the kobold. And that big monster made of hay. And about a zillion other members of the Society of the Evening Star, guarding the gates in case somebody tries to do exactly what you're saying. And probably hoping Vanessa figures out how to let them in."

"Do you have a better idea?" Kendra huffed.

"I told you a better idea. They won't be expecting it."

Kendra shook her head. "Seth, even Tanu and Coulter weren't sure how they were going to get past the traps in the tower. Even if you could defeat the revenant, we'd never make it to the artifact."

Seth got up out of his chair. "Outside of Fablehaven, the Society of the Evening Star can send everybody they have after us. We wouldn't last five minutes. In here, they only have Vanessa, Errol, and that imp. Either way is dangerous. But I'd rather take a risk trying to fix everything than take a risk running away."

"Running for help," Kendra stressed.

"You didn't run away when you went to the Fairy Queen," Seth reminded her.

"That was different," she said. "You and Grandma and Grandpa were about to die for sure, and I had nobody to help me. If I had run away, I would have been abandoning you. I knew I could save you if the Fairy Queen was willing to help me."

"And if we get the artifact we can save Grandma and Grandpa," Seth said. "It probably has powers we can use."

"Nobody even knows what it does," Kendra said.

“It does something. They’re all supposed to be really powerful, letting us control time or space and stuff like that. You didn’t know exactly what the Fairy Queen could do. You just knew she was powerful. Whatever the artifact is, at least it would give us a chance. Would you rather go hide under a log? In the morning, we’d be no better off than we are right now.”

“At least we wouldn’t be dead.”

“I’m not so sure,” Seth said. “All it takes is one of us falling asleep, and we’ll be in all sorts of trouble.”

“I’m not saying we hide under a log. I say we bring Mendigo, and take our chances trying to find the Sphinx. We don’t have to use the driveway; we can climb the gate and loop way around, stay out of sight. There’s a better probability we’ll succeed.”

“How is there a better chance? We have no idea what is waiting outside the gates! We have no idea where the Sphinx is! We don’t even know if he’s still alive!”

Kendra folded her arms. “He’s been alive for hundreds of years and all of a sudden he gets killed?”

“Maybe. These artifacts have been hidden for hundreds of years and all of a sudden they’re being found.”

“You’re exhausting,” Kendra said.

“That’s what you say when I’m right!” Seth said.

“It’s what I say when you won’t shut up.” Kendra stood. “I have to use the bathroom.”

“First tell me we’ll go after the artifact.”

“No way, Seth. We’re leaving the preserve.”

“I’ve got it,” Seth said. “How about you leave, and I go get the artifact?”

“Sorry, Seth. I thought you were dead once. I’m not going to lose you now.”

“It makes sense,” he said with more conviction. “I go after the artifact, you go after help. Both might be long shots, but both only require one of us.”

Kendra’s hands clenched into fists. “Seth, I’m about to lose it. Enough about going after the artifact. It’s crazy. Can’t you tell when an idea is doomed? Are you programmed to self-destruct? We’re sticking together, and we’re leaving Fablehaven. There might not even be anybody on guard out there. You’re just guessing. We’ll be careful, but our best bet is somehow finding the Sphinx. Hopefully he’s already looking for us.”

“Fine, you’re right,” he said curtly.

Kendra wasn’t sure how to respond. “You think?”

“It doesn’t matter what I think,” Seth said. “The fairy princess has spoken.”

“You’re a jerk,” she said.

“Then I can’t win,” Seth said. “I’m a jerk if I agree, I’m crazy if I don’t.”

“It’s *how* you agree,” she said. “Can I go to the bathroom now?”

“Apparently you get to do whatever you want,” Seth said.

Kendra walked to the bathroom. He was being unreasonable. Going after the artifact was insanity. If they were seasoned adventurers like Tanu, it might be a risk worth taking. But they knew nothing. It was a certain recipe for disaster. Running away from Fablehaven was scary too, but at least those dangers weren’t guaranteed. The revenant was there for sure, and so were the traps guarding the artifact.

Kendra massaged her temples, trying to clear her mind. She always got muddled when she was overtired. Part of her didn’t want to leave the bathroom. As soon as she rejoined Seth, they would have to run off into the night with Mendigo and flee the preserve. All she wanted to do was curl up and go to sleep.

Kendra washed her hands and splashed water on her face. Reluctantly she returned to the main room. Warren sat alone at the table. “Seth?” she called.

The potion pouch was open. The key was gone. A note sat on the table, with the invisibility glove beside it. Kendra hurried to the note.

Kendra,

I took Mendigo and am going after the artifact. I will send him back once he takes me to the grove.

Don’t be mad.

Keep a good lookout and lie low until Mendigo gets back. Then go find the Sphinx. I left you the glove.

Love,

Seth

Kendra reread the note in stunned disbelief. She threw it down and ran outside. How long had she been in the bathroom? Pretty long. She had been thinking, and taking her time. Ten minutes? More?

Dared she yell for Mendigo? The night was quiet. A crescent moon was rising. The stars were clear and bright. She heard nothing. If she ordered Mendigo back, would he hear? Would he come? Surely Seth had commanded the giant puppet not to heed any orders from her to return. And since she had told Mendigo to obey Seth, the puppet probably saw their authority as equal, and would obey Seth's preemptive command.

By now, they were probably out of earshot anyway. Mendigo would be even faster carrying only one passenger.

How could Seth be so selfish? She considered going after him, but had no idea which direction he had gone. If she knew where the farthest corner of Fablehaven was, she would go search for Hugo, but again, she would be wandering blind. Seth was going to get killed, and while Mendigo was gone, somebody would probably show up and capture her as well.

Should she hide inside the house, or outside? If they sent the imp, inside would be foolproof. But they knew the imp would not be able to enter the cottage, so if they sent somebody, it would probably be Dale or someone else controlled by Vanessa. Which meant Kendra should find a good hiding place outside the cottage and lie low until Mendigo returned. The glove would help conceal her.

She ran back into the house to get Tanu's bag and the glove. Warren looked at her, smiling vaguely. He had no idea what was going on. In a way, she envied him.

* * *

Seth had discovered that riding Mendigo piggyback was considerably more comfortable than being slung over his shoulder. He had also discovered that Mendigo could run notably faster carrying only one person. In one hand Mendigo held the key, in the other, the courage potion.

Seth had ordered Mendigo to go to the covered bridge, and then to proceed onward to the valley surrounded by four hills. He could only hope the puppet understood where he meant. Mendigo seemed to be running purposefully, so at least the puppet had some destination in mind. Seth had also ordered Mendigo to disregard any instructions from Kendra until he sent him back to her. He had also directed Mendigo to quietly point out any humans or

imps that came near them. He hoped the chances were slim of meeting up with any of his enemies in the woods, but it was possible the imp or others were out hunting them.

The crescent moon gave off enough light that Seth could see fairly well, even without special fairy vision. He had found a flashlight in a cupboard at the cottage, so he had insurance that he would be able to see his adversary in the grove. He had also commandeered a pair of pliers that he had noticed in the tool closet when they had grabbed the hoe for Mendigo.

Before too long Mendigo was clomping across the covered bridge. It had been only two nights ago that Hugo had carried Seth and Coulter along this same route to the same destination. This time Seth would be prepared. That revenant had looked pretty flimsy. With the courage potion to counteract the fear, he should have a good chance.

Back under the trees, Seth lost all sense of where they were headed, and had to trust that Mendigo knew the way. "Get us to the valley with the four hills, Mendigo," Seth said softly. "And be careful with the bottle you're holding. Don't let it get damaged."

They rushed along in silence until Mendigo suddenly veered and slowed, heading toward a clearing. Seth was about to reprimand the puppet when he saw that Mendigo was pointing. The puppet came to a stop behind a bush. Looking in the direction indicated by the wooden finger, Seth saw a silhouetted form slowly walking in the clearing.

Who was it? He was big. Was it Kendra's imp? No, it was Tanu!

Seth burst from hiding and ran into the clearing. Tanu continued shuffling along, oblivious to Seth's approach. Seth ran up to Tanu and stared in amazement. Seeing Warren and Coulter as albinos was one thing. Seeing the large Samoan, whose skin had been so dark, was another. Illuminated by the ghostly moonlight, his pallid skin and white hair were shocking.

"Hey, Tanu," Seth said. "Anybody home?"

The big Samoan trudged languidly forward, offering no hint of acknowledgment. Seth looked back at Mendigo. He hated the thought of leaving Tanu to roam the woods, but Warren had showed up back at the house after he became an albino. At least Tanu appeared to be generally heading in the right direction.

The reality was, time was too short, and his mission too urgent, for Seth to do much for Tanu at the moment. Kendra was back at the cottage nearly defenseless. He needed to get to the grove and send Mendigo back to her.

“Mendigo, come get me. Let’s keep going to the valley with the four hills, fast as you can.” Mendigo raced to him, and Seth climbed on his back. The puppet started running. “But if we come near any other imps or humans, still point them out without giving us away.”

Seth glanced back over his shoulder at Tanu making his way across the clearing. At that rate, even if he walked in the right direction the whole way, he would not reach the house for a day or two. Hopefully everything would be happily resolved by then.

Once again, Seth was crashing through the darkness. He was pretty sure Hugo had gotten them to the valley more rapidly. Just when he was about to despair that they would ever reach the grove, they emerged from a thick stand of trees and Seth recognized that they were in the brush-filled valley surrounded by the familiar hills.

Mendigo slowed to a walk. “Mendigo, take me to the grove at that end of the valley,” Seth said, gesturing toward their destination. Mendigo started trotting. “Fast as you can.” Mendigo sped up.

As the grove drew nearer, Seth contemplated how much he was betting on the potency of the courage potion. The fear potion had made him very afraid, but it was hardly a shiver when compared to the terror radiating from the revenant. Of course, he had sampled only a drop or two of the fear potion, with some other ingredients mixed in to dilute it. He would down a much bigger dose of pure courage, and bring the bottle with him so he could chug more if needed.

Mendigo stopped near the edge of the grove. Seth estimated it was roughly the same place Hugo had stopped. “Mendigo, go just a few steps closer to the trees,” Seth urged.

The puppet took several steps, but did not move forward. He was walking in place. Seth slid off of Mendigo, dropping to the ground. “Mendigo, walk into the grove.” The puppet appeared to be trying to comply, but instead took more steps without advancing.

“Forget it, Mendigo. Hand me the key and the potion.” The puppet obeyed. “Mendigo, return to Kendra as fast as you can.” Mendigo started running off, so Seth shouted after him to finish his instructions, cupping his hands around his mouth. “If she’s not at the cottage, or is in any trouble, rescue her. Hurt her enemies if they try to stop you. Obey her!”

Before Mendigo was out of sight, Seth turned to face the grove. Under the moon and the stars, the grove was brighter than it had been on his previous visit. Even so, he switched on the flashlight. It had a dimmer bulb than the light Coulter had used, but it still made a difference.

Standing alone in the dark, shining his dim flashlight at the ominous trees and their convoluted shadows, was not good for morale. Seth remembered Kendra's certainty that he would fail, and, alone under the stars, he suddenly felt she might be right.

Seth took a calming breath. This was what he wanted. This was why he had run away from Kendra. Sure, he was a little nervous now, but a good dose of courage would remedy the situation. And when the chilling fear of the revenant began to take hold, he would give himself another boost. He had to do this, just as Kendra had to go after the Sphinx. Both propositions were risky, but both were necessary.

Setting down the tall key, Seth unstopped the bottle and tipped it into his mouth. Even with the little bottle upended, the potion dripped out in a weak trickle. He shook the fluid into his mouth until he had emptied roughly a quarter of the contents.

The liquid burned. Once, in a Mexican restaurant, Seth had downed some hot sauce straight from the bottle on a dare from Kendra. It was brutal. He had to stuff his mouth with chips and guzzle water to stem the burning. This was worse—less taste, more stinging.

Seth coughed and swiped at his lips, eyes watering. His tongue felt like he had licked an iron, and his throat felt like a pincushion bristling with scalding needles. Tears leaked profusely down his cheeks. There was nothing to mute the burning, no water, no food. He had to wait it out.

As the painful sensation subsided, a warmth began to spread through his chest. He smirked at the dark trees. They seemed less intimidating. Had he actually been scared? Why, because it was dark? He had a flashlight. He knew exactly what was in there—a skinny ruin of a man so frail that he could flatten him with a sneeze. A creature so used to victims folding out of fear that it had probably lost all ability to contend with a real opponent.

Seth glanced at the long key. Between the flashlight and the potion and the pliers, his hands were full. The pliers went into a pocket, and he managed to hold the flashlight and the potion in the same hand, while grasping the key in the other. He marched across the space separating him from the grove, and soon found himself amid the trees. He was trying not to smile, but the grin would not go away. How had he been worried? How had he let Kendra's

misgivings make him doubt for even a second? This would be absolute simplicity.

Pausing, he set down his things and began throwing punches to warm himself up. Wow, he hadn't realized how fast his right had gotten! His left was pretty good too. He was a machine! Maybe he would give the creature a free swing or two, just for fun. Toy with the freak before he put it out of its misery. Show the pathetic monstrosity exactly what happened to anything that traded blows with Seth Sorenson.

He retrieved his items and continued deeper into the grove. The air became steadily cooler. Seth shone his flashlight beam around, not wanting to give the revenant a chance to sneak up on him. Last time Seth had been helplessly frozen. This time he would dictate exactly how the encounter would go.

Seth began to notice an unusual numbness in his toes. It reminded him of the time he'd gone skiing in ski boots that were too small. He paused, stomping his feet, trying to restore sensation, but instead the numbness spread up his ankles. He started shivering. How had it gotten cold so quickly?

A flicker of motion caught his eye. Pivoting, Seth shone his flashlight at the approaching revenant. The creature was still a good distance away, barely visible through the trees.

The numbness had spread above his knees, and his fingers began to stiffen and feel rubbery. The deadening of his nerves sparked a trace of panic. Was he just going to go rigid without experiencing the same fear as before? Brave or not, if he became paralyzed, he would be in trouble. His vision blurred a little. His teeth chattered. He dropped the tall key.

Seth raised the bottle to his lips. Deciding he should consume all he could while still able, he downed all the remaining potion before tossing the bottle aside. The fluid did not feel as hot as before. Watching the sluggish advance of the revenant, Seth enjoyed the warmth that blossomed at his center and flowed outward, driving away the numbness. Pulling the pliers from his back pocket, he grinned.

No use waiting for the painfully slow zombie to reach him. Seth jogged toward the creature, the beam of his flashlight bobbing. As he got closer, the emaciated figure came into plain view, wearing the same filthy, tattered clothes. The yellow cast to the skin and weeping lesions made the wretch disgusting, but not scary. Sure, the thing was taller than him, but not by much, and it moved like it was on the verge of collapse.

Seth focused on the wooden nail protruding from the side of the revenant's neck. Pulling it out would almost be too easy. Seth wondered if he should do some karate moves to give the revenant a preview of things to come. He had never taken any lessons, but he had seen enough movies to have the general idea.

He stopped jogging about ten paces from the sickly zombie and performed a few fancy punches and a couple of kicks. The revenant kept slowly approaching, mouth twisted in an awful rictus, making no acknowledgment of the martial arts display. Seth flexed both arms, showing the revenant two good reasons to surrender.

The revenant raised an arm and pointed a bony finger at Seth. The shocking cold hit him as completely as if he had fallen into an icy lake. He gasped weakly and his muscles tightened. At his core there remained a warm, confident center, but it was being rapidly eroded. Irrational, gibbering terror was assailing him at the fringes of his focus, trying to smother his self-assurance.



Part of him wanted to collapse and quail. Seth gritted his teeth. Potion or no potion, magical fear or no magical fear, he wasn't going to succumb, not this time. He willed himself to take a step toward the revenant. His leg refused to function at first. He was numb to the hip, and it felt like heavy weights were holding his foot down. Leaning forward and grunting, he managed a single ponderous step. Then another.

The revenant was still pointing at him, and still coming toward him. Seth knew he could just wait for the revenant to reach him, but something told him it was important to keep moving. He took another step.

The revenant was now within reach. The vaguely malevolent eyes held no personality. A putrid stench polluted the air. The arm of the revenant remained outstretched, and the pointing finger was nearly touching him.

Seth's confidence dwindled. He knew his body was about to shut down. He eyed the black, ragged fingernail drawing closer to his chest. The warm feeling had shrunk to a fading spark. Horrors began to fill his mind. Gripping the pliers tightly, Seth lifted his arm and, with a choppy motion, brought the pliers down on the bony finger. The revenant displayed no reaction to the blow, but the arm lowered a bit, and the finger had obviously been dislocated.

Teeth clenched, Seth fought against what felt like tremendous gravity to take a step to the side. Mustering all his strength, he kicked the revenant in the back of the knee. The knee buckled and the revenant fell. Seth stumbled forward and knelt on its chest, feeling prominent ribs against his shins.

The revenant glared up at him. Seth could not move. His arms trembled. The final spark of confidence was dying. Seth could feel the deluge of irrational fear waiting to overwhelm him. In a moment it would. The revenant reached up, both hands moving slowly but purposefully toward Seth's neck.

Seth thought about all the people depending on him. Coulter had sacrificed himself for him. Kendra was alone in the cottage. His grandparents and Dale were trapped in a dungeon. He could do this. Courage was his thing. It didn't have to be fast. He just had to get there.

Seth focused on the nail and began moving the pliers toward it. He could not move quickly. It was as if the air had become a gel. If he tried to go fast, his progress halted. Pushing slowly and steadily, the hand with the pliers gradually advanced.

The hands of the revenant reached his throat. Fingers so cold they burned pressed into his flesh. The rest of his body was numb.

Seth didn't care. The pliers kept moving. Strong, merciless fingers squeezed his neck tighter. Seth gripped the wooden nail with the pliers. He tried to yank it out, but it would not budge.

Seth felt like he was drowning. The spark of confidence was gone, but grim determination remained. The only sensation was the searing pain in his neck. Ever so slowly, his arm feeling distant, hardly connected, Seth began withdrawing the nail, watching it slide out centimeter by centimeter. The nail was longer than he expected—it kept coming and coming, bloodlessly emerging from the hole it had long inhabited. His hand slowed. It felt like the air was congealing from a gel to a solid. The strangling grip of the revenant prevented him from breathing. Sweat beaded on his brow.

With dreamlike slowness, the last of the long wooden nail emerged from the neck. He saw a tiny space between the tip of the nail and the empty hole. For an instant, Seth thought he noticed something flicker across the revenant's face, relief in the eyes, the hideous smile becoming slightly more sincere.

And then the air was no longer solid, and he was falling, and everything went dark.



The Inverted Tower

Wearing a blanket like a shawl, Kendra straddled a thick limb in a tree with a good view of the cottage. The night was just cool enough to make her glad for the blanket, which was currently invisible along with the rest of her. Before climbing to her current perch she had crisscrossed the area touching the boles of several other trees, in case an imp tried to track her scent.

Although she felt exhausted, her precarious position helped motivate her to keep alert. If she nodded off, she would fall about ten feet and receive a very rude awakening from the uncaring ground. She had spent the majority of her time astride the limb either furious at Seth or fretting about him. It was not fair that he had abandoned her and left her vulnerable, nor that he had taken action without consulting her. But she also realized that he was trying to do what he thought was right, and that he would probably pay a heavy price for his misguided bravery, which gave her a reason to rein in her unkind thoughts.

Tense and anxious, Kendra strained her eyes and ears for any sign of an enemy approaching, or of Mendigo returning. She was unsure how she would proceed once Mendigo reappeared. Even though it was too late to save Seth from his fate, a big part of her wanted to go after him rather than flee Fablehaven. At the same time, she knew that if she could find the Sphinx, it might be her best chance to rescue her grandparents and maybe

even discover a way to restore Seth, Tanu, Coulter, and Warren from their albino states.

Waiting impatiently on the limb, Kendra was stunned to see Warren climb out onto the observation platform atop the cottage. She watched him in astounded silence as he stretched and rubbed his arms. The night was too dim for her to observe details, but he appeared to be moving about like a normal person.

“Warren!” she hissed.

He jumped and turned toward her. “Who’s there?” he asked.

She was so surprised to hear him speak that it momentarily prevented her from answering. “You can talk! Oh my gosh! What happened?”

“Of course I can talk. I’m sorry—who are you?”

“I’m Kendra.” She couldn’t believe it. He seemed perfectly fine.

“I’m going to need a little more to go on.” He squinted in her direction. The night probably looked darker to him than it did to her, and of course she was invisible.

“I’m Kendra Sorenson. Stan and Ruth are my grandparents.”

“If you say so. What compelled you to hide in a tree in the middle of the night? Can you tell me how I got here?”

“Meet me at the back door,” Kendra said. “I’ll be there in a second.” Warren had somehow been cured! She was no longer alone! She slid off the limb and climbed down from the tree. Taking off the glove, she walked out from among the trees and through the garden to the back door, where Warren met her.

Standing in the doorway, he studied her. He looked even more handsome now that he had possession of himself. His striking eyes were a silvery hazel. Had they been that color before? “It’s you,” he said in curious wonder. “I remember you.”

“From when you were mute?” she asked.

“Was I mute? That’s a first. Come inside.”

Kendra entered. “You were a mute albino for a few years.”

“Years?” he exclaimed. “What year is it?”

She told him and he looked flummoxed. They walked to the table in the main room.

He ran a white hand through his thick hair, then stared at his palm. "I thought I was looking sort of bleached," he said, flexing his fingers. "The last thing I remember was something coming toward me in the grove. It could have been yesterday. I was overcome by a panic like I had never known, and my mind withdrew to a dark place. I felt nothing there, hemmed in by pure terror, disconnected from my senses, retaining a groggy semblance of self-awareness. Near the end I saw you, wreathed in light. But it felt like hours lapsing, not days, certainly not years."

"You've been catatonic," Kendra said. "There is a revenant in the grove, and everybody who goes there ends up like you did."

"I haven't wasted away too terribly," he said, patting himself. "I feel a tad slimmer, but not withered like I should be after years in a coma."

"You could move around, but always in a daze," Kendra explained. "Your brother Dale made sure you got exercise. He took good care of you."

"Is he here?"

"He's locked in the dungeon with my grandparents," Kendra said. "The entire preserve is in danger. Members of the Society of the Evening Star have taken over the house. One of them is a narcoblix, so I've been awake for a couple of days straight. They are trying to get the artifact."

He raised his eyebrows. "You're saying there isn't going to be a Welcome-Back-from-Your-Coma Party?"

Kendra smiled. "Until we rescue the others, I'm all you get."

"Sooner or later, I want cake and ice cream. You mentioned the artifact. Do they know where it is?"

She nodded. "They weren't sure what to do about the revenant. My brother went to fight it. Since you're suddenly awake . . . I think he must have defeated it."

"Your brother?"

"My little brother," she said, suddenly rather proud of him. "He took off with the key to the tower and a crazy plan to use a courage potion to counteract the fear radiating from the revenant. I thought he was nuts, but it must have worked."

"He has the key to the inverted tower?" Warren asked.

"We stole it from Vanessa. She's the narcoblix."

"Your brother intends to enter the tower?"

“He wants to get the artifact before they do,” Kendra said.

“How old is he?”

“Twelve.”

Warren looked astonished. “What kind of training does he have?”

“Not much. I’m worried about him.”

“You should be. If he goes into that tower alone, he will not emerge alive.”

“Can we go after him?” Kendra asked.

“Sounds like we’d better.” He dropped his gaze to his hands, shaking his head. “So now I’m albino? Don’t stand too close; my luck might rub off. I set out, seems like yesterday, to retrieve the artifact. That was what led me to the grove. I knew a danger lurked there, but the overwhelming fear took me off guard. Now, after losing years of my life in a panic-induced trance, I get to pick up right where I left off.”

“Why were you after the artifact?”

“It was a clandestine commission,” Warren said. “We had reason to believe the secret of Fablehaven might have been breached, so I was charged with removing and transferring the artifact.”

“Who had you do that?”

Warren gave her a measuring stare. “I’m a member of a covert organization that combats the Society of the Evening Star. I can’t say any more.”

“The Knights of the Dawn?”

Warren tossed up his hands. “Nice. Who told you that?”

“Dale.”

Warren shook his head. “Telling that guy a secret is like writing it across the sky. Anyhow, yes, we had reason to suspect Fablehaven had been discovered by the Society, and I was supposed to locate the artifact.”

“Ready to finish what you started?”

“Why not? Looks like things fell apart around here without me. Time to put Humpty back together again. None of my gear is where I left it, but ill-equipped or not, we’d better hurry if we hope to catch your brother before he enters the tower. I take it Hugo isn’t around.”

“Vanessa sent him to the farthest corner of Fablehaven with orders to stay put,” Kendra said.

“The stables are far enough from here that getting a horse will save us no time. I know the way to the valley. You up for a night hike?”

“Yes,” she said. “Mendigo should return soon. He’s an enchanted puppet the size of a man, and can help us get there faster.”

“An enchanted puppet? You’re not exactly an average teenager, are you? I bet you’ve got some stories to tell.”

Kendra was pleased by the admiration in his voice, and hoped it wasn’t showing on her face. Why was she thinking about the moment she had kissed him? She was suddenly very conscious of the way she was standing, and had no idea what to do with her hands. She had to stop noticing how cute he was. This was the wrong time for silly crushes! “One or two,” she managed to say.

“I’m going to scavenge for equipment,” Warren said, hurrying over to the cupboards.

“I have a glove that makes me invisible when I hold still,” Kendra said. “And several magical potions, though I’m not sure what they do.”

“Of course you do,” he said, rifling through some drawers. “Where did you get all that?”

“The glove belonged to a man named Coulter.”

“Coulter Dixon?” he asked urgently. “Why do you speak of him in the past tense?”

“He became a mute albino like you. Which probably means he’s fine now, except that he’s locked up in the dungeon with Dale.”

“Jackpot!” Warren announced.

“What?”

“Cookies.” He stuck one in his mouth. “What about the potions?”

“A guy named Tanu. He’s a former mute albino too now, but I don’t know where he is.”

“I’ve heard of Tanu the potion master,” Warren said. “Never met him.”

Just then Kendra heard a faint jingling of hooks. She ran to the front door. Mendigo came to a halt beside the porch. “Our ride is here,” Kendra said.

“One minute,” Warren called. He returned promptly with a coil of rope looped over one shoulder and an ax in his hand. “Best weapon I could find,” he said, hefting the ax.

“Mendigo can carry us,” she said. “He’s stronger than he looks.”

“That may be, but we’ll travel faster if I run alongside. Off we go, then.”

“Mendigo,” Kendra said. “Carry me to the place you just took Seth, fast as you can. And don’t lose Warren.” She pointed at Warren for emphasis. She scrambled up onto Mendigo’s back and they set off at a brisk pace.

Warren did a good job keeping up at first, but he was nearly running at a full sprint, and before long he was gasping and wheezing. Kendra ordered Mendigo to carry him as well, and Warren consented. “I don’t have the wind I used to, or the legs,” he apologized.

Warren was considerably bigger than Seth or Kendra, and Mendigo did not run quite as speedily while carrying him. Occasionally Warren insisted on running for a minute or two, trying to maximize their pace.

The night wore on. At last they reached the valley. The stars in the east were growing faint as the sky began to pale. Mendigo soon reached the unseen boundary that he could not cross.

“He can’t enter the grove, just like Hugo,” Warren remarked. “If Hugo had been with me that night, I would not have lost those years.”

“Set us down, Mendigo,” Kendra said. “Guard the grove from all intruders.”

“What have we here?” Warren murmured, stooping and examining the ground.

“What?” Kendra said.

“I think your brother was here. Follow me.” Warren jogged toward the trees, clutching the ax.

Kendra rushed to keep up. “Could there be other dangers in the grove?” she asked.

“Doubtful,” Warren said. “This has been the revenant’s domain since the hiding of the artifact and the founding of Fablehaven. Few would dare tread this cursed ground.”

“Wait a second,” Kendra said. “Here’s Seth’s emergency kit. He lost it the first time he came to the grove.” Kendra retrieved the cereal box from where it lay.

“First time?” Warren asked.

“Long story,” Kendra said.

“Look here,” Warren said. “The key. Your brother is not inside the tower. He’s probably injured or spent. We’d better hurry.”

They trotted through the trees. Warren held the ax in one hand, the key in the other. “What’s that up ahead?” Warren said. “A flashlight?”

Kendra saw the glow as well, low to the ground. As they hurried nearer, she saw that it was indeed a fallen flashlight. Gauging by the faintness of the bulb, the batteries were nearly depleted. Beside the flashlight lay a skeleton clad in rags. And atop the skeleton lay her brother, facedown.

Warren knelt beside Seth, felt his wrist for a pulse, and rolled him over. One of Seth’s hands remained closed around a pair of pliers that held nothing. The flashlight revealed ugly mottled marks on Seth’s throat. Warren leaned in for a closer look. “His neck is bruised and burned, but he’s breathing.”

“Shouldn’t Vanessa be in control of him?” Kendra asked. “You know, the narcoblix?”

“This is no natural sleep,” Warren said. “She may have power over him, but she can’t animate limbs that refuse to function. He paid a severe price to best the revenant—it was evidently a very close contest. Potion or no potion, your brother must have the heart of a lion!”

“He’s very brave,” Kendra said, tears pooling in her eyes. Her lips trembled. “Can I borrow the light?” Warren handed her the flashlight and she found a small potion in the cereal box. “He was very proud that Tanu gave him a potion that could boost his energy in an emergency.”

“That might do him good,” Warren said. He uncapped the bottle, propped up Seth’s head, and poured some of the fluid into his mouth. Seth spluttered and coughed. After a moment, Warren gave him more, which he gulped.

Seth’s eyes opened, and his brow furrowed. “You!” he said weakly, his voice raspy.

“Get out of him, hag,” Warren spat.

Seth smiled eerily. And then his eyes rolled white. “What happened?” he gasped, voice still raspy. “The revenant?”

“You succeeded,” Warren said.

“You’re healed,” Seth murmured perplexedly, staring at Warren.
“Didn’t know . . . that would happen. Kendra. You came.”

“Ask him something only he would know,” Warren said. “This could be a ruse.”

Kendra thought for a moment. “What dessert did you hate in your school lunch last year?”

“Cherry cobbler,” he said weakly.

“What was your favorite shadow puppet Dad used to make?”

“Chicken,” he said.

“It’s him,” Kendra said confidently.

“Can you sit up?” Warren asked.

Seth’s head bobbed slightly forward. His fingers twitched. “I feel like I’ve been run over by a steamroller. Like everything . . . has been squished out of me. My throat hurts.”

“He needs time to recuperate,” Warren said. “And I need to get into the tower. The narcoblix knows the way is open. The only reason she would have released Seth is because she is already on her way here. Kendra, you mentioned that a great imp is helping her, along with another man, but she may have more contacts than them on the preserve. I should be able to navigate the traps. Let’s have Mendigo take you and your brother to a safe place.”

“I want to come,” Seth croaked.

“You’ve done enough today,” Warren said. “Time to pass off the torch to others.”

“Give me more of that potion,” Seth said.

“More of that potion won’t change your condition,” Warren said.
“Though Kendra should probably have a dose, to help her keep awake.”

Kendra took a sip. Almost instantly she felt a burst of alertness, as if she had been slapped.

Warren scooped his arms under Seth, lifting him in a cradled position. Kendra started collecting the key and the ax, but Warren told her to leave them. He was walking with quick steps back toward Mendigo.

“Should I go into the tower with you, Warren?” she asked, catching up.

“Too dangerous,” he said.

“I may be able to help,” she said. “Last year, I visited the Fairy Queen’s shrine on the island in the pond and raised a fairy army to save Fablehaven from a demon named Bahumat.”

“What?” Warren sputtered.

“She did,” Seth confirmed.

“You do have stories!” Warren said.

“The fairies left me with certain gifts,” Kendra continued, not wanting to specify that she was fairykind. “I can see in the dark, and speak all the languages the fairies can. I don’t need the milk anymore to see magical creatures. And my touch can recharge magical objects that are out of energy. The Sphinx seemed to think that might come in handy for some of the artifacts.”

“It very well might,” Warren said. “It has been suggested that the artifacts were deliberately drained of energy as an additional safeguard.”

“Without me you might not be able to use the artifact even if you find it,” Kendra said.

“I believe I can successfully negotiate the traps in the tower,” Warren said. “But that is without knowing what they are. I’m not infallible, as the grove has aptly proven. Do you understand the possible dangers of accompanying me?”

“We could both die,” Kendra said. “But there is danger everywhere at Fablehaven today. I’ll come with you.”

“An extra pair of eyes and hands could make a difference,” Warren conceded. “And the ability to charge the artifact, whichever one it is, could make all the difference. We’ll trust Mendigo to watch over Seth.”

“This is no fair,” Seth muttered.

“Do you want your glove back?” Kendra asked.

“You’ll need it more,” he said firmly.

They emerged from the grove and hurried to Mendigo. Warren suggested that Kendra have Mendigo take Seth to the stables. Kendra gave orders for Mendigo to take Seth to the stables and watch over him, keep him safe from harm, and not allow him to wander off for a full day unless otherwise instructed. Mendigo trotted away, cradling Seth.

Warren and Kendra ran back to the dry skeleton of the revenant and retrieved the key and the ax. Kendra followed Warren deeper into the grove.

There was little undergrowth, but the deeper they went, the closer the trees grew together, and the heavier they were draped with moss and mistletoe. They reached a place where the trees grew so snugly that their branches interlocked in such a way as to almost form a wall.

When Warren shouldered through the living barrier, they found a small clearing ringed by trees, illuminated by a warm, predawn glow. A sizable raised platform of reddish stone dominated the area, looking almost like an outdoor stage. Stone stairs on one side of the platform granted easy access.

Up the steps Warren charged, with Kendra at his heels. Despite the ubiquitous wildflowers and weeds in the clearing, the stone platform was untouched by vegetation. The smooth surface was flecked with black and gold. At the center of the spacious platform was a round socket, surrounded by multiple circular grooves that radiated out concentrically to the edge of the platform. About four feet separated each of the dark, narrow grooves. From above, the grooves would look like a target, with the socket at the center of the bull's-eye.

Warren placed the complicated end of the key into the round socket. He had to twist the key back and forth, lining up various protuberances with notches in the socket to gradually work it in deeper. Once the tall key was approximately a foot into the hole, it clicked home.

"You sure you're up for this?" Warren asked. "There will be no turning back once we go inside."

"What do you mean?" Kendra asked.

"These sorts of places are designed so that unless you make it to the end and claim your prize, you do not make it out alive. The designers don't want explorers solving the puzzle piece by piece. The traps guarding the way back will be much less forgiving than the traps protecting the way forward. Until we reach the artifact."

"I'm coming," Kendra said.

Face reddening with exertion, Warren gripped the handle of the key tightly and began turning it. The key rotated 180 degrees and stopped.

The platform shuddered. It became apparent that the circular grooves marked divisions between concentric rings of stone when the outer ring fell away into darkness, followed by the next, and the next, and the next. The massive rings thundered as they struck the ground.

Warren pulled Kendra near him, standing atop the innermost circle with the key. Though the other rings all fell, the innermost never dropped. Peering down, Kendra saw that the outermost ring had fallen the farthest, with each ring thereafter plummeting a shorter distance, so that all together they formed a conical stairway. From the outside of the platform, it was at least a thirty-foot drop to the floor of the chamber. From the center where Kendra and Warren stood, the next ring was only four feet lower, the next four feet lower again, and so forth down to the floor.

“They just don’t build entrances like they used to,” Warren said. He tugged on the key, and, with a musical ring of steel, the portion of the key in the socket separated from the rest of it. Now instead of ending in a complicated series of protuberances and notches, the key ended in a slender, double-edged spearhead. “Would you look at that?”

“Can’t be good,” Kendra said.

“Yeah, it probably turns into a weapon for a reason,” Warren said, looking down into the chamber. “I don’t see any trouble yet.”

“I’m putting on the glove,” Kendra said. She vanished.

“Not bad,” Warren said.

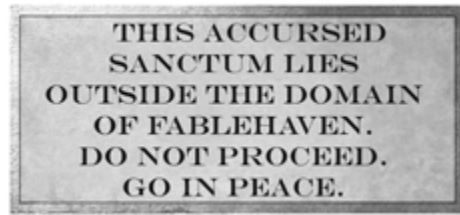
Kendra waved at him, reappearing as she moved. “It only works when I hold still.”

“Do you know what any of the potions do?” Warren asked.

“I know a couple that would make us about eight or nine inches tall,” she said. “And I know some are bottled-up emotions, although I’m not sure which is which. Seth might know a few others. We should have asked him.”

Warren began climbing down from ring to ring. “As a last resort, you can always try a random potion,” he said. “Hopefully it won’t come to that.”

The chamber was not much larger than the widest ring of stone. The floor appeared to be a single slab of bedrock. There was nothing in the chamber except a pair of doors at opposite ends. One wall was covered in writings in various languages, including a few repeated messages in English. Kendra assumed the other messages restated the same thing in their respective languages.



“Why did they write it in English so many times?” Kendra asked.

“I only see it in English once,” Warren said.

“Oh, fairy languages,” she said.

They reached the bottom ring. “Stay near me,” Warren instructed.

“Step only where I step. Be ready for anything.” He tapped the ground with the handle of the key before stepping down. Kendra followed him.

“Which door should we try?” Kendra asked.

“You pick,” he said. “It’s a toss-up.”

Kendra pointed at one of the doors. Warren led the way, prodding the floor with the key like a blind man. The door was of plain, heavy wood bound in iron, and appeared to be in good repair. Warren probed the ground off to one side and had Kendra stand there holding the ax. Standing still, she disappeared. Holding the key like a spear, he pulled the door open.

Nothing waited behind the door except a stairway curling downward. Warren got out the dying flashlight. He tried to tap the top stair with the handle of the key, but the handle went right through it.

“Kendra, look,” Warren said. The handle of the key disappeared through the first few steps. “False stairs. Probably masking a drop of hundreds of feet.”

They crossed the room and repeated their cautious actions at the other door. Again the door opened to a stairway, and again the stairs were only an illusion. Warren leaned out far, testing with the key, to check if perhaps only the first few stairs were counterfeit, but nothing within reach proved to be tangible.

Warren led the way around the perimeter of the room, tapping the floor and the walls. They reached a place where the key passed through the wall. Warren leaned through the illusion, and Kendra heard him tapping with the key.

“Here is the genuine stairway,” he said. Kendra passed through the insubstantial wall and saw a stone stairway winding downward. White stones set in the walls emitted a soft light.

“You never know what might be a mirage in places like this,” Warren said. He poked one of the glowing stones with the key. “Ever seen a sunstone?”

“No,” Kendra said.

“So long as one stone sits under the sun, all the sister stones share the light,” he said. “It’s probably atop one of the nearby hills.”

As they descended the stairs, they found a few places where illusionary steps disguised gaps in the stairway. Warren helped Kendra leap across the empty places. Finally they reached the bottom of the stairs and another door.

Again Warren had Kendra move over to one side as he opened the door. “Strange,” he murmured, testing the ground. Warren stepped through the doorway. “Come on, Kendra.”

She peeked through the doorway. The room was large and circular, with a domed ceiling. White stones set in the ceiling illuminated the scene. Deep, golden sand covered the floor. On the far side of the room a door was painted on the wall. On the left side of the room murals of three monsters decorated the wall, with another three on the right side. Kendra saw a blue woman with six arms and the body of a serpent, a Minotaur, a huge Cyclops, a dark man who from waist up looked human and from waist down had the body and legs of a spider, an armored snakelike man wearing an elaborate headdress, and a dwarf in a hooded cloak. All the images, though a tad faded, had been rendered with supreme skill.

Warren raised a hand for Kendra to halt. The key sank into the sand in front of him. “There are places where the sand becomes treacherous,” he said. “Watch your step.”

In order to avoid sinking in quicksand, they took a circuitous path to the painted door on the far side of the room. The painting depicted a door of solid iron with a keyhole below the handle. Hesitantly, Warren touched the painting. The image of the door rippled for an instant, and suddenly the door became real, a mural no longer.

Warren whirled, key held high, and eyed the other murals in the room. Nothing happened. Finally he turned back to the door and tried the handle.

The door was locked. “Notice anything all the creatures on the wall have in common?” Warren asked.

Kendra focused on comparing them. “A key around their necks,” she said. The keys were not obvious. They were small, and subtly drawn, but each painted being had one.

“Any theories on how we get through the door?” Warren asked, obviously with an answer in mind.

“You’ve got to be kidding,” Kendra said.

“Don’t we both wish,” he said. “The old guys who designed this place sure knew how to throw a party.” He led Kendra around the perimeter of the room, avoiding quicksand, and scrutinized the depiction of each individual creature.

“The keys appear identical to me,” he said after studying the dwarf. “I think the game is selecting which foe we believe we can overcome.”

“I hate to be cruel,” Kendra said, “but I’m thinking the dwarf.”

“I would choose him last of all,” Warren said. “He carries no weapon, which leads me to believe he must be strong in magic. And he looks the easiest at first glance, which almost certainly means he is the most deadly.”

“Then who?” Kendra asked. The Minotaur carried a heavy mace. The Cyclops wielded a cudgel. The blue woman held a sword in each hand. The hobgoblin, as Warren had named the snakelike man, clutched a pair of axes. And the half-spider man bore a javelin and a whip.

“I suspect the Minotaur may be the lesser of these evils,” Warren said at length. “I would no sooner choose the woman than the dwarf, and a Cyclops is nearly as adroit as he is strong. Of the others, the Minotaur carries the most cumbersome weapon. His mace will limit his reach and hamper his ability to avoid the tip of my spear.”

“You mean your key,” Kendra said.

“We’ll use one key to get another.”

Kendra regarded the Minotaur. Black fur, wide horns, bulky musculature. He stood a full head taller than Warren. “You think you can take him?” Kendra asked.

Warren was testing the sand and outlining the sinkholes. “I’ll want you to stand still,” he said. “The Minotaur may catch your scent—I want to keep him in doubt as to your location. You’ll keep the ax, and if I should lose the

key, you may be able to toss it to me. If I should fall, the Minotaur will roam the room searching for you. If you keep still, you may have one free swing at him.”

“But you think you can take him?” Kendra repeated.

Warren looked at the image of the Minotaur and hefted the key. “Why not? I’ve made it through some tight scrapes before. I would give a lot for a few of my regular weapons. Maybe you could use the ax to help me mark all the quicksand?”

They spent much longer than Kendra liked delineating the areas of treacherous sand. She knew Vanessa and Errol were on their trail. Once the sand had been marked, Warren positioned Kendra so that the largest region of quicksand was between her and the Minotaur. He approached the mural.

“You ready?” Warren asked.

“I guess,” Kendra answered, squeezing the handle of her invisible ax, her heart pounding.

“Maybe I can get in a cheap shot right at the start,” he said, touching the image of the Minotaur and raising the key, holding it ready to strike. The mural wavered for a moment and then vanished. The sharp tip of the key clinked against the wall, and the Minotaur appeared behind Warren.

“Behind you!” Kendra screamed.

Warren ducked and lunged to the side, narrowly avoiding a blow that would have brained him. The Minotaur swung the mace briskly. The weapon was big and heavy, but the Minotaur was strong enough that it did not look very cumbersome.

Warren faced the Minotaur, staying a few paces away, key held ready. “Why not just hand over the key?” Warren asked. The Minotaur snorted. From across the room, Kendra could smell the beast, an odor like livestock.

The Minotaur charged, and Warren nimbly danced away. Warren pulled back his arm as if to throw the key, and the Minotaur raised his mace protectively. Feinting like he was hurling the key, Warren leapt closer and used the long reach of the key to scratch the Minotaur on the snout.

The Minotaur roared, chasing Warren around the room. Warren ran from his pursuer, trying his best to lead the Minotaur toward quicksand while keeping the beast away from Kendra. Either the Minotaur understood what the lines in the sand meant, or he instinctively knew where not to step, because he skirted the quicksand just as effectively as Warren.

Sniffing the air, the Minotaur turned toward Kendra. “Over here, you coward!” Warren shouted, moving in closer and brandishing the key. The Minotaur strode boldly toward Warren, holding the mace off to one side, tempting Warren by leaving his chest exposed.

After a few feints, Warren took the bait, driving the tip of the key toward the Minotaur’s chest. The Minotaur grabbed the key just below the slender spearhead with his free hand and wrenched it from Warren’s grasp, yanking him closer in the process, and swung the mace.

Warren saved himself by diving backwards and managing to keep his feet. The blow had missed by inches. The Minotaur quickly reversed his grip on the key and hurled it like a javelin, burying the head in Warren’s abdomen despite his attempt to dodge it.

Roaring triumphantly, the Minotaur rushed at Warren, who pulled out the key and stumbled away, the spearhead red with his own blood. Scrambling, spraying sand, Warren managed to get a small area of quicksand between the Minotaur and himself.

Kendra flung the flashlight and struck the Minotaur in the back. The brute turned, but she was invisible again. The Minotaur picked up the flashlight, sniffed it, and then sniffed the air, moving toward Kendra.

Using the key like a crutch, Warren came around the quicksand, approaching the Minotaur from behind. The Minotaur whirled and gave chase. Warren skipped away, ending up with his back to a broad expanse of quicksand.

“Warren, quicksand!” Kendra cried.

Too late, he stepped beyond the line in the sand, one leg sinking to his thigh, the rest of him collapsing forward onto the sturdier sand. The Minotaur dashed forward, mace held high to issue the killing stroke. Quick as a mousetrap, Warren thrust upward with the key, the razor tip of the spearhead entering the Minotaur just below the sternum, angled up to pierce his heart. The Minotaur stood still, impaled, and snorted. The mace fell from his hairy hands, landing heavily on the sand. Warren twisted the key and shoved it in deeper, toppling the Minotaur backwards. Panting, Warren withdrew his leg from the mushy sand.

Kendra ran to him. “That was an amazing trick!” she shouted.

“A desperate one,” he said. “All or nothing.” His hand covered the wound on his abdomen. He swatted at the damp sand coating his leg.

“Probably wouldn’t have worked, except the Minotaur thought I was mortally wounded. Course, he might have been right.”

“Is it bad?” she asked.

“It pierced me deep, but clean,” he said. “In straight, out straight. Belly wounds are hard to read. Depends what got punctured. Go fetch the key.”

Kendra crouched beside the supine Minotaur, enjoying the livestock smell even less up close. The key hung on a fine gold chain. She pulled hard, and the chain snapped. “I have it,” Kendra said.

“Get the big one too,” Warren said. The big key was still lodged in the Minotaur’s chest. Kendra had to brace a foot against the beast to tug it free. Warren had taken off his shirt. The blood stood out sharply against his white skin. Kendra averted her eyes. He wadded up his shirt and pressed it against the wound, which was a couple of inches to one side of his belly button. “Let’s hope this stanches the bleeding,” he said. “Can you cut me a length of rope?”

Using the sharp spearhead of the bloody key, Kendra did as he said, and Warren used the rope to bind his shirt in place over the wound. He wiped the blood from the spearhead onto his pants. “Can you go on?” Kendra asked.

“Not much choice,” he said. “Let’s see if the Minotaur’s key works.”

Groaning, Warren used the tall key to pull himself to his feet. He walked to the iron door, inserted the Minotaur’s key, and opened it.



The Vault

Another stairway spiraled down beyond the open door. More sunstones, brighter than before, lit the way. Warren prodded the steps and found that they were solid. “Kendra,” he said. “Go erase the lines around a few of the sinkholes near the entrance to the room.”

When Kendra returned, Warren was feeling the pulse in his neck. Perspiration dampened his forehead. “How are you?” she asked.

“I’m not doing too bad,” he assured her. “Especially for a guy who just underwent involuntary surgery. We have the Minotaur’s key. If we shut the door behind us, our friend the narcoblix will probably have to earn a key of her own.”

“Okay,” Kendra said, stepping into the stairwell with Warren and closing the door. She turned to face him, and vanished.

“Maybe you should just keep the glove handy for the next threat,” Warren said. “It is tough losing track of where you are when we pause.”

Kendra took off the glove. As long as they were moving around, exploring the tower, it wasn’t much of a protection anyway. Slipping it on would be little more trouble than simply holding still. They descended the stairs for some time, finding no false steps until the final few before the very end.

“I like the placement,” Warren said, jumping over them and wincing when he landed. He leaned against the wall, one hand clutching his wound. “Just when you assume all the stairs are solid, you plunge to your doom.”

No door awaited them. Instead, an arched entryway granted access to a broad chamber with a complex mosaic on the floor. The mosaic depicted an enormous battle of primates being waged in tall trees. The perspective was from the ground looking up, creating a disorienting effect.

Motioning for Kendra to stay put, Warren entered the room. A second archway on the far side of the chamber appeared to be the only way out. Satisfied that they faced no immediate threat, Warren beckoned for Kendra to follow.

The instant she stepped into the room, the ax vanished from her grasp. Below her, high in a tree, a chimpanzee screamed. Twirling Kendra’s ax, the manic primate leaped from his high perch and fell upwards toward the ground. The chimpanzee sailed right out of the mosaic, materializing in front of Kendra, brandishing the ax.

Shrieking, Kendra ran away from the ax-wielding chimp, yanking on her glove. Rushing up from behind the chimpanzee, Warren flung the key just as the screeching ape was beginning to give chase. The key sailed true, striking the frenzied beast between the shoulder blades, and the chimpanzee pitched forward onto the floor, long hand twitching, the ax skidding forward over tiny tiles.

“Don’t pick up the ax,” Warren warned. “This chamber is meant to strip us of all weaponry.”

“Except the key,” Kendra said.

Grunting, Warren bent over and retrieved the key, again wiping the spearhead on his pants. “Right,” he said. “My guess is that to pass this room with any weapon besides the key, we would have to slay every monkey in the mosaic.”

Kendra looked down. There were hundreds of apes, including dozens of powerful gorillas. “Maybe it was a good thing you didn’t have all your gear.”

Warren smiled ruefully. “You’re not kidding. Being butchered by monkeys is pretty low on my list of ways to go. Come on.”

They passed through the archway at the other end of the room and began winding down yet another stairwell. All the stairs were real, and at

the bottom they found another open archway, narrower than the previous ones.

Warren led the way into a cylindrical room where the floor was hundreds of feet below. Widely spaced sunstones provided sufficient light. A narrow catwalk without railings ringed the top of the room, level with the entrance. The roof bristled with barbed spikes. Kendra saw no way to descend—the walls were smooth and sheer all the way to the bottom, where she could barely make out something in the center of the floor.

“I’m not sure we brought enough rope,” Warren joked, stepping onto the catwalk. “I believe this is our destination. How are you with heights?”

“Not so good,” Kendra said.

“Wait here,” he said. He walked along the catwalk, testing the air with the key, as if searching for an invisible stairway. Kendra noticed an alcove in the far side of the wide room. When Warren reached the alcove, he removed something from it. He levitated a few feet into the air, glanced up at the spikes above him, and floated back down.

“I think I get it,” he called. He reached into the alcove again and there was a bright flash that flung him backwards off the catwalk. Kendra watched breathlessly as Warren plummeted toward the distant floor. He began falling slower, then stopped, then started rising. He floated slowly as he drew even with Kendra, and finally stopped, hovering in the center of the room.

In addition to the key, Warren was holding a short white rod. “I can’t move side to side,” he explained. He floated up close to the spikes, carefully took hold of one, and pushed off, sending himself drifting toward Kendra, moving much the way Kendra pictured astronauts would in zero gravity.

Warren alighted on the catwalk beside her. The short rod was carved out of ivory. One tip was black. He had been holding the rod parallel to the floor, but now that he stood on the catwalk, he tilted it so the black tip was facing up.

“That makes you fly?” Kendra asked.

“More like it reverses gravity,” he said. “Black tip up, gravity pulls down. Black tip down, gravity pulls up. Sideways, you get zero gravity. Tilt the black tip up a little bit, gravity pulls down a little bit. Get it?”

“I think so,” she said.

“Careful of the roof,” he warned.

“Have you done this before?” she asked.

“Never,” he said. “You learn to experiment in places like this.”

He held out the rod. She took it. “I want to try it out in the stairway, without the spikes.”

“Go for it,” he said.

Kendra went back to the stairway. Slowly she tipped the rod until it was sideways. Nothing felt any different. She jumped slightly, and it felt perfectly normal.

“I don’t think it works out here,” she said.

“The enchantment must be specific to this room,” he said. “Still, strong spell, I’ve never heard of anything like it. Remember, with the rod, you’re changing which way gravity pulls you. If your momentum is going one way, turning the rod won’t instantly change your direction. When I was falling and I flipped it over, I slowed, stopped, and then started going up. So leave yourself room to stop, or you might end up a shish kebab.”

“I’m not going to let myself go fast,” Kendra said.

“Good idea,” Warren said. “And, for the record, don’t try to grab a second rod. It felt like I’d been struck by lightning.”

Holding the rod, Kendra followed Warren around the catwalk. She kept the black tip pointed straight up, not wanting to risk drifting up to the spikes. When they reached the alcove, she saw that there were nine other rods, each resting in a hole, black tip up.

“What do you say we make sure we can’t be followed,” Warren said, grabbing a rod and tossing it off the edge of the catwalk. Instead of falling, the rod floated back to the same hole from which Warren had removed it. He picked up the rod again. When he let go of it, the rod again returned itself to the hole.

“We better hold tight to these, or we’ll end up stranded down there,” Kendra said.

Warren nodded, removing a rod for himself. He turned it so the black tip was only slightly upwards and stepped off the edge, falling gently, again making Kendra think of astronauts.

Kendra tipped the rod slowly, marveling as she felt the pull of gravity diminishing, even without moving. The sensation was strange; it reminded

her of being underwater. Tilting the rod so the black tip was slightly downward, she floated up, her feet leaving the catwalk. Tipping the rod the other way a tad, she drifted back down.

Now that she trusted the rod, Kendra stepped off the edge of the catwalk and began a mild freefall. The sensation was incredible. She had dreamed of going into space in order to experience zero gravity, and here she was, in an underground tower, sampling something much like it. The dizzying drop beneath her feet was no longer very intimidating, now that she could control gravity with a twist of her wrist.

Warren rose to meet her. "Experiment with the rod," he said. "Nothing too drastic, but get a feel for how to rise and fall and stop yourself. There's a knack to it. I have a feeling it will come in handy before we finish here."

Suddenly Warren shot downward. Kendra watched him slow to a stop. "I thought you said nothing too drastic," she called to him.

He rocketed upwards, drawing even with her again. "I meant for you," he said before plunging away below her.

Little by little, Kendra tilted the black tip up higher, incrementally increasing the rate of her descent. She abruptly tipped the rod in the other direction, and her descent slowed with a feeling like she was connected to an elastic band. Making the rod parallel with the ground, she brought herself to a standstill about halfway to the floor.

Kendra glanced up at the distant spikes in the ceiling. She tilted the black tip all the way down, and with a sudden rush of acceleration she was shooting up toward the iron stalactites. The sensation was disorienting, exactly like falling headfirst toward the ground, and the spikes came rapidly nearer. In a panic she whipped the rod the other way. The elastic feeling was much stronger this time, although it took long enough to slow that she got much nearer to the spikes than she liked. Before she knew it she was careening toward the floor of the tall chamber. Her body began rotating, and she lost some sense of which way she needed to turn the rod to slow her fall. She overcorrected several times before gaining control, whipping herself up and down erratically.

When she finally leveled out, Kendra was two-thirds of the way to the floor, hovering near the wall. She kicked off gently.

"And I thought I was a daredevil," Warren called.

“That was a little more daring than I intended,” Kendra admitted, trying not to sound as shaken as she felt. She experimented more with rising and falling, growing accustomed to easing herself to a stop and to keeping her body properly oriented. At last she landed softly on the floor next to Warren and normalized the gravity by holding her rod black-end up.

The room was bare except for a pedestal at the center. The floor was polished, seamless stone. Atop the pedestal sat a life-sized likeness of a black cat, made of colored glass.

“Is that the artifact?” Kendra asked.

“My guess is we’re looking at the vault,” Warren said.

“Do we smash it?” Kendra asked.

“That might be a start,” Warren said.

“How are you feeling?” Kendra asked.

“Stabbed,” he said. “But functional. Things could turn ugly fast. If it comes to it, you may want to fly up to the catwalk and hope for mercy from the narcoblix. But don’t try to exit the tower. I was very serious about the traps set to prevent anyone from exiting prematurely.”

“Right,” Kendra said. “I won’t ditch you.”

Warren tipped the rod somewhat and jumped, soaring over Kendra’s head and landing gently behind her, wincing slightly and clutching his side. “See, you can also simply reduce gravity to your advantage. Could come in handy.”

Kendra tilted the rod, feeling herself lightening, and took a leap, gliding in a long, lazy parabola. “Gotcha.”

“You ready?” Warren said.

“What’s going to happen?” Kendra said.

“I’ll smash the cat and we’ll see.”

“What if the roof comes down on us?” she asked.

Warren gazed up at the distant ceiling. “That would be bad. Let’s hope the spikes are just meant to impale people who are clumsy with their gravity sticks.”

“You think there may be something scary inside the cat?” Kendra asked.

“Seems like a safe bet. We better hurry. Who knows how long before the narcoblix shows up? You ready? Glove on?”

Kendra pulled on the glove and turned invisible. "Okay."

Warren prodded the cat with the sharp end of the key. The tip of the spearhead clinked loudly, but the figurine did not crack. He jabbed it a few times. Clink, clink, clink. "I'm not sure we're meant to break it," he said. Moving close, Warren touched the cat with his finger and then skipped away, key ready.

The glass cat shimmered and became a real cat, meowing softly. It had a tiny key around its neck.

Kendra felt some of the tension leave her. "Is this some kind of joke?" she asked.

"If so, I don't think we've seen the punch line yet."

"Maybe it has rabies," Kendra said.

Tentatively, Warren approached the black cat. It hopped down from the pedestal and slunk toward him. Nothing indicated that the feline was anything other than a scrawny domestic cat. Crouching, Warren let the animal lick his hand. He stroked the cat softly, and then untied the ribbon that held the key. Instantly the cat hissed and swiped a paw at him. Warren stood and backed away, puzzling over the key. The cat arched its back and showed its teeth.

"It turned mean," Kendra said.

"It is mean," Warren corrected. "This is certainly no mere housecat. We have not yet seen the true form of our adversary."

The feral cat spat and hissed.

Warren began investigating the big key. He rolled it, examining it from end to end. "Ah-ha!" he said, inserting the tiny key into a hole just below the spearhead. When he turned the miniscule key, the handle at the opposite end of the big key detached and clattered to the ground. Connected to the handle was a long, slender blade. A sword had been hidden in the shaft of the tall key, with only the handle showing!

Warren picked up the sword, swishing it through the air. The handle had no guard. The sharp blade was long and sleek, and it flashed dangerously in the glow of the sunstones. "We have ourselves a pair of weapons," Warren said. "Take the spear! Without the sword it has a better balance."

Eyes on the cat, Kendra drew near and took the spear from Warren. “How do I use this?” she asked.

“Stab with it,” Warren said. “It’s probably too heavy for you to throw it effectively. Pay more attention to soaring away if trouble comes near.”

“All right,” she said, taking a few practice jabs.

Without warning, the cat charged at Kendra. She swung the spear and it veered away, darting toward Warren. His sword whisked down and lopped off the head of the cat. Warren stepped away from the corpse, watching it intently. Both the head and the body of the feline began to boil as if full of writhing worms. The head melted into a soupy pool. The headless body began to heave inside out, revealing wet glimpses of muscle and bone, until the churning finally stopped and the black cat was whole again.

The cat hissed at Warren, fur rising along its arched back. It was bigger now, larger than any domestic cat Kendra had ever seen. Warren took a step toward the cat and it bolted, body stretching long as it raced fluidly away. The next two times Warren came close, the cat streaked away, in the end returning to the pedestal.

Warren approached the pedestal. Baring teeth and claws, the cat sprang at him. A slash of his sword intercepted the feline, and the cat flopped to the floor. Warren stabbed it to ensure the animal a quick demise, and then backed away.

Once again, the lifeless body began to pulse and roil. “I’m not too keen about this pattern,” Warren said darkly. Moving in close, he began stabbing the churning mass of fur and bone and organs. With each wound it seemed to grow, and so he retreated to let the process finish.

The reborn black cat no longer looked like a domestic animal. Not only was it much too big, the paws were proportionately larger, with crueler claws, and the ears were now tufted like those of a lynx. Still entirely black, the lynx let out a fierce yowl, showing intimidating teeth.

“Don’t kill it again,” Kendra said. “It will keep getting worse.”

“Then we will never get the artifact,” Warren said. “The cat is the vault, and the sword and the spear remain the keys. To get the artifact, we must defeat all of its incarnations.” The black lynx crouched, eyeing Warren cunningly. When Warren fainted forward, the lynx did not flinch.

Staying low, the lynx prowled toward Warren, as if stalking a bird. Warren stood ready, sword poised. A dark blur, the lynx rushed at him, low

and silent. The sword flashed, opening a gash, but the lynx got through, clawing and biting furiously at Warren's pant leg. A fierce return stroke ended the flurry of claws. The lynx lay motionless.

"Fast," Warren complained, limping away, blood dripping from his tattered pant leg.

"Did it hurt you bad?" Kendra asked.

"Surface wounds. My pants got the worst of it," Warren said. "But it got to me. I'm not sure I like what that says about my reflexes." The hide of the carcass began to bulge.

"Would the spear be better?" Kendra asked. "You could stab it before it gets close."

"Maybe," Warren said. "Trade me." He crossed to her and they exchanged weapons.

"You're limping," she said.

"It's a little tender," he said. "I'll hold up."

The lynx yowled, a heartier, more powerful sound. As it stood on all fours, its head was higher than the bandage on Warren's stomach. "Big cat," Kendra said.

"Here, kitty, kitty," Warren coaxed, edging toward it with the spear. The beefed-up lynx began pacing, staying out of range, moving with sure grace, hunting for an opening. The lynx darted at Warren and then pulled back. It faked a second charge, and Warren danced backwards.

"Why am I starting to feel more and more like a mouse?" Warren complained. He lunged forward, thrusting with the spear, but the lynx sprang to one side and received only a glancing blow before streaking toward Warren, low and impossibly quick, inside the reach of the spear. Warren jumped high into the air.

The lynx instantly wheeled around and raced toward Kendra. Invisible or not, the animal knew her exact location. She reversed the rod and shot upwards, coming to a stop fifty feet above the floor. After halting her ascent, Kendra did not turn invisible. It was impossible to reach a complete standstill in the air. No matter how she held the rod, there was always a slight drifting that apparently prevented the glove from working. Warren hovered about twenty feet below her, glaring at the lynx. He glanced up at Kendra, and then his eyes fixed on something beyond her. "We've got company," he said.

Kendra looked up and saw Vanessa and Errol gliding down from the catwalk. "What do we do?" Kendra asked.

Swinging the spear to ward off the lynx, Warren dropped to the ground and jumped at an angle that let him float near to Kendra. "Give me the sword," he said.

"I propose a truce," Vanessa called down to them airily, as if it were all a game. Kendra handed Warren the sword. He gave her the spear. The exchange caused them to slowly drift apart.

"A convenient idea, since we have the weapons," Warren growled.

"How many times have you slain the guardian?" Vanessa asked.

"None of your business," Warren said. "Come no closer."

She stopped, hovering with Errol beside her. Errol's suit was torn. One of his eyes was purple and swollen shut, and there were scratches on his cheeks.

"You do not look well, Warren," Vanessa said.

"Neither does your friend," he replied.

"I think you two could use some assistance," Vanessa said.

"What got him?" Warren asked. "The hobgoblin?"

Vanessa smiled. "He was injured before we entered the tower."

"I picked up a bar of gold on the back porch," Errol said. "Apparently it was stolen from a troll. He took it back very impolitely after we left the yard."

Kendra covered her mouth to hide her laughter. Errol glared at her. "Your real name is Christopher Vogel?" Kendra asked.

"I have many names," he said stiffly. "My parents gave me that one."

"We elected to fight the Cyclops," Vanessa said. "Lots of bare skin for my darts. And we deduced from the ax and the ape not to enter the nearby chamber armed. But this cat may pose a problem. How many times has it died? We've seen once."

"You better turn around and clear out of here," Warren said.

"I hope you aren't counting on other help," Vanessa said. "We found Tanu in the woods and took care of him. He will be asleep until this time tomorrow."

"I'm surprised you came in person," Kendra said bitterly.

"Where finesse is required, I prefer my own body," Vanessa said.

“We have no intention of harming anyone,” Errol said. “Kendra, we just want to take the artifact and leave all of you in peace. This can still end well for you and your family.”

With a flick of his wrist, Warren soared up to their level. “Sorry if we’re out of reach,” Vanessa said.

Although hovering at the same height, they were separated by a good distance. “Either you will depart, or I will emphatically insist,” Warren said, raising the sword menacingly.

“We could fight,” Errol said calmly. “But trust me, brave as she may be, it would not take much for me to wrest that lance from the girl.” Errol pushed off of Vanessa so that both of them drifted over to opposite walls. They landed softly against the walls, staying near enough to control their direction by pushing off.

“A contest between us will end in injuries none of us can afford,” Vanessa said. “Why not first slay the beast together?”

“Because I don’t want to be stabbed in the back,” Warren said.

“You don’t imagine you can walk out of here without the artifact?” Errol asked. “There are always safeguards against such actions.”

“I’m well aware,” Warren said. “I can handle the cat.”

“How many times have you killed the beast?” Vanessa persisted.

“Three times,” Warren said.

“So this is its fourth life,” Errol said. “Hang me if it has less than nine.”

“At your best, uninjured, this guardian is too much for you or any single person,” Vanessa said. “All together we may have a chance.”

“I will not arm you,” Warren said.

Vanessa nodded at Errol. Both of them dropped rapidly along the wall until they were level with Kendra. Warren fell with them, but without a way to control his lateral movement, he could not intervene. Vanessa and Errol kicked off the wall, floating toward Kendra. She tilted the rod, floating upwards, and Vanessa and Errol adjusted to float upwards with her.

They were approaching her from opposite directions. At best she could poke one of them with the spear. Warren had lowered himself almost to the ground, but the fierce lynx was keeping him from touching down. He swatted at it with the sword. In a panic, with Vanessa and Errol closing in, Kendra tossed the spear toward Warren, yelling, “Catch!”

The spear turned end over end and narrowly missed piercing Warren before it clanged to the floor beside the lynx. Yowling, the overgrown cat guarded the spear, fangs bared. Vanessa and Errol plunged to the ground in pursuit of the fallen weapon. Errol struck the floor much harder than he must have intended, and he crumpled. Vanessa landed perfectly.

It was claw against sword as Warren lowered himself toward the snapping, hissing lynx. Vanessa dashed toward the lynx across the floor. Kendra saw a little white stick fly by her on its way back to the top of the room, and realized Errol had dropped his rod.

With Vanessa approaching from behind and Warren slicing it from above, the lynx darted away, ignoring Vanessa and racing toward Errol, who was rising shakily. Vanessa dove and grabbed the spear at the same time as Warren. Errol screamed, hobbling hopelessly away from the charging lynx, favoring his right leg.

Warren released the spear and jumped toward where the lynx was about to converge with Errol. Vanessa sprinted across the floor. The lynx sprang, and Errol vanished, reappearing a few feet off to one side. The lynx landed and swerved to stay after Errol. Spreading his hands, backing away, Errol created a puff of smoke and a blazing shower of sparks. As the undaunted lynx sprang through the fiery flash, Errol raised his arms defensively. The heavy lynx knocked Errol down and began mauling his forearm, shaking and dragging him. Vanessa arrived before Warren and buried the spear deep into the animal's side. Warren alighted beside her and decapitated the lynx.

Kendra looked on from above in hypnotized horror. She had no love for Errol, but watching anyone get mauled like that was a terrible thing. It all happened so quickly! Smoke curled up from where sparks had singed the lynx.

"Hurry, get him another gravity stick," Vanessa cried.

"You can only hold one at a time," Warren said, stepping toward her.

"Then back off!" Vanessa panted, holding up the spear defensively. Warren soared into the air. The dead lynx was churning. The severed head was melting. Vanessa glanced upwards, as if considering racing for a stick after all, then looked at the roiling corpse. "Errol, get up," she commanded.

Dazed, the injured magician rose, standing on one leg, his tattered sleeve a bloody ruin. "On my back," she said, turning.

He climbed up piggyback and Vanessa bounded into the air. She rose about twenty feet before slowing, stopping, and drifting back toward the ground. The black tip of the rod was pointed straight down, but still she descended. The revived cat roared. The head was shaped differently, and the body was much more muscular. The cat was now a panther.

“Errol’s bigger than her,” Warren whispered to Kendra. “Gravity is pulling him down and her up, but he’s heavier.” Warren compressed his lips. “Hand him the rod!” he shouted.

Vanessa, struggling, either didn’t hear or didn’t care. “Let go of me!” she demanded. Errol clung to her desperately.

“Don’t look,” Warren said.

Kendra closed her eyes.

The panther leaped, claws raking Errol and dragging both him and Vanessa to the floor. Errol lost his hold, and Vanessa took off like a missile, escaping unscathed as the panther finished her partner.

Vanessa shot past Warren and Kendra, then slowed and descended, hovering not far from them. “I have the spear; you have the sword,” she said, panting, her voice slightly unsteady. “The guardian probably has several more lives. How about that truce?”

“Why did you betray us?” Kendra accused.

“One day those I serve will rule all,” Vanessa said. “I do no more harm than I must. At present, our needs align. We must defeat the guardian to escape this place, and neither of us will succeed alone.”

“And once we have the artifact?” Warren asked.

“We’ll be fortunate to be alive and to have reached the next crossroads,” Vanessa said. “I can give you no further assurances.”

“Defeating this guardian will be no small task,” Warren admitted. “What do you say, Kendra?”

Two sets of eyes were on Kendra. “I don’t trust her.”

“A little late for that,” Vanessa said.

“You were supposed to be my teacher and my friend,” Kendra said. “I really liked you.”

Vanessa grinned. “Of course you liked me. In the spirit of teaching, here’s a final piece of instruction. I used the same approach when we met as Errol did. I rescued you from a supposed threat in order to build trust. Of

course, I helped set up the threat. I visited your town the night before the kobold showed up at your school and bit your homeroom teacher while she slept. Later, the kobold put a tack on her chair to put her to sleep, then I took over and gave you quite a scare.”

“That was you?” Kendra said.

“We had to make sure you had ample reason to accept Errol’s help. And then, once you realized Errol was a threat, I came to your rescue.”

“What happened to Case?” Kendra asked.

“The kobold? He’s off on some new mission, I presume. His purpose was merely to alarm you.”

“Is Mrs. Price all right?”

“She’ll be fine, I’m sure,” Vanessa said. “We meant her no harm. She was a means to an end.”

“I’m not sure I get the moral of this lesson,” Warren said. “Don’t trust people who help you?”

“More like, be careful who you trust,” Vanessa said. “And don’t cross the Society. We’re always a step ahead.”

“So we shouldn’t team up,” Kendra said.

“You have no other choice,” Vanessa laughed darkly. “Neither do I. None of us can flee. If we fight each other, none of us will leave here alive. You can’t afford to pass up my help defeating the guardian. Nor can I afford to pass up yours. And, albino or not, Warren is looking paler by the minute.”

Kendra looked down at the panther. She glanced at Warren. “What do you think?”

He sighed. “Honestly, we’d better work with her to kill the cat. Even with a combined effort, it will be a challenge.”

“Okay,” Kendra said.

“Anything good in the pouch?” Vanessa asked.

“Probably, but we don’t know one potion from another,” Kendra said.

“I’m not sure I could be much help discerning potions,” Vanessa said. She looked at Warren. “Your shirt is soaked.”

The shirt bound to his abdomen was indeed drenched in blood. His naked chest was bathed in sweat. “I’m all right. Better than Christopher.”

“I’m quite good with a sword,” Vanessa said.

“I can hold my own,” Warren replied.

“Fair enough, finders keepers,” she said. “Patience is our best weapon. If we do this right, we can dispatch it without ever touching the ground.”

“You be our eyes, Kendra,” Warren said, lowering himself. Vanessa sank toward the floor as well. Kendra hovered, watching the baleful panther prowl below, gazing up at the flying people.

Vanessa and Warren floated apart from one another, dipping low enough to bait and tease the panther, rising out of reach when it leaped up at them. Vanessa finally got into a good position and hurled the spear into the panther’s ribs. As the panther moved around, the spear eventually dislodged. Warren lured the panther away, and Vanessa retrieved the weapon.

They continued baiting the panther until Vanessa harpooned it again. Soon the animal collapsed, and Warren finished it with the sword. “Sharp blade,” Vanessa remarked. “It cuts deep.”

Weapons ready, they hovered above the floor, watching as the panther emerged from its own corpse, now the size of a tiger. Before long the glossy black coat had been punctured multiple times with the spear, and the great beast finally succumbed.

“You’re not doing much with that sword,” Vanessa commented.

“I’ll use it when the time comes,” Warren said.

“Here comes the seventh life,” Vanessa said.

This time, with a mighty roar that echoed through the tall room, the panther was reincarnated standing as tall as a horse, with dagger claws and saber-toothed fangs. Four writhing serpents, black with red markings, grew out of its powerful shoulders.

“Now, that’s a cat,” Warren said.

Warren and Vanessa started baiting the huge panther, but it did not come at them. Instead, it crouched near the center of the room, keeping the pedestal between itself and Vanessa. They ventured lower and lower trying to tempt the panther to break cover.

Finally, with terrifying suddenness, the panther dashed at Warren and vaulted alarmingly high. Warren fell upwards at full speed, but not before a lashing serpent struck him on the calf. Vanessa was not in an ideal position, but used the opportunity to let the spear fly. It pierced the panther just above

a rear leg. Bawling, the panther sprang at her as well, again achieving a phenomenal height, just missing her.

“I got nipped on the calf,” Warren said.

“One of the snakes?” Vanessa asked.

“Yeah.” Warren rolled up his pant leg to look at the bite marks.

Below them, the panther crouched near the pedestal, the spear still in its leg. Using small bursts of gravity and kicking her legs, Vanessa made her way awkwardly over to Warren, moving vaguely like a jellyfish.

“You’d better lend me the sword,” Vanessa said. “It will not be a gentle venom.”

“One of these potions counteracts poison,” Kendra said.

“And probably five of them *are* poison,” Vanessa replied. “Time is essential, Warren. I’ll need you with me as we face the final forms.”

Warren gave her the sword. Vanessa dropped tantalizingly close to the ground, lower than Warren had been when the giant panther reached him. The ferocious feline charged and pounced. Instead of soaring up to escape, as the panther anticipated, Vanessa dropped, and with a sweep of the sword opened a tremendous wound across the great cat’s underbelly.

Vanessa hit the ground hard and instantly took flight, but there was no need—the panther was lying on its side, serpents thrashing, body twitching. Warren dropped to the ground and retrieved the spear, then rejoined Vanessa in the air.

“We’ve got another one coming,” Vanessa announced as the body began to fold in upon itself. “How are you holding up?” she asked Warren.

“So far so good,” he said, but he looked exhausted.

Twin roars resounded through the towering room. The panther, much larger now than any horse, had sprouted a second head. The doubly fierce creature had no snakes or other oddities. It paced beneath them with feral intensity.

“You want to bait or throw?” Vanessa asked.

“I’d better bait,” he said, giving her the spear and taking the sword.

Warren went lower, but not much lower. The panther was no longer cowering behind the pedestal; it paced in the open, as if daring them to come closer. Warren still looked to be well out of reach when the panther sprang and from gaping mouths expelled a spray of black sludge. The two-

headed panther had not come up directly below Warren, and so the spray came at him diagonally, spattering his chest and legs.

Instantly Warren was screaming. Tendrils of smoke steamed up from where the volatile substance clung to him. He dropped the sword and brushed frantically at the searing sludge. Thrashing and groaning, Warren rose ever higher until he reached the spikes in the roof and used them to make his way to the catwalk, where he collapsed.

Vanessa and Kendra followed Warren and knelt on the catwalk beside him. His body was charred wherever the sludge had splattered. “Acid, or something,” he muttered feverishly, eyes wild.

Vanessa cut open his pant leg. The flesh around the snakebite was swollen and discolored.

“We can’t get him out of here?” Kendra asked Vanessa.

“The tower will not let us leave without the artifact,” Vanessa said. “A safeguard to protect its secrets.”

“Can any traps be worse than that thing?” Kendra asked.

“Yes,” Vanessa said. “The traps that prevent a premature exit will be rigged to cause certain death. The guardian can be defeated; the traps probably cannot. Hand over the potion pouch. Warren is dying. Blind luck is better than none.” Vanessa began considering various bottles, uncapping a few to sniff them. Below, the panther heads roared.

“No potions,” Warren gasped. “Give me the spear.”

Vanessa gave him a sidelong glance. “You’re in no condition—”

“The spear,” he said, sitting up.

“This might buy you time,” Vanessa said, holding up a bottle. “I think I recognize the potion. It has a distinctive odor. It will transform your body to a gaseous state. During that time, poison will not spread, acid will not burn, and blood will not flow.”

Vanessa held it out to him.

Lips twisting into a grimace, Warren shook his head.

Vanessa held out the spear.

Snatching it, Warren rolled off the edge of the catwalk. He was controlling his fall with the rod, but descending rapidly. Warren yelled—a primal, barbaric challenge. The two-headed panther snarled up at him.

Warren cried out again, directly above the feline monstrosity. The monster reared up to meet him, jaws agape.

Holding the spear poised, Warren let himself fall at full speed the final thirty feet, and so it was with tremendous force that he plunged the spear between the two necks an instant before striking the unyielding floor. With more than half the length of the spear buried in its body, the mighty beast took a few drunken steps, wobbled, leaned, and slumped to the floor.

Kendra grabbed the bottle from Vanessa and dove off the catwalk. She kept full gravity, and an incredible rush of wind washed over her as she plummeted downward. She whipped the rod around, and her fall began to slow, and then she brought the rod level, coming to a perfect stop beside Warren.

Warren was a wreck, facedown, unconscious, breathing shallowly. Heaving with both hands, Kendra rolled him over, wincing as something inside of him crunched. His mouth was open. Tilting his head up, she tried to ignore the snapping sound his neck made, and dumped the potion into his mouth. His Adam's apple bobbed, and much of the fluid leaked out the sides of his mouth.

Once again, the body of the monster was bulging and undulating, as if it were about to erupt. Vanessa was yanking on the spear, tugging it out a little at a time, leaning into it with everything she had.

"Get clear, Kendra," Vanessa called. "This is not over."

When Kendra looked back at Warren, he was wispy and translucent. She tried to touch him, and her hand passed through him like he was mist, dissipating him slightly. Kendra raced across the floor and grabbed the sword. Behind her, Vanessa finally jerked the spear free.

As Vanessa launched into the air, Kendra watched the ninth version of the guardian emerge. Long wings unfurled. Twelve serpents sprouted from various spots along its back. Three heavy tails swayed. And three heads bellowed together, a deafening sound even from where Kendra stood behind the beast. The great wings beat down and the beast took flight, pursuing Vanessa.

Kendra gaped in petrified awe. From wingtip to wingtip, the monstrosity stretched across half the cavernous room. It rose swiftly.

Running out of room to ascend, Vanessa started falling instead of rising, hurling the spear as she neared her pursuer. The weapon merely

grazed the monster and tumbled toward the floor. All three heads snapped at Vanessa, and all missed. She rebounded off its well-muscled body, snakes striking eagerly, and tumbled toward the ground. Vanessa managed to slow her descent at the last moment, but she still landed heavily only a moment after the spear struck the floor.

Like Errol before her, she lost her grip of the rod, and it floated away toward the ceiling. Quivering, snake-bitten, dragging a broken leg, she crawled for the spear. Above, the three-headed fiend descended, roaring exultantly. Beyond the monster, Kendra saw a pair of figures falling toward her.

Propping herself up with the spear, Vanessa stood and faced the three-headed monster cat as it landed before her. The cat watched her from well out of reach. Kendra recognized Tanu and Coulter descending swiftly, both albino, and she waved her arms at them.

Even as scalding sludge fountained from three mouths, dousing Vanessa in blistering agony, Tanu alighted beside Kendra, snatched his potion pouch, and upended a bottle into his mouth. He accepted the sword from Kendra. As Vanessa screamed, Tanu expanded, clothes splitting as he doubled in height, a huge man becoming a giant, the sword looking like a knife in his enormous hand.

Too late the three-headed monster turned, as Tanu raged, stabbing and slashing, hacking off wings and serpents even as he was clawed and bitten. Tanu's heavy arm pistoned mercilessly until the monster crumpled, and Tanu collapsed atop the beast, bleeding from bitter wounds.

Kendra watched in horror as the carcass of the monster began to boil. Tanu scooted away from it. But this time, instead of folding in upon itself, the corpse melted away and simmered into nothingness, as if it had never been.

Coulter and Kendra ran to Tanu, who lay on his side. The white Samoan pointed at the space the monster had occupied. There sat a bright, copper teapot worked into the shape of a cat, with the tail forming the spout. Coulter retrieved it. "Doesn't look like much," he said.

"I may need to touch it," Kendra said, taking the pot from him. Light at first, the pot started getting heavier. The exterior of the pot did not change, but Kendra recognized the difference. "It's filling up."

"Pour it," Tanu gasped.

Tanu had three deep, ragged gouges across his beefy forearm. Kendra poured golden dust from the teapot onto the wounds. Much of the dust seemed to dissolve on contact. The gouges vanished, leaving no scar. An enormous chunk of flesh was missing from Tanu's shoulder, but when Kendra filled the gaping wound with dust from the teapot, it closed and the skin above it looked like new.

As Kendra shook the feline teapot over Tanu, his white flesh returned to a healthy brown, and all his wounds closed and vanished. Tanu shook his head, powdery dust rising from his hair.

Kendra hurried over to Vanessa, who lay moaning, withered, unrecognizable, incapable of movement or speech. "I should heal her," Kendra said.

"I would love to say no," Tanu said. "But it is the right thing to do."

"Technically we're not on the preserve," Coulter reminded them. "What happens in here, stays in here."

"Don't let her near any weapons," Kendra warned them.

Coulter kicked the spear away as Kendra coated Vanessa with the dust from the teapot. The healing dust renewed itself and continued to flow until Kendra stopped pouring, leaving Vanessa perfectly whole and unscarred. She sat up, staring at the teapot in wonder. "Nothing could have cured those burns," she said in amazement. "I was blind and nearly deaf."

"This is over," Tanu told Vanessa. "There are others stronger than us waiting just outside the entrance."

Vanessa said nothing more.

Coulter remained near her, sword in hand. "I suppose it goes without saying, if you slip into a trance, you'll never come out of it."

Kendra went over to Errol and dumped dust on him. Nothing changed. He was dead.

"We may be able to save Warren," Kendra said.

"I noticed he was gaseous," Tanu said, having tied his torn clothes together into a loincloth. "Which means he is alive. The potion would not have worked if he were dead. He must be nearly gone, or he would be able to move around freely in his gaseous state. Instead he lies in a daze. Considering the power of the dust in that artifact, I'm sure we will be able to restore him. Dale will thank you forever."

“Vanessa said she found you in the woods and put you to sleep,” Kendra said.

“Then she was lying,” Tanu said.

“Bluffing,” Vanessa rephrased.

“When I came to myself, I returned to the house,” Tanu continued. “I approached cautiously, and must have arrived not long after Vanessa departed to come here. I picked the locks to the dungeon. It is much easier to sneak into that prison than to sneak out. Your grandparents are fine. They retrieved the register, and we found friends waiting outside the gates of Fablehaven.”

Not long after that, Tanu returned to his regular size and adjusted his clothes. They stood next to the ghostly, smoky form of Warren until the gas coalesced and he became solid once more. As soon as he became tangible, Kendra covered him with dust from the teapot, mending broken bones and poisoned tissue and burns and ruptured organs. He sat up, blinking, unbelieving. When he removed the blood-soaked shirt from his abdomen, he found no mark beneath it. Warren was no longer albino. He had dark hair and intense hazel eyes.

Kendra also dusted Coulter, curing his albinism.

“We should hurry,” Tanu said. “Dale will be needing some healing himself. The hobgoblin left him lame.”

They bound Vanessa’s hands with the same rope that had bandaged Warren, and levitated up to the catwalk, Tanu holding Vanessa. They replaced their rods in the alcove. No monkeys stirred as they crossed the mosaic, though they still had to tread carefully on the stairs. They found Dale in the sandy room, where only the blue woman, the half-spider, and the dwarf remained on the walls.

Dale shouted in ecstasy upon seeing his brother revived and well, and they embraced for a long while before Kendra could get near enough to heal his legs. Once his legs were well, Dale stared at the teapot in wonder, wiping away tears of joy, and proclaimed that now he had officially seen everything.

One final surprise awaited Kendra. When at length they reached the uppermost chamber in the tower and climbed the knotted rope to reach the stone platform in the formerly cursed grove, she found the Sphinx and Mr. Lich waiting to welcome them.



The Quiet Box

Tell me about the cat again,” Seth said, sitting on the bed with his legs crossed, trying to juggle three blocks.

“Again?” Kendra said, looking up from her book.

“I can’t believe I missed the coolest thing anyone has ever seen,” Seth complained, losing control of the blocks after two tosses. “A giant, flying, snake-covered, three-headed, acid-breathing panther. If you didn’t have witnesses, I’d be sure you made it up just to torture me.”

“Being there wasn’t much fun,” Kendra said. “I was pretty sure we were all going to die.”

“And it hosed down Vanessa with a massive acid blast,” he continued enthusiastically. “Was she screaming?”

“She couldn’t scream,” Kendra said. “She was just sort of moaning. She looked like she’d been dipped in lava.”

“All that to guard the lamest thing ever: a shabby old teapot.”

“A teapot that cured all your zombie wounds,” Kendra said.

“I know, it’s useful, but it looks like a bad decision from a really pathetic garage sale. You just like it because your fairy voodoo made it work.” He started trying to juggle again and immediately lost the rhythm, one of the blocks falling to the floor.

Grandpa opened the door to the attic bedroom. “The Sphinx says he’s ready, if you still want to join us,” he reported.

Kendra smiled. It was nice seeing Grandpa walking around again like his old self. To her, healing Grandpa Sorenson had seemed like the most miraculous consequence of retrieving the artifact. The other injuries were so recent that they had somehow not sunk in as being real. It had been as if the teapot were washing away the memory of a bad dream. But Grandpa had been in a wheelchair ever since she had arrived at Fablehaven this year, so watching him cut the cast off and walk around was particularly impressive.

“Heck, yeah,” Seth said, bouncing off the bed. “I’ve missed too much! I’m not missing this.”

Kendra got up as well, although her feelings were more conflicted than Seth’s. Rather than wanting to witness Vanessa’s final sentence as a novelty, or perhaps to gloat, she hoped to reach some sense of closure for the betrayal Vanessa had enacted.

It had been the Sphinx who had recommended the Quiet Box. The previous day, after Vanessa had been incarcerated in the dungeon, they had all sat around filling in the blanks for each other. Grandma and Grandpa knew almost none of the story. Seth held them enthralled with how he overcame the revenant. Kendra and Warren told of the descent into the tower and the battle with the cat. Tanu, Coulter, and Dale told of the rescue they had mounted, how when they had approached the grove with the Sphinx, the imp who appeared to be guarding it had turned and fled, and how Dale had been injured by the hobgoblin.

The Sphinx explained that he had been on the move because of evidence that the Society of the Evening Star was closing in on his location. Once he was clear, he became worried that nobody at Fablehaven was answering his calls, and doubly concerned when he found the gates locked and nobody responding to his solicitations for entry. He had waited there until Tanu finally answered the phone after freeing Grandpa. Tanu had opened the gates for him.

In the end, the conversation had turned to Vanessa. The problem was, as a narcoblix, she would forever have power over those she had bitten whenever they were asleep. “She must be shut away in a prison that will inhibit her power,” the Sphinx had said emphatically. “We cannot expect

Mr. Lich to spend the remainder of his life watching her.” At the time, Mr. Lich was in the dungeon, stationed outside her cell.

“Can’t the sand from the artifact cure those of us she bit?” Kendra asked.

“I have been studying the artifact,” the Sphinx said. “Its healing powers appear to affect only the physical body. I do not believe it can cure maladies of the mind. The dust instantly removed the marks from her bite, but it is powerless against the mental link the bite forges.”

“Do you know of a prison that would curtail her power?” Grandpa asked.

The Sphinx paused and then nodded to himself. “I have a simple answer. The Quiet Box in your very own dungeon will suit our needs perfectly.”

“What about the current occupant?” Grandma asked.

“I know the history of the current prisoner inside your Quiet Box,” the Sphinx said. “He has great political significance, but no talents that require such a mighty cage. I know a place where he will be no more likely to cause harm.”

“Who is he?” Seth asked.

“For the safety of all, the identity of the prisoner must remain a mystery,” the Sphinx said. “Let your curiosity take comfort in the reality that for most of you, the name would hold little meaning. I was present when he was sealed in the box, trussed up and hooded, disguised and unknown to the others who attended the event. I worked long to ensure his capture, and to keep all knowledge of him hidden. Now I will provide the anonymous captive with new confinement, so the Quiet Box can be used to secure the type of villain for which it was designed. Morally, with her as our prisoner, we cannot execute Vanessa. But neither can we reward her treachery with leniency, or provide her the slightest opportunity to inflict further harm.”

All had agreed that it was a sound plan. Seth had asked to be present for the prisoner exchange. Kendra had seconded the request. The Sphinx said he saw no harm in it, since the current occupant of the Quiet Box was unrecognizable beneath his mask and bindings. Grandpa had granted permission.

As Kendra followed Grandpa and Seth down the stairs, she reflected that this punishment was in many ways worse than an execution. From what she had gathered, imprisonment in the Quiet Box meant centuries of uninterrupted solitude. The Box put the occupant in a suspended state but did not render the prisoner entirely unconscious. She could not imagine complete sensory deprivation for a day, let alone a year, but this was potentially many lifetimes standing upright inside a snug container. She could only guess at the psychological consequences of such extended isolation.

Kendra was hurt that Vanessa had betrayed her, and glad to see her come to justice, but the prolonged confinement of the Quiet Box struck her as a heavy price for even the most heinous crime. Even so, the Sphinx was right—Vanessa could not be permitted to exert further control over those she had bitten.

They met Grandma in the kitchen and descended together into the dungeon, where they found Mr. Lich escorting Vanessa from her cell, with a firm grip on her upper arm. The Sphinx nodded gravely. “Once again we prepare to part ways,” he said. “Hopefully our next meeting will be under less duress.”

Tanu, Coulter, Dale, and Warren had all opted not to attend, so the small party set off down the hall in silence toward their destination. Mr. Lich led the way with Vanessa, so Kendra could not see her face. Vanessa was dressed in one of Grandma’s old housecoats, but she held her head erect.

Before long they reached the tall cabinet that reminded Kendra of magicians making lovely assistants vanish. The Sphinx turned and faced them. “Let me stress one last time what exemplary courage and character all of you showed in thwarting this insidious attempt to steal a potentially ruinous artifact. Kendra and Seth, both of you displayed remarkable valor. Words cannot convey my sincere admiration and gratitude. Once we release the prisoner, Mr. Lich and I will need to make a hasty departure. Rest assured that we have a safe home in mind for both the artifact and the captive from the Quiet Box, and that we will telephone you, Stan, to confirm that all is safe and secure. When the prisoner emerges, make no sound until we are gone. My cautious nature would rather he not hear your voices or receive any other clues about who you are.”

The Sphinx turned to face Vanessa. “Have you any final words before you learn why we call it the Quiet Box? Take heed—any utterance that passes your lips had best be words of apology.” His voice held a menacing edge.

Vanessa looked at them in turn. “I apologize for the deceit. I never meant any of you physical harm. A false friendship is a terrible thing. Kendra, though you might not believe it, I remain your pen pal.”

“Enough,” the Sphinx said. “Make no professions of continued fidelity. We pity your fate, and collectively wish you had not brought this evil upon yourself. You have sought forbidden knowledge and committed unforgivable betrayals. You once had my trust, but it is now irretrievable.”

The Sphinx opened the cabinet. The inside was lined with purple felt. The box was empty. Seth craned his neck, then gave Kendra a befuddled glance. Where was the current occupant?

Mr. Lich ushered Vanessa into the box. Her eyes were cold, but her jaw trembled. The Sphinx closed the door, and the cabinet rotated 180 degrees. Mr. Lich opened a door identical to the first, providing a view of the same space from the opposite side. But the view was not of Vanessa.

Instead, a figure clad entirely in burlap stood in the box. A coarse sack covered his head, chained snugly around his neck. Thick ropes bound his arms to his sides. Shackles gripped his ankles.

Mr. Lich laid a hand on his shoulder and led the mysterious captive out of the box. The Sphinx closed the door. Kendra, Seth, Grandma, and Grandpa watched as the prisoner shuffled away down the hall between the Sphinx and Mr. Lich. Grandma put an arm around Kendra, giving her a comforting squeeze.

* * *

That night, Kendra found she could not sleep. Her mind was whirling with the events of the past few days. They had been through so much, it seemed she had returned to Fablehaven a lifetime ago.

Midsummer Eve was a few days away. Grandpa had emphasized to Seth that they were putting their lives into his hands by permitting him to remain on the preserve during that perilous evening. Her brother had assured everyone that he had learned his lesson, that he would stay far from

the windows unless otherwise instructed. Kendra was almost surprised to discover that, like her Grandpa, she absolutely believed him.

One particular thought kept recurring as Kendra lay awake in the dark. Vanessa's last words kept striking her as increasingly peculiar: "I remain your pen pal."

Kendra knew she might be crazy, but she felt certain the statement was more than a platitude. It sounded like Vanessa might be hinting at a secret message.

Deciding she had to know, Kendra kicked off the covers. Opening the nightstand drawer, she removed the umite wax candle that Vanessa had given her. She padded across the attic floor and down the stairs to the hall.

Kendra eased open the door to Grandpa and Grandma's room. Like everyone else in the dark house, they were sleeping soundly. There were the dungeon keys, on a peg near the bed. Grandpa had sworn he was going to make copies and hide them in strategic locations in case of another takeover.

Kendra hesitated. This was a disturbingly Sethlike thing to do. Shouldn't she just tell her grandparents her suspicion and have them accompany her? But she was worried they would not want her reading a farewell message from Vanessa. And she was worried they would be right, that the message would be cruel. And she was also worried that she was wrong, and there would be no message, and she would look foolish.

Quietly removing the keys from the peg, Kendra left the room. She was getting good at sneaking around. Being able to see in the dark certainly helped. Kendra tiptoed down the stairs to the entry hall.

Would there really be a message? In many ways, she would be relieved if the cell wall was blank. What could Vanessa have to say? A sincere apology? An explanation? More likely something spiteful. Kendra steeled herself against the possibility.

Whatever the message, it was hers to read. She did not want others going through her mail, at least not until after she had a look.

Kendra took matches from a kitchen cupboard and descended the stairs to the basement. Getting to Vanessa's cell would be simple—they had held her in the fourth cell on the right, not far from the dungeon entrance.

With Mr. Lich watching her, could Vanessa have written much of a message? Maybe. He was only there to prevent her from going into a trance

and taking over people. He might not have had his eyes glued to her every second.

Kendra unlocked the iron door to the dungeon and entered. The goblins could make no complaint against her. They had received six dozen eggs, three live geese, and a goat for aiding Kendra and Seth when they had showed up in miniature. As long as she went straight to Vanessa's cell and then left, visiting the dungeon secretly could not possibly cause any harm. Maybe the idea wasn't quite as Sethlike as it had seemed.

She unlocked Vanessa's cell and entered. As had become routine for Kendra since the fairies had altered her vision, it was dim but not terribly dark. The cell was like the others she had seen—stone walls and floor, crude bed, hole in the corner for waste. She struck a match and lit the candle, suddenly certain there would be no message.

Beneath the glow of the umite candle, words flared into view, cramped but legible, covering multiple patches of the floor—a much longer message than Kendra had anticipated. The words were oriented so that they must have been written while Vanessa crouched with her back to the door, with most of the writing concentrated in areas that were hard to see from the little window.

In mounting wonder and alarm, Kendra read the following message:

Dear Kendra,

I have vital information to share with you. Call it a final tutorial, and a parting shot at my treacherous employers. You should have learned the lesson I shared when we first met. What is the textbook Society infiltration? Set up a threat, then come to the rescue in order to build trust. Errol did it to you and Seth. Then I did the same thing to you and your grandparents, pretending to be part of the solution rather than the cause of the problem, legitimately helping most of the time until the moment of betrayal arrived. Others have been using that model for a long time, with infinite subtlety and patience. Namely, the Sphinx.

Your reflex will be to doubt me, and I cannot prove that I am right. My gifts made me privy to secrets that piqued my curiosity,

and when I dug deeper, I unearthed a truth that I should have left undiscovered. He suspects I know his secret, which is why he will confine me to the Quiet Box. He would prefer if he could have me executed. I work for him, but I am not supposed to know the identity of my employer. Few know the enigmatic leader of the Society of the Evening Star. For months, I believe, the Sphinx has suspected that I have guessed his true identity. The kind of fraud he is perpetrating could endure only with supreme discretion and meticulous attention to detail. In his mind, I have become a liability.

The Sphinx could have claimed he had a prison that would hold me and impede my powers. He could have taken me with him. And if he had, he would have earned my undying loyalty. At present, I would still be in doubt as to his intentions, but Lich, not fully understanding the dynamics of the situation, hinted about the Quiet Box, and so I scrawl my revenge on the floor.

Consider the coup this is for the Sphinx. As a known traitor, I am a spoiled asset for the Society, and therefore of much less use. He gets to look like the hero and the sure friend of Fablehaven as he locks me in the most secure prison on the property, further obscuring the duplicitous truth. In case his suspicions are correct and I know his true identity, I am permanently out of the equation.

What else? He frees a prisoner who is undoubtedly a powerful ally! And he walks away with the artifact I was sent here to retrieve for him!

This could be a fabrication. Keep your eyes open, and time will confirm my version of things. The reason the Sphinx knows so much, and anticipates danger so well, is because he is playing both sides. He is causing the danger, and then providing relief and advice until those perfect moments of betrayal arrive. Who knows how many artifacts he has collected? He has been at it for centuries! Considering his actions at Fablehaven and in Brazil, he

has apparently decided that the time for aggressiveness has arrived. Beware, the Evening Star is rising.

Had he trusted me, his secret would still be safe. But he spurned me, and underestimated me, and so his secret is revealed. My loyalty is no longer his. I know much more that could be useful to you and your grandparents.

If not your friend, your disillusioner,

Vanessa

Acknowledgments

Writing a book is a private endeavor, but sharing a book with others becomes a public enterprise. There are many people to thank who have helped the Fablehaven series come this far.

My wife is the person closest to the process. She reads my work chapter by chapter, providing my first feedback and encouragement. Not only is she my best friend, she also helps me find time to write and makes our household function—the thanks I owe to her are incalculable.

Chris Schoebinger at Shadow Mountain spearheads the marketing and keeps everything on track. Emily Watts edits the book—the polish she adds really helps it shine. Brandon Dorman turns words into striking images, and designers Richard Erickson and Sheryl Dickert Smith use those images and their own skills to give the book a visual identity. Jared Kroff and friends make Fablehaven.com look cool. My sister Summer coordinates the tour and travels with me, helping me raise awareness about Fablehaven while encouraging students to strengthen their imaginations through reading.

I can never read my own work without an intimate knowledge of the story and the events to come. This can pose a problem when I struggle to distinguish the information in my mind from the information actually on the page. To help me gauge whether the story is unfolding effectively I solicit feedback from trusted readers. For this book I had help from Jason and Natalie Conforto, Mike Walton, Scott and Leslie Schwendiman, Chris Schoebinger, the Freeman family, Emily Watts, Mike Crippen, Lisa Mangum, Pam, Gary, Summer, Cherie, Nancy, Tamara, Tuck, Liz, Randy, and others.

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wonderful folks at Shadow Mountain who are helping me share the story of Fablehaven with readers everywhere.

Writers live or die by readers telling others about the books they enjoy. I'm grateful to Robert Fannery for helping to get the word out online, Donna Corbin-Sobinski for going the extra mile in Connecticut, and numerous family members, friends, bookstore employees, teachers, and librarians for helping increase awareness of the series.

In the end, I most rely on readers who suspend their disbelief and let the story of Fablehaven come to life in their minds. Thanks for sharing your time with me!

On a final note, my cousin Nicole Aupiu told me that some of her friends don't believe I'm her cousin. I am! In fact, a character in this book is named after her brother Tanu.

Keep an eye out for Book 3 of the Fablehaven series coming in 2008, and my first non-Fablehaven fantasy novel, *The Candy Shop War*, in stores before the end of 2007.

Reading Guide

1. In the first chapter of the book, Kendra's power to recognize magical creatures allows her to see Casey Hancock for what he is, an evil kobold. Do you think she made the right choice not to tell her friends about him? What would you do if you felt like you should warn a friend about something or someone, but you were embarrassed or afraid to do so?

2. Which of the "experts"—Coulter, the magical relics collector, Tanu, the potions master, or Vanessa, the magical creatures expert—would you be most interested in learning from? If you could be an expert in one of these areas, which would you choose? Why?

3. On pages 108–11, Kendra samples one of Tanu's bottled emotions, shame. After it has worn off, she realizes that the emotion made her blow little problems all out of proportion. How can our emotions make things seem worse than they really are? What can we do when we're caught up in the "spell" of a negative emotion?

4. On page 124, Seth asks Dale what he'll do if he can't find a way to cure his brother, Warren. Dale answers, "I'll never know that day has come, because I'll never stop trying." How do you keep your hope up when you've tried lots of different solutions to a problem, and nothing seems to work? Have you ever kept trying and ended up succeeding at something that you failed at to begin with?

5. Pages 136–39 describe Grandma Sorenson's interaction with the jinn that resulted in her being changed into a chicken. Have you ever felt that you could "handle" a situation that you knew would be dangerous?

6. If you had a magical glove like Coulter's, how would you use it? How could you help people? What magical relic would you most like to invent? What would it do? Why would you like to have that power?

7. Chapter 9 describes Kendra's and Seth's encounters with the Sphinx. Why do you think he treated them differently, especially in the Foosball game? Is it best to always treat everyone the same, or are there times when certain individuals may need special handling? Why?

8. Every good and lasting relationship must have trust. However, Kendra finds herself betrayed by people whom she trusted. How much are you willing to trust someone? If you found out someone lied to you, would you be willing to forgive him or her? If so, what would that person have to do to earn back your trust?

9. Seth and Coulter encounter paralyzing fear from the revenant. Is fear always a bad thing? Can fear ever be good? Why or why not? If you could overcome one fear, what would it be?

10. In book 1, Seth's boldness caused problems. In book 2, his courage helped save the day. What is the difference between bravery and recklessness? Is it always easy to see the difference?

11. When Slaggo and Voorsh, the goblins, are about to cook Kendra and Seth, Kendra persuades them that her grandparents will reward them for letting the children go. The goblins recall, "Stan and Ruth have repaid loyalty in the past," and "[Stan] has a history of fair rewards." How does a person gain a reputation for fairness or other good qualities? How might you be helped by your good reputation, or that of your parents?

12. In Seth's battle with the revenant, when his courage is almost gone, he remembers all the people who have helped him and are depending on him. Has thinking about people you love ever given you more courage than you thought you had? How does remembering your loved ones help you make better choices in your life?

13. What do you think of the end of the book? What reasons are there to believe the final message? What reasons are there to disbelieve it?



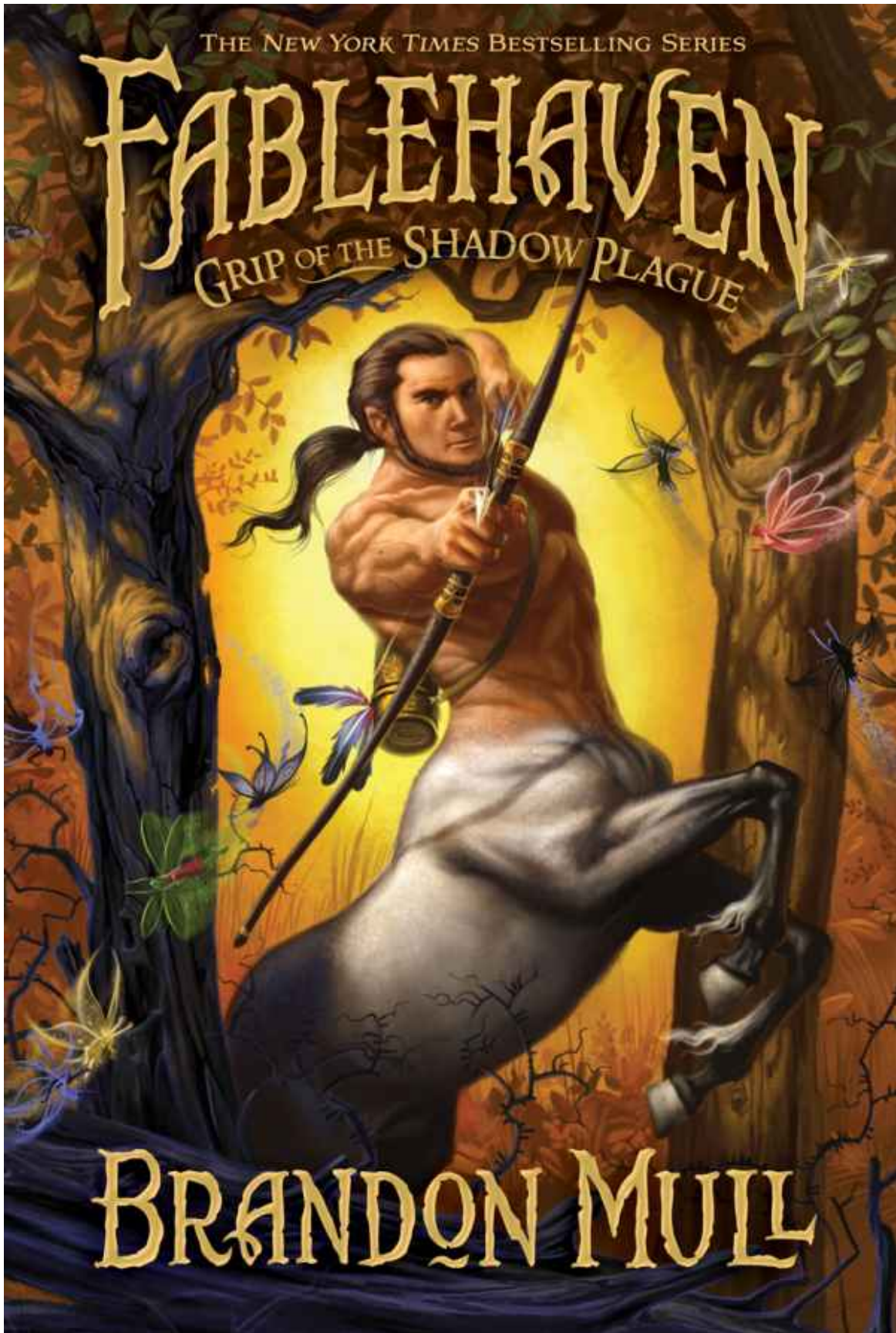
BOOK THREE

Fablehaven: Grip of the Shadow Plague

THE NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING SERIES

FABLEHAVEN

GRIP OF THE SHADOW PLAGUE



Mull, Brandon, 1974-

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Summary: When Kendra and Seth go to stay at their grandparents' estate, they discover that it is a sanctuary for magical creatures and that a battle between good and evil is looming.

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*For Cy, Marge, John, and Gladys, who prove that grandparents
can be friends and heroes.*

Chapter 1



Nipsies

On a muggy August day, Seth hurried along a faint path, eyes scanning the lush foliage to his left. Tall, mossy trees overshadowed a verdant sea of bushes and ferns. He felt damp all over—the humidity refused to let his sweat dry. Seth checked over his shoulder periodically and started at any sound in the undergrowth. Not only was Fablehaven a dangerous place to roam alone, he was terrified of getting spotted so far from the yard.

His skill at sneaking into the woods had improved over the long summer. The excursions with Coulter were fun, but not frequent enough to satisfy his appetite for adventure. There was something special about venturing out onto the preserve alone. He had become familiar with the woods surrounding the main house, and despite the concerns of his grandparents, he had proven to himself that he could explore safely. In order to avoid deadly situations, he rarely strayed far from the yard, and he avoided the areas he knew to be most perilous.

Today was an exception.

Today he was following directions to a secret meeting.

Although Seth felt certain he had interpreted the instructions correctly, he was beginning to fret that he had somehow overlooked the final marker. The trail he currently trod was one he had never roamed before, quite a distance from the main house. He remained intent on the shrubs along the left side of the path.

Many people had come and gone from Fablehaven over the summer. At breakfast, Grandpa Sorenson had notified Seth, Kendra, Coulter, and Dale that Warren and Tanu would be returning home that evening. Seth was excited for a reunion with his friends, but knew that the more people who were at the house, the more eyes would be watching to impede his unauthorized expeditions. Today was probably the last time he would be able to slip out on his own for a while.

Just as he was losing faith, Seth observed a stick topped by a large pinecone planted in the ground not far from the path. He should not have worried about missing it—the tall marker was unmistakable. Standing beside the stick, Seth took his compass from his emergency kit, found northeast, and set off on a heading not quite perpendicular to the meager trail.

The ground sloped mildly upward. He swerved to avoid some thorny, flowering plants. Birds twittered in the leafy branches overhead. A butterfly with wide, vibrant wings bobbed on the breezeless air. Because of the milk he had drunk that morning, Seth knew it was actually a butterfly. Had it been a fairy, he would have recognized it as such.

“Pssst,” a voice hissed from the bushes off to one side, “over here.”

Seth swiveled and saw Doren, the satyr, peering over a glossy shrub with broad leaves. The satyr motioned him over.

“Hey, Doren,” Seth said in a low voice, trotting over to where the satyr crouched. He found Newel hiding there as well, his horns somewhat longer, his skin slightly more freckled, and his hair a bit redder than Doren’s.

“What about the brute?” Newel asked.

“He promised to meet me here,” Seth assured them. “Mendigo is covering his chores at the stables.”

“If he doesn’t show, the deal is off,” Newel threatened.

“He’ll be here,” Seth said.

“Did you bring the merchandise?” Doren asked, trying to sound casual, but unable to hide the desperation in his gaze.

“Forty-eight size C batteries,” Seth said. He unzipped a duffel bag and let the satyrs inspect the contents. Earlier in the summer, Seth had given the pair dozens of batteries as a reward for helping him and his sister sneak into his grandfather’s home under dire circumstances. The satyrs had already depleted their bounty watching their portable television.

“Look at them, Doren,” Newel breathed.

“Hours upon hours of entertainment,” Doren muttered reverently.

“The sports alone!” Newel cried.

“Dramas, sitcoms, cartoons, soap operas, talk shows, game shows, reality shows,” Doren listed lovingly.

“So many lovely ladies,” Newel purred.

“Even the commercials are amazing,” Doren enthused. “So many technological marvels!”

“Stan would flip out if he knew,” Newel murmured gleefully.

Seth understood that Newel was right. His Grandpa Sorenson worked hard to limit the amount of technology on the preserve. He wanted to keep the magical creatures of Fablehaven unspoiled by modern influences. He did not even have a television in his own home.

“So where is the gold?” Seth asked.

“Not far ahead,” Newel said.

“Gold has become harder to find since Nero moved his hoard,” Doren apologized.

“Accessible gold,” Newel amended. “We know about plenty of treasure hidden around Fablehaven.”

“Most of it is cursed or guarded,” Doren explained. “For example, we know a wonderful nest of jewels stowed in a pit under a boulder, if you don’t mind chronic flesh-eating infections.”

“And a priceless collection of gilded weapons in an armory protected by a vengeful family of ogres,” Newel added.

“But up ahead there’s lots of gold with almost no strings attached,” Doren promised.

“I still think I should get paid extra since you need my help collecting it,” Seth complained.

“Now, Seth, don’t be ungrateful,” Newel chided. “We set a price. You agreed. Fair is fair. You don’t have to help us retrieve the gold. We can just call the whole thing off.”

Seth looked from one goatman to the other. Sighing, he zipped up the duffel bag. “Maybe you’re right. This feels too risky.”

“Or we could up your commission by twenty percent,” Newel blurted, placing a hairy hand on the bag.

“Thirty,” Seth said flatly.

“Twenty-five,” Newel countered.

Seth unzipped the bag again.

Doren clapped his hands and stamped his hooves. “I love happy endings.”

“It isn’t over until I have the gold,” Seth reminded them. “You’re sure this treasure will truly be mine? No angry trolls will come to claim it?”

“No curses,” Newel said.

“No powerful beings seeking retribution,” Doren asserted.

Seth folded his arms. “Then why do you need my help?”

“This stash used to be free money,” Newel said. “The easiest payday at Fablehaven. With the help of your oversized bodyguard, it can be a bargain again.”

“Hugo won’t have to hurt anybody,” Seth confirmed.

“Relax,” Newel said. “We’ve been over this. The golem won’t need to harm a fly.”

Doren held up a hand. “I hear somebody coming.” Seth heard nothing. Newel sniffed the air.

“It’s the golem,” Newel reported.

Several moments later, Seth detected the heavy footfalls of Hugo’s approach. Before long, the golem crashed into view, crunching through the undergrowth. An apelike figure fashioned out of soil, clay, and stone, Hugo had a thick build and disproportionately large hands and feet. Currently one arm was somewhat smaller than the other. Hugo had lost an arm in a battle with Olloch the Glutton, and despite frequent mud baths, the limb had not quite finished re-forming.

The golem came to a stop towering above Seth and the satyrs, who barely reached his massive chest. “Set,” the golem intoned in a deep voice that sounded like huge stones grinding together.

“Hi, Hugo,” Seth replied. The golem had only recently begun attempting simple words. He understood everything anyone told him, but rarely sought to express himself verbally.

“Good to see you, big guy,” Doren said brightly with a wave and a broad smile.

“Will he cooperate?” Newel asked out the side of his mouth.

“Hugo doesn’t have to obey me,” Seth said. “I don’t officially control him like Grandma and Grandpa do. But he’s learning to make his own decisions. We’ve done some private adventuring together over the summer. He’ll usually go along with whatever I suggest.”

“Fair enough,” Doren said. He clapped his hands together and rubbed them briskly. “Newel, my fellow gold digger, we may be back in business.”

“Will you finally explain what we’re doing?” Seth begged.

“Have you ever heard of the nipsies?” Newel asked.

Seth shook his head.

“Tiny little critters,” Doren elaborated, “smallest of the fairy folk.” The satyrs watched Seth expectantly.

Seth shook his head again.

“They’re most closely related to brownies, but stand at only a fraction of the height,” Newel said. “As you know, brownies are experts at mending, salvaging, and inventively recycling. Nipsies are also master artisans, but they tend to start from scratch, tapping into natural resources to acquire raw materials.”

Doren leaned close to Seth and spoke confidentially. “Nipsies have a fascination with shiny metals and stones, and a knack for finding them.”

Newel winked.

Seth crossed his arms. “What will stop them from taking their treasure back?”

Newel and Doren burst out laughing. Seth frowned. Newel placed a hand on his shoulder. “Seth, a nipsie is about this big.” Newel held his thumb and forefinger half an inch apart. Doren snorted as he tried to resist further laughter. “They can’t fly, and they have no magic to attack or harm.”

“In that case, I still don’t see why you need my help getting the gold,” Seth maintained.

The chuckling subsided. “What nipsies *can* do is prepare traps and plant dangerous vegetation,” Doren said. “The little nippers apparently took umbrage at the tributes Newel and I demanded, so they erected defenses to keep us away. Hugo here should have no trouble getting us into their domain.”

Seth narrowed his eyes. “Why don’t the nipsies get help from Grandpa?”

“No offense,” Newel said, “but many creatures at Fablehaven would endure considerable hardship to avoid human interference. Don’t worry about the pipsqueaks appealing to Stan—he won’t hear about this from them. What do you say? Shall we grab some easy gold?”

“Lead the way,” Seth said. He turned to the golem. “Hugo, are you willing to help us visit the nipsies?”

Hugo held up an earthen hand, the thumb and forefinger almost touching. He gave a slight nod.

They tramped forward through the undergrowth until Newel raised a cautionary fist. From the edge of a clearing, Seth saw a wide meadow with a grassy hill in the middle. The sides of the hill were steep, but ended abruptly about twenty feet above the ground, as if the top were flat. “We’ll need Hugo to get us into the hill,” Newel whispered.

“Would you?” Seth asked the golem.

Hugo effortlessly placed Newel on one shoulder, Doren on the other, and cradled Seth in his larger arm. The golem set off across the meadow, crossing to the hill with long strides. Near the base of the hill, the weeds at Hugo’s feet began to writhe and snap. Seth saw thorny vines curling around the golem’s ankles, and the green heads of carnivorous plants striking at his shins.

“Part of the problem right there,” Doren pointed out. “The little nippers cultivated all sorts of venomous plants around the outskirts of their territory.”

“Underhanded vermin,” Newel grumbled. “I was limping for a week.”

“We were lucky to get away with our skins,” Doren said. “We need to reach the other side of the hill.”

“The slopes of the hill are full of traps,” Newel explained. “A sealed entrance awaits on the far side.”

“Take us around the hill, Hugo,” Seth said.

The aggressive plants continued lashing and squirming and biting, but Hugo strode forward heedless of the onslaught. On the far side of the hill, they found an irregular boulder as tall as a man embedded at the base of the slope. A gooey mass of yellow slime pooled around the stone.

“Have Hugo shove the stone aside,” Doren suggested.

“You heard him,” Seth said.

Hugo stepped onto the slick slime, which slurped against his huge feet. With his free hand, Hugo thrust the boulder aside as if it were made of papier-mâché, revealing the mouth of a tunnel.

“Put us down in the entrance,” Newel said.

“And then keep the slime at bay,” Doren added.

“Do it, please,” Seth implored.

Hugo placed Seth at the entrance to the tunnel, then set the satyrs beside him. The golem turned and began kicking away the slime, which splashed through the air in sticky globs and strands.

“He comes in handy,” Newel acknowledged, nodding toward Hugo.

“We need to get one for ourselves,” Doren agreed.

Seth stared at the walls of the tunnel. They were made of polished white stone with veins of blue and green. Intricate carvings etched the entire surface from floor to ceiling. Seth traced a finger over the elaborate designs.

“Not too shabby,” Newel commented.

Seth stepped back from the wall. “I can’t believe all the detail.”

“Wait until you see the Seven Kingdoms,” Doren said.

The three of them proceeded along the short tunnel. The roof was just high enough that none of them needed to crouch.

“Watch your step,” Newel said. “Take care not to crush a nipsie. Their lives are just as real and valuable as anyone’s. If you accidentally kill a nipsie, the protections of the foundational treaty of Fablehaven will no longer be yours.”

“He’s just saying that because of the time he stepped on a supply wagon and knocked the driver senseless,” Doren confided.

“He made a full recovery,” Newel replied stiffly.

“I don’t see any nipsies here in the tunnel,” Doren reported after bending down to study the smooth marble floor.

“Then tread lightly at the far side,” Newel recommended.

When Seth emerged from the far end of the tunnel, he unexpectedly stepped out into the sunlight. There was no top to the hill—the entire center had been excavated, leaving the slopes to form a circular wall around a unique community. “Look at that,” Seth mumbled.

The entire area inside the hill was landscaped in miniature, bristling with tiny castles, mansions, factories, warehouses, shops, mills, theaters,

arenas, and bridges. The architecture was complex and varied, incorporating soaring spires, swooping rooftops, spiraling towers, fragile arches, cartoonish chimneys, colorful canopies, columned walkways, multi-tiered gardens, and glistening domes. The nipsies constructed with the finest wood and stone, adding a gleam to many of their fanciful structures with precious metals and gemstones. Radiating out from a central pond, an elaborate irrigation system comprised of canals, aqueducts, ponds, and dams connected seven sprawling communities of dense habitations.

“Feast your eyes on the Seven Kingdoms of the nipsies,” Newel said.

“See that squarish building there?” Doren asked, pointing. “The one with the pillars and the statues out front? That’s the royal treasury of the Third Kingdom. Not a bad place to begin if they fail to cooperate.”

Among the splendid edifices of the Seven Kingdoms, the tallest of which barely reached the height of Seth’s knees, scurried thousands of minuscule people. At first glance they looked like insects. After rummaging through his emergency kit, Seth crouched near the mouth of the engraved tunnel where a crew of nipsies had been digging and peered at the undersized workers through a magnifying glass. They wore dapper clothing and, despite falling short of half an inch, looked just like humans. The group Seth was watching made animated gestures in his direction as they scurried away. Tiny bells started ringing, and many of the nipsies began to flee indoors or into holes in the ground.

“They’re scared of us,” Seth said.

“They’d better be,” Newel blustered. “We’re their supreme gigantic overlords, and they tried to lock us out with predatory plants and carnivorous slime.”

“Look there, by the reflecting pool,” Doren mourned, extending a hand. “They tore down our statues!”

Remarkable likenesses of Newel and Doren, each over a foot tall, lay toppled and defaced near vacant grandstands.

“Somebody has gotten much too big for their britches,” Newel growled. “Who has desecrated the Monument to the Overlords?”

Pandemonium continued in the bustling streets. Frantic crowds pressed to get indoors. Dozens of nipsies recklessly descended the scaffolding of a building under construction. Nipsies armed with diminutive weapons congregated on the roof of the royal treasury.

“I see a delegation gathering around the horn,” Doren said, motioning at an eighteen-inch tower topped by a large, pearl-colored megaphone.

Newel winked at Seth. “Time to open negotiations.”

“Are you sure this is right?” Seth asked. “Taking from these little guys?”

Doren slapped Seth on the back. “Nipsies live to sniff out pockets of ore. Our taking some of their stored wealth gives them something to do!”

“Hail, Newel and Doren,” a tiny voice chimed. Even magnified by the megaphone, it was squeaky and hard to hear. Stepping carefully, Seth and the satyrs leaned in closer. “We, the nipsies of the Third Kingdom, are overjoyed at your long-awaited return.”

“Overjoyed, are you?” Newel said. “Poisonous plants were not exactly the welcome we expected.”

The nipsies on the tower conferred together before answering. “We regret if the defenses we erected of late have proven problematic. We felt an increase in security was warranted due to the unsavory character of certain potential pillagers.”

“Little nipper almost makes it sound like he’s not talking about us,” Doren murmured.

“They’re none too shabby when it comes to diplomacy,” Newel agreed. He raised his voice. “I noticed that our monuments have fallen into disrepair. Our tribute is long overdue.”

Again the delegation on the tower huddled before responding. “We regret any lack of appreciation you may perceive,” a voice squeaked. “You arrive in a desperate season. As you know, since time out of mind, the Seven Kingdoms of the nipsies have dwelt in peace and prosperity, interrupted only by the abusive solicitations of certain gigantic outlanders. But dark times have befallen us of late. The Sixth and Seventh Kingdoms have united in war against the rest of us. They recently decimated the Fourth Kingdom. We and the Second Kingdom are harboring thousands of refugees. The Fifth Kingdom is under siege. In the First Kingdom there is talk of retreat, a mass exodus to a new homeland.

“As you are aware, we nipsies have never been a warlike people. It is plain that a sinister influence has overcome the citizens of the Sixth and Seventh Kingdoms. We fear they will not be satisfied until they have conquered us all. As we speak, their navy sails toward our shores. If you

simultaneously attack our community from the rear, I fear the Seven Kingdoms may fall into darkness. However, if you lend us aid in this tragic hour, we will gladly reward you handsomely.”

“Allow us a moment to deliberate,” Newel said, pulling Doren and Seth in close. “You think this is a trick? What the nipsies lack in size, they often make up for in guile.”

“I see a large fleet of black ships, there in the central pool,” Doren said. Although the biggest ships were no larger than Seth’s shoes, there were dozens of them approaching.

“Aye,” Newel said. “And look off to the left. The Fourth Kingdom does appear to be in ruins.”

“But who ever heard of nipsies at war?” Doren questioned.

“We’d better have a chat with the Seventh Kingdom,” Newel resolved. “Hear their version of things.”

“We will return,” Doren declared to the nipsies on the tower. He and Newel began walking away.

“Who are you?” the voice chirped from the megaphone. “The one without horns.”

“Me?” Seth asked, placing a hand against his chest. “I’m Seth.”

“O wise and prudent Seth,” the voice resumed, “please prevail on the goat giants to come to our aid. Do not allow the wicked elders of the traitorous kingdoms to seduce them.”

“I’ll see what I can do,” Seth said, hurrying after Newel and Doren, watching the ground carefully to avoid flattening any nipsies. He caught up to the satyrs outside of a walled kingdom built of black stone and flying sable banners. The streets of the kingdom were virtually empty. Many of the nipsies in view wore armor and bore weapons. This kingdom had a tower with a megaphone as well.

“The wall is new,” Doren remarked.

“And I don’t recall everything looking so black,” Newel said.

“They really do appear more warlike,” Doren conceded.

“Here they come up the tower,” Newel observed, nodding toward the black megaphone.

“Greetings, worthy overlords,” a voice squealed. “You have returned in time to witness the culmination of our labors and to share in the spoils.”

“Why are you waging war with the other kingdoms?” Newel asked.

“You have yourselves to thank,” the speaker answered. “The Seven Kingdoms sent out many parties in search of methods for preventing your return. No party ventured farther than mine. We learned much. Our vision expanded. While the other kingdoms constructed defenses, we quietly rallied support within the Sixth and Seventh Kingdoms and developed engines of war. After all, as you have long known, why *make* when you can *take*?”

Newel and Doren shared an uneasy glance.

“What would you have us do?” Doren asked.

“Victory is already inevitable, but if you help hasten our hour of triumph, we will reward you far more generously than any of the other kingdoms. Most of our riches are below ground, a secret they would never share. Surely the others have solicited your aid in stopping us. Such action would prove disastrous to you. We are in allegiance with a new master who will one day rule all. Stand against us, and you stand against him. All who defy him must perish. Join us. Avoid the wrath of our master, and reap the handsomest reward.”

“Can I borrow your lens?” Doren asked.

Seth handed the satyr his magnifying glass. Doren stepped over the city wall into a vacant square, squatted, and examined the figures on the tower. “You two will want to have a look,” he advised soberly.

Doren moved out of the way, and Newel took a long look through the magnifying glass, followed by Seth. The tiny men on the tower looked different from the others Seth had seen. Their skin was gray, their eyes bloodred, and their mouths fanged.

“What has happened to your countenances?” Newel asked.

“Our true form revealed,” the voice responded from the megaphone. “This is how we look with all illusion stripped away.”

“They’ve been corrupted somehow,” Doren hissed.

“You won’t actually help them?” Seth said.

Newel shook his head. “No. But it may not be wise to resist them either. Perhaps we should avoid involvement.” He looked to Doren. “We do have an appointment elsewhere shortly.”

“That’s right,” Doren said, “I had almost forgotten our other engagement. We don’t want to disappoint the, uh, hamadryads. Can’t afford to get behind schedule. We’d better head out.”

“You don’t have an appointment,” Seth accused. “We can’t just abandon the good nipsies to be destroyed.”

“If you’re so big on heroism,” Newel said, “you go stop the navy.”

“My job was to get us in here,” Seth replied. “If you want batteries, you need to earn the gold yourself.”

“He has a point,” Doren admitted.

“We don’t need to earn anything,” Newel asserted. “We can go take what we need from the Third Kingdom treasury and be gone.”

“No way,” Seth said, shaking an upraised hand. “I won’t accept stolen payment. Not after what happened with Nero. The Third Kingdom offered an honest reward if you help them. You were the one telling me the nipsies can’t harm us. Is that any different just because some turned evil? Tell you what, I’ll even waive my extra twenty-five percent.”

“Hmmm.” Newel rubbed his chin.

“Think of all the shows,” Doren urged.

“Very well,” Newel said. “I’d hate to see this little civilization ruined. But don’t blame me if the eerie nipsies and their nefarious masters come hunting us down.”

“You’ll regret this,” the hostile nipsies cried through the megaphone.

“Will I?” Newel asked, kicking a hoof through the city wall. He ripped the megaphone off the tower and threw it over the side of the excavated hill.

“I’ll go stop the siege of the Fifth Kingdom,” Doren offered.

“You stay put,” Newel ordered. “No need to give them a score to settle with both of us.”

“They really got under your skin,” Doren chuckled. “What are they going to do?”

“There is a dark influence at work here,” Newel said grimly. “But if I’m going to defy them at all, I may as well finish the job.” He tore up the roof of a solid-looking building and scooped out a handful of minute gold ingots, dumping them into a pouch he wore at his waist. “Here’s a lesson for you,” Newel said, reaching into the treasure house a second time.

“Don’t try to threaten the supreme gigantic overlords. We do as we please.”

Newel strode off into the pond, which was never any deeper than his furry shins. He rounded up the flotilla of ships and began carrying them back to the Seventh Kingdom, snapping off the masts and scattering the vessels around the city.

“Careful not to kill any of them,” Doren cautioned.

“I’m being careful,” Newel replied, sloshing through the pond, sending ripples of water crashing into the fragile docks. When he had dumped the final ships in an empty marketplace, Newel crossed to the Fifth Kingdom and began smashing the little siege engines and catapults that were attacking fortified locations around the city, including the principal castle.

Seth watched the proceedings with undivided interest. In a way, it was like witnessing a spoiled child destroying his toys. And yet when he looked more closely, he beheld the numerous lives the satyr’s actions were affecting. From the perspective of the nipsies, a thousand-foot giant was thundering through their world, changing the course of a desperate war in a matter of minutes.

Newel scooped hundreds of attacking troops out of the Fifth Kingdom and placed them in the Seventh. Then he demolished several of the bridges that gave the Sixth Kingdom access to the Fifth. He stole several golden decorations from the proud towers in the Sixth Kingdom and systematically tore down their defenses. In the end, Newel returned to the tower of the Seventh Kingdom where the megaphone had been.

“Be warned—cease to make war, or I will return. Next time I will not leave so much of your kingdoms intact.” Newel turned to face Doren and Seth. “Come on.”

The three of them walked over to the Third Kingdom, near the engraved tunnel that led back to Hugo. “We have done what we can to halt your war,” Newel declared.

“All hail the supreme gigantic overlords!” a small voice called through the pearly megaphone. “Today will ever be a holiday to honor your gallantry. We will raise and refurbish your monuments to unsurpassed splendor. Please take what you wish from the royal treasury.”

“Don’t mind if I do,” Newel said, prying open the wall and scooping out infinitesimal gold, silver, and platinum coins along with some relatively large gemstones. “You nipsies keep your guard up. Something is grievously wrong with your cohorts over in Kingdoms Six and Seven.”

“Long live Newel!” the squeaky voice approved. “Long live Doren! Long live Seth! Wise counsel from our heroic protectors!”

“Looks like we’re done here for now,” Doren said.

“Nice job,” Seth said, clapping Newel on the back.

“Not a bad day’s work,” Newel sniffed, patting his bulging pouches. “Several kingdoms saved, a couple of kingdoms humbled, and a treasure won. Let’s go weigh our loot. We’ve got shows to catch.”

Chapter 2



Reunion

For Kendra Sorenson, there was no such thing as total darkness anymore. She sat in a chilly hall in the dungeon underneath the main house at Fablehaven, her back to a stone wall, her knees drawn up to her chest. She was facing a large cabinet with gold trim, the sort of cabinet a magician would use to make an assistant disappear. Despite the absence of light, she could make out the contours of the Quiet Box without difficulty. The hall was dim, the colors muted, but unlike even the goblin wardens who patrolled the dungeon, she needed no candle or torch to navigate the gloomy corridors. Her heightened vision was one of many consequences of her having become fairykind the previous summer.

Kendra knew that Vanessa Santoro waited inside the box. Part of Kendra desperately wanted to speak with her former friend, even though Vanessa had betrayed the family and almost gotten them killed. Her desire to communicate with Vanessa had little to do with nostalgic feelings about the conversations they had shared. Kendra yearned for clarifications about the final note Vanessa had scribbled on the floor of her cell prior to being sentenced to the Quiet Box.

Upon discovering the note Vanessa had left, Kendra had immediately shared it with her grandparents. Grandpa Sorenson had scowled down at the glowing letters by the ghostly light of an umite candle for several minutes, weighing the unsettling accusations left by a desperate traitor. Kendra still recalled his initial verdict:

“This is either the most disturbing truth I have ever encountered, or the most brilliant lie.”

Nearly two months later, they were no closer to either verifying or disproving the message. If the message were true, the Sphinx, the greatest ally of the caretakers, was actually their archenemy in disguise. The message accused him of using his intimate association with the protectors of the magical preserves to further the sinister schemes of the Society of the Evening Star.

Alternatively, if the message were false, Vanessa was vilifying the most powerful friend of the caretakers in order to create internal dissension and provide a reason for her captors to release her from her imprisonment in the Quiet Box. Without outside assistance, she would remain trapped inside the Quiet Box in a suspended state until someone else took her place. Potentially, she could wait there standing upright in black silence for centuries.

Kendra rubbed her shins. Without another person to take Vanessa’s place temporarily, releasing her one-time friend from the Quiet Box for a brief conversation would be impossible. Not to mention the concern that Vanessa was a narcoblix. Over the summer, before she was unmasked, Vanessa had bitten nearly everybody at Fablehaven. As a result, once outside of the Quiet Box, she could control any of them whenever they were asleep.

Kendra would have to wait for a chat with Vanessa until everyone else agreed. Who knew how long that might take! The last time they had discussed the subject, nobody had been in favor of giving Vanessa a chance to further explain herself. Under a strict vow of secrecy, Grandpa and Grandma had shared the troubling message with Warren, Tanu, Coulter, Dale, and Seth. They had all taken measures to investigate the truthfulness of the note on the floor. Hopefully tonight, with Tanu and Warren returning from missions, they would have better information. If not, might the others finally conclude that the time had come to hear what else Vanessa had to say? The narcoblix had tantalized them by hinting that she knew more than she had revealed in her note. Kendra felt convinced that Vanessa could shed more light on the subject. She resolved that once again she would argue in favor of hearing more from Vanessa.

A flickering light danced at the end of the hall. Slaggo rounded a corner. The creepy goblin carried a crusty bucket in one hand while clutching a guttering torch in the other. “Skulking in the dungeon again?” he called to

Kendra, pausing. “We can put you to work. The pay is unbeatable. You like raw hen flesh?”



“I’d hate to barge in on your fun,” Kendra snapped. She had not been very polite to Slaggo or Voorsh ever since they had almost fed her to her captive grandparents.

Slaggo leered. “You’d think they locked your favorite pet in the Box, the way you sulk.”

“I’m not pining for her,” Kendra corrected. “I’m thinking.”

He took a deep breath, surveying the hall smugly. “Hard to picture more inspiring surroundings,” he admitted. “Nothing like the futile moans of the condemned to set your wheels turning.”

The goblin proceeded forward, licking his lips. He was short, bony, and greenish, with beady eyes and bat-wing ears. He had looked much more fearsome when Kendra was temporarily seven inches tall.

Instead of passing her, he halted again, this time gazing at the Quiet Box. “I’d like to know who was in there before,” he murmured, almost to himself. “I’ve wondered every day for decades . . . now I’ll never know.”

The Quiet Box had contained the same secret prisoner ever since it had been brought to Fablehaven, until the Sphinx had swapped Vanessa for the mysterious occupant. The Sphinx had insisted that only in the Quiet Box would Vanessa be unable to use her ability to control others in their sleep. If Vanessa’s final message were true, and the Sphinx was evil, he had probably released an ancient and powerful collaborator. If the message were false, the Sphinx was merely relocating the prisoner to a new place of confinement. None of them had seen the identity of the secret captive, only a chained figure whose head was hidden by a coarse burlap sack.

“I wouldn’t mind knowing his identity either,” Kendra said.

“I got a whiff of him, you know,” Slaggo said casually, giving Kendra a sidelong glance. “I lay low in the shadows as the Sphinx walked him by.” He was clearly proud of the fact.

“Could you tell anything about him?” Kendra asked, taking the bait.

“I’ve always had a reliable sniffer,” Slaggo said, wiping his nostrils with his forearm and rocking back on his heels. “Definitely a male. Something odd about the scent, uncommon, hard to place. Not entirely human, if I were to guess.”

“Interesting,” Kendra said.

“Wish I could have gotten a closer smell,” Slaggo lamented. “I would have tried, but the Sphinx is not a man to trifle with.”

“What do you know about the Sphinx?”

Slaggo shrugged. “Same as anyone. He’s supposed to be wise and powerful. He smells exactly like a man. If he’s something else, he hides it perfectly. Man or not, he’s very old. He carries the scent of another age.”

Slaggo of course knew nothing about the note. “He seems like a good person,” Kendra said.

Slaggo shrugged. “Can I offer you some glop?” He swung the bucket in front of her.

“I’ll pass,” Kendra said, trying not to inhale the putrid stench.

“Fresh off the fire,” he said. She shook her head, and he strolled away. “Enjoy the darkness.”

Kendra almost smiled. Slaggo had no idea how well she could see without light. He probably thought she adored sitting alone in the dark. Which meant he thought she was his kind of girl. Of course, she *had* made a habit of spending time alone in a dungeon, so maybe he wasn’t far off.

When the goblin was out of sight and the orange flicker of his torch had dwindled, Kendra arose and placed a palm against the smooth wood of the Quiet Box. Despite the fact that Vanessa had betrayed them, despite the reality that she was a proven liar, despite her obvious motivation for pretending to possess valuable information, Kendra believed the message on the floor, and she longed to know more.

* * *

Seth arrived at the dinner table wearing his best poker face. Coulter, the magical relics expert, had cooked meat loaf, with baked potatoes, broccoli, and fresh rolls on the side. Everyone was already seated—Grandpa, Grandma, Dale, Coulter, and Kendra.

“Tanu and Warren haven’t shown up yet?” Seth asked.

“They called a few minutes ago,” Grandpa said, holding up his new cell phone. “Tanu’s plane got in late. They’re grabbing food on the road. They should arrive in about an hour.”

Seth nodded. The afternoon had ended profitably. He had already tucked away his share of the gold in the attic bedroom he shared with Kendra, the leather pouch containing the treasure bundled in a pair of athletic shorts at the bottom of one of his drawers. He still found it hard to believe he had stashed

the gold before anybody could sabotage his success. All he had to do now was play it cool.

He wondered how much the gold was worth. Probably a few hundred thousand at least. Not bad for a not-yet-thirteen-year-old.

The one complication was the nipsies. Surely, as caretaker, Grandpa Sorenson knew of their existence. Seth was pretty sure Grandpa Sorenson would want an update on what had happened to them so he could investigate further. Who was the evil master the warlike nipsies had mentioned? Could it be the Sphinx? There were any number of shady candidates at Fablehaven. Despite the action Newel had taken to prevent the scary nipsies from defeating the nice ones, Seth felt certain that the conflict was not over. If he did nothing, the good nipsies could be wiped out.

Still, Seth hesitated. If he spilled what he had learned about the nipsies, Grandpa would know he had been venturing into prohibited areas of Fablehaven. Not only would he get privileges revoked, he would almost certainly have to return the gold. It made Seth shrivel inside to think of how disappointed everyone would be in him.

There was a chance Grandpa would discover what was wrong with the nipsies as part of his routine duties watching over the preserve. But considering the defenses the nipsies had erected, Grandpa might not have any plans to visit them in the near future. Would he find out what was going on in time to prevent a tragedy? Ever since Kendra had discovered the final note from Vanessa, everyone had been so preoccupied by events outside of Fablehaven that Seth doubted whether anyone would check up on the nipsies for a long while. There was even a chance that Grandpa knew nothing about them.

“We’ll still meet tonight to discuss what Tanu and Warren have discovered, right?” Kendra sounded concerned.

“Of course,” Grandma said, spooning broccoli onto her plate.

“Do we know if they had much success?” Kendra asked.

“All I know is that Tanu failed to find Maddox,” Grandpa said, referring to the fairy dealer who had ventured onto the fallen Brazilian preserve. “And Warren has done some serious traveling. I refuse to risk talking about the details of our secret concern on the telephone.”

Seth added some ketchup to his meat loaf and took a bite. It was almost too hot, but tasted great. “What about my folks?” Seth asked. “Are they still pressuring you to send us home?”

“We’re running out of excuses to stretch your stay much longer,” Grandma said, giving Grandpa a worried glance. “School begins in just a couple of weeks.”

“We can’t go home!” Kendra exclaimed. “Especially not until we prove whether the Sphinx is innocent. The Society knows where we live, and they’re not afraid to approach us there.”

“I wholeheartedly agree,” Grandpa said. “The problem remains how to persuade your parents.”

Kendra and Seth had been at Fablehaven the entire summer under the pretense of helping to care for their injured grandfather. He really had been injured when they had first arrived, but the artifact they had collected from the inverted tower had healed him. The original plan had been for Kendra and Seth to stay for a couple of weeks. Grandma and Grandpa had managed to extend that to over a month through telephone conversations—Kendra and Seth kept reporting how much fun they were having, and Grandma and Grandpa emphasized how helpful they were being.

After a month, Grandpa could tell that his son and daughter-in-law were truly getting impatient, so he invited them to visit for a week. Grandma and Grandpa had decided that the best solution would be to help them discover the truth about Fablehaven, so they could all openly discuss the danger that Kendra and Seth were in. But no matter how many clues they left or hints they offered, Scott and Marla refused to catch on. In the end, Tanu had fixed them a tea that left them open to suggestion, and Grandpa, wearing a phony cast, had secured another month for the kids to visit. Yet once again, their time was almost up.

“Tanu is coming back,” Seth reminded them. “Maybe he can slip Dad some more of that tea.”

“We need to get beyond temporary remedies,” Grandma said. “The current threats could persist for years. Perhaps the Society of the Evening Star has lost interest in you now that the artifact is no longer at Fablehaven. But my instincts tell me otherwise.”

“As do mine,” Grandpa agreed, giving Kendra a significant stare.

“Can we force Mom and Dad to see through the illusion hiding the creatures here?” Kendra asked. “Just give them milk and point them toward the fairies? Take them into the barn to see Viola?”

Grandpa shook his head. “I’m not sure. Total unbelief is a powerful inhibitor. It can blind an individual to obvious truths, no matter what others

do or say.”

“The milk wouldn’t work on them?” Seth asked.

“It might not,” Grandpa said. “That is part of the reason I let people discover the secrets of Fablehaven through finding clues. First off, it gives them a choice about whether or not they want to know the truth about this place. And secondly, the curiosity wears down their unbelief. It doesn’t require much belief for the milk to work, but complete unbelief can be tough to overcome.”

“And you think Mom and Dad have no belief in them?” Kendra asked.

“As to the possibility of mythical creatures actually existing, they appear to have none at all,” Grandpa said. “I left them much more obvious clues than I provided for you and Seth.”

“I even had a conversation with them where I all but told them the truth about Fablehaven and my role here,” Grandma said. “I stopped once I could see they were gawking at me like I belonged in an asylum.”

“In some ways their unbelief is good for their safety,” Grandpa said. “It can be a protection from the influence of dark magic.”

Seth scowled. “Are you saying that magical creatures only exist if we believe in them?”

Grandpa dabbed at his lips with a napkin. “No. They exist independent of our belief. But usually some belief is necessary in order for us to interact with them. Furthermore, most magical creatures dislike unbelief enough to steer clear of it, in much the same way you or I might avoid an offensive odor. Unbelief is part of the reason many creatures chose to flee to these preserves.”

“Would it be possible for any of us to stop believing in magical creatures?” Kendra wondered.

“Don’t bother,” Coulter huffed. “Nobody could try harder than I have. Most of us just make the best of it.”

“Gets pretty hard to doubt once you’ve interacted with them,” Dale agreed. “Belief hardens into knowledge.”

“There are some who learn of this life and then flee it,” Grandma said. “They avoid the preserves and substances like Viola’s milk that can open their eyes. By turning their backs on all things magical, they let their knowledge lie dormant.”

“Sounds like good sense to me,” Coulter muttered.

“Your Grandma and Grandpa Larsen retired prematurely from their involvement with our secret society,” Grandpa said.

“Grandma and Grandpa Larsen knew about magical creatures?” Seth exclaimed.

“As much as we do or more,” Grandma said. “They ended their involvement around the time Seth was born. We all had such high hopes for your parents. We introduced them to one another and quietly encouraged their courtship. When Scott and Marla refused to show interest in our secret, your Grandma and Grandpa Larsen seemed to lose their commitment.”

“We had been friends with the Larsens since your parents were children,” Grandpa mentioned.

“Wait a minute,” Kendra said. “Did Grandma and Grandpa Larsen really die accidentally?”

“As far as we have ever been able to tell, yes,” Grandma said.

“They had retired from our community ten years prior,” Grandpa said. “It was simply a tragic mishap.”

“I never guessed that they would have known about the secret preserves,” Seth said. “They didn’t seem like the type.”

“They were very much the type,” Grandma assured them. “But they were good at keeping secrets, and at playing roles. They did a fair amount of spying for our cause back in the day. Both were involved with the Knights of the Dawn.”

Kendra had never considered the possibility that her deceased grandparents might have shared the secret knowledge held by the Sorensens. It made her miss them more than ever. It would have been so nice to share this amazing secret with them! Strange how two couples who knew the secret both had kids who refused to believe. “How will we ever convince Mom and Dad to let us stay here?” Kendra asked.

“Let your Grandpa and me keep working on that,” Grandma promised with a wink. “We still have another week or so.”

They finished the meal in silence. Everyone thanked Coulter for the meat loaf as they cleared the table together.

Grandpa led the way into the living room, where each of them found a seat. Kendra thumbed through an antique book of fairy tales. Before long, a key rattled and the front door opened. Tanu entered, a tall Samoan with heavy, sloping shoulders. One of his thickly muscled arms hung bandaged in

a sling. A satchel bulging with odd shapes dangled from the potion master's opposite shoulder. Behind him came Warren, wearing a leather jacket, his chin stubbly with three-day whiskers.

"Tanu!" Seth ran up to the big Samoan. "What happened?"

"This?" Tanu asked, indicating the injured arm.

"Yeah."

"Botched manicure," he said, dark eyes twinkling.

"I'm back too," Warren hinted.

"Sure, but you weren't sneaking onto a fallen preserve in South America," Seth told him dismissively.

"I had some close calls of my own," Warren mumbled. "Cool ones."

"We're glad you both made it back safely," Grandma said.

Warren scanned the living room and leaned toward Tanu. "Looks like we arrived late for a meeting."

"We're dying to hear what you found out," Kendra said.

"How about a drink of water?" Warren sniffed. "A little help with our bags? A warm handshake? A guy could get the feeling you only want him for his information."

"Cut the theatrics and have a seat," Dale said. Warren scowled at his older brother.

Tanu and Seth entered the room and took seats next to each other. Warren plopped down on the sofa beside Kendra.

"I'm glad we're all here," Grandpa said. "We in this room represent the only persons aware of the accusation that the Sphinx may be a traitor. It is imperative that we keep it that way. Should the accusation prove true, his vast network of deliberate and inadvertent spies are everywhere. Should the accusation prove false, this is hardly the time to spread rumors that could provoke dissension. Given all we have been through together, I feel sure we can confide in one another."

"What new information have you uncovered?" Grandma asked.

"Not much," Tanu said. "I got onto the Brazilian preserve. Things are a mess there. A reptilian demon named Lycerna has overthrown all order. If Maddox found a good place to hole up, he may be all right, but I wasn't able to locate him. I did deliver the tub, and I placed some coded messages as to where I hid it. He knows how to use it."

"Good man," Coulter approved.

“What tub?” Seth asked.

Coulter looked at Grandpa, who nodded. “An oversized, old-fashioned tin bathtub that happens to contain a shared transdimensional space linked to an identical tub in the attic.”

“That meant nothing to me,” Seth said.

“One moment,” Coulter said, rising and going into the other room. He returned with a battered leather satchel. After rummaging in the satchel for a moment, he retrieved a pair of tin cans. “These function the same way as the tubs, on a smaller scale. I have used them to send messages. Take this one, have a look inside.” He handed one of the tin cans to Seth.

“Empty,” Seth reported after glancing into it.

“Correct,” Coulter said. He removed a coin from his pocket and dropped it into the can he had retained. “Check again.”

Seth looked into the can and saw a quarter resting on the bottom. “There’s a quarter in here!” he exclaimed.

“Same quarter as I have in mine,” Coulter explained. “The cans are linked. They share the same space.”

“So now we have two quarters?” Seth asked.

“Only one quarter,” Coulter corrected. “Take it out.”

Seth dumped the quarter into his palm. Coulter held up his can. “See, my quarter is gone. You took it out of your can.”

“Awesome,” Seth breathed.

“Maddox can use the tub to get home, if he can find it,” Coulter said. “The only catch is that somebody has to be on our end to pull him out. Without outside help, he can emerge only from the tub he enters.”

“So if somebody was on the other end to help us out, we could get to the Brazilian preserve through an old bathtub in the attic?” Seth said.

Grandma raised her eyebrows. “If you wanted to risk getting devoured by a gargantuan serpentine demon, yes.”

“Wait,” Kendra said. “Why didn’t Tanu just come home through the tub?”

Tanu chuckled. “The plan was for me to use the tub after I delivered it, but I was also trying to ascertain whether the artifact had been removed from the Brazilian preserve. Sadly, I failed to find where the artifact was hidden. Lycerna cut off my escape route to the tub. I was lucky to make it out over the wall.”

“We’re talking about your side of the attic, right?” Seth asked. “The secret side—not where we’re sleeping.”

“Safe guess,” Grandma said.

“How’d you bust your arm?” Seth wondered.

“Honestly?” Tanu said sheepishly. “Dropping from the top of the wall to the ground.”

“I thought maybe the demon chomped you,” Seth sighed, looking a little disappointed.

Tanu gave a rueful smile. “I wouldn’t be here if she had.”

“Any evidence that could implicate the Sphinx as a cause for the fall of the Brazilian preserve?” Grandpa asked.

“I found nothing to indict him at the preserve,” Tanu said. “He was in the area soon after the trouble started, but he always shows up when things go wrong. Whether he was there to help or hinder, I have no idea.”

“How have you fared, Warren?” Grandpa asked. “Any news of the fifth secret preserve?”

“Still nothing. I keep hearing about the same four, the ones we already knew about. Australia. Brazil. Arizona. Connecticut. Nobody can give me a location for the fifth.”

Grandpa nodded, appearing mildly disappointed but unsurprised. “What of the other matter?”

“The Sphinx knows how to cover his tracks,” Warren said, his demeanor growing serious. “And he is not the sort of figure you ask questions about openly. Trying to discover his origin has felt like wandering through a maze full of dead ends. Every time I take a few steps in a new direction, I hit a new wall. I’ve been to New Zealand, Fiji, Ghana, Morocco, Greece, Iceland—the Sphinx has lived all over, and everywhere there are different theories about who he is and where he came from. Some say he is the avatar of a forgotten Egyptian god, some say he is a sea serpent cursed to roam dry land, some say he is an Arabian prince who won immortality by cheating the devil—every account is different, each more farfetched than the last. I’ve talked to caretakers, magical beings, historians, criminals, you name it. The guy is a ghost. The stories I’ve heard are too diverse. If you ask me, I’d say he started all the rumors himself to confuse the exact sort of investigation I’ve been trying to conduct.”

“The Sphinx has always shrouded himself in secrecy, which leaves him vulnerable to the sort of accusation Vanessa made,” Grandpa said.

“Which Vanessa knew,” Coulter pointed out. “He’s an easy target for slander. It isn’t the first time.”

“Yes, but usually the accusations are the baseless ranting of the fearful,” Grandma said. “This time, the circumstantial evidence is terrifying. Her explanation fit the events perfectly.”

“There is a reason we don’t convict people based on circumstantial evidence,” Tanu said. “We know firsthand how devious Vanessa can be. She could easily have used the facts of the circumstances to weave a convincing lie.”

“I have other news,” Warren announced. “The Knights of the Dawn are having their first united gathering in over ten years. All Knights are required to attend.”

Coulter sighed. “Never a good sign. The last united gathering I attended was when hard evidence came to light that the Society of the Evening Star was resurfacing.”

“You’re a Knight too?” Seth asked Coulter.

“Semi-retired. We’re not generally supposed to reveal ourselves, but I figure if I can’t trust you all, I can’t trust anyone. Besides, I’ll be in a grave before too long.”

“There’s more,” Warren continued. “The Captain wants me to bring Kendra to the event.”

“What?” Grandpa exclaimed. “Outrageous!”

“Only Knights are invited to the assemblies,” Grandma said.

“I know, I know, don’t shoot the messenger,” Warren said. “They want to induct her.”

“At her age!” Grandpa cried, his face reddening. “Are they recruiting at maternity wards these days?”

“And we all know who the Captain is,” Warren said, “though he never openly reveals himself.”

“The Sphinx?” Kendra guessed.

Grandpa nodded thoughtfully, pinching his lower lip. “Have they offered a reason?”

“The Captain suggested that she has talents essential to us in weathering the coming storm,” Warren said.

Grandpa buried his face in his hands. "What have I done?" he moaned. "It was my choice to introduce her to the Sphinx in the first place. Now, good or evil, he wants to exploit her abilities."

"We can't let her go," Grandma said adamantly. "If the Sphinx is also the leader of the Society, this is undoubtedly a trap. Who knows how many other Knights may be corrupt!"

"I have worked with many of the Knights," Tanu said. "I've seen lives risked and sacrificed. I would vouch that most are true protectors of the preserves. If the Knights are harming our cause, it's because they've been duped."

"You're a Knight too?" Seth asked.

"Like Warren, Tanu, Coulter, and Vanessa are all Knights of the Dawn," Grandpa said.

"Vanessa didn't turn out very well," Seth reminded them.

"Which is another good point," Grandma said. "Even if the Sphinx is honorable, Vanessa proves that the Knights have at least some traitors among them. A meeting where all the Knights are gathered could prove perilous for Kendra."

"Where will it be?" Grandpa asked.

Warren scratched the side of his head. "I'm not supposed to say, but half of us will have formal invitations by tomorrow, and the others have a right to know. Outside Atlanta, in the home of Wesley and Marion Fairbanks."

"Who are they?" Seth asked.

"Billionaire fairy enthusiasts," Grandma said. "They have a private collection of fairies and whirligigs."

"For which they paid handsomely," Grandpa added. "The Fairbankses have no idea of the extent of our community. They've never seen a preserve. They're outsiders, useful for funds and connections."

"And they have a big mansion ideal for gatherings," Coulter said.

"But there hasn't been a gathering for ten years?" Kendra asked.

"No united gathering," Tanu said. "A united gathering means everybody is supposed to come, no excuses. Secrecy is important to the Knights, so such gatherings are rare. Normally we assemble in smaller groups. When we do meet in a large body, we wear disguises. Only the Captain knows the identity of all the members of the brotherhood."

"And he might be a traitor," Kendra said.

“Right,” Warren agreed. “But I don’t see how we can deny the request.”

Grandpa stared at him, eyebrows raised. He motioned for Warren to explain further.

“The last thing we can afford to do, in case the Sphinx is actually an enemy, is show we are suspicious of him. Based on Vanessa’s assertion, if he is evil, there can be no question of how he would retaliate if he knew we had uncovered his secret.”

Grandpa nodded reluctantly. “If he were going to make a move against Kendra, it would probably not be when she is supposed to be under his protection. He knows that many assume he is the Captain of the Knights. I wonder why he is requesting her presence?”

“Perhaps he has a talisman that needs charging,” Grandma proposed. “Her ability to recharge magical objects through touch is unique.”

“Might even be the Brazilian artifact,” Tanu murmured.

The implications made the room go silent.

“Or the Sphinx may be on our side,” Coulter reminded everyone.

“When is the united gathering?” Grandpa asked.

“Three days,” Warren said. “You know how they never tell anyone until the last minute, to help prevent sabotage.”

“Are you a Knight too?” Seth asked Grandpa.

“I was,” Grandpa said. “None of the caretakers are in the brotherhood.”

“Will you be going?” Kendra asked him.

“The gatherings of the brotherhood are only for current members.”

“Tanu, Warren, and I will be there,” Coulter said. “I agree, regardless of the true intentions of the Sphinx, Kendra should attend. We’ll stay at her side.”

“Could we devise a plausible excuse for her absence?” Grandma asked.

Grandpa shook his head slowly. “If we had no doubts about the Sphinx, we would go out of our way to fulfill his request. Any excuse we offer might raise suspicion.” He turned to Kendra. “What do you say?”

“Sounds like I’d better go,” she said. “I’ve walked into more dangerous situations than this. The Sphinx would have to risk revealing himself in order to harm me. Besides, hopefully Vanessa is wrong. Do you think it might help to speak with her?”

“Help add to our confusion maybe,” Coulter spat. “How can any of us trust a word she says? She’s too dangerous. From my point of view, if we let her breathe fresh air, we’ll be playing right into her hands. Whether the note is true or false, escaping the Quiet Box was surely her only goal in leaving it.”

“I have to agree,” Grandma said. “I think if she could have added further proof to her accusation, she would have done so in the message. It was plenty long.”

“If her accusation proves valid, Vanessa may still be of great use,” Grandpa said. “There may be others in her organization whom she could reveal. Once we offer her the opportunity, we can count on her trying to use such information as leverage to avoid returning to the Quiet Box, which is not a headache I care to endure at the moment. For now, I would rather seek out more evidence on our own. Perhaps the four of you can learn more at the united gathering.”

“Then I’m going?” Kendra asked.

The adults in the room exchanged tacit glances before nodding.

“Then we only have one problem left to discuss,” Seth said.

Everyone turned to him.

“How do I get invited?”

Chapter 3



Sharing Discoveries

Kendra lay on her bed, perched on her elbows above an oversized journal, reading strong, slanted handwriting that looked like it belonged on the Declaration of Independence. The author of the journal was Patton Burgess, the former caretaker of Fablehaven, the man who had lured Lena the naiad out of her pond more than a hundred years ago. As she had scoured Patton's journals over the summer, Kendra had become more fascinated than ever by Lena's story.

Even though leaving the water had transformed the nymph to a mortal state, she had aged much more slowly than Patton. After Patton had succumbed to his years, Lena had traveled the world, eventually returning to Fablehaven to work with Kendra's grandparents. Kendra had met Lena the previous summer, and they had become fast friends. All of that had ended when Kendra had gotten help from the Fairy Queen to summon an army of giant fairies to stop a witch named Muriel and the demon she had freed. The fairies had defeated the demon, Bahumat, and imprisoned Muriel with him. Afterwards, they had repaired much of the hurt the witch had caused. They had changed Grandpa, Grandma, Seth, and Dale back from altered states, and rebuilt Hugo from scratch. They had also restored an unwilling Lena to her state as a naiad. Once back in the water, Lena had reverted to her former ways, and she had not seemed eager to return to dry land when Kendra had tried to offer help.

Kendra had good reason to study the journal entries. During her stay at Fablehaven, Vanessa had spent much of her time perusing the records of former caretakers. If, as a traitor, Vanessa had been so intent on examining the history contained in the journals, Kendra had decided the information must be valuable. No caretaker had kept a tenth as many records as Patton, and so Kendra had mostly found herself poring over his writings.

He was an intriguing man. He oversaw the construction of the new house and barn at Fablehaven, along with the stables, all still in use. He prevented the ogres from eradicating themselves by negotiating the end of an ancient feud. He helped erect the glass observation domes that served as safe rooms around the preserve. He mastered six of the languages spoken by magical beings, and used the knowledge to establish relationships with many of the most fearsome and elusive inhabitants of the preserve.

His interests were not limited to the upkeep and improvement of Fablehaven. Rather than staying rooted to the preserve, Patton traveled extensively in an era before airplanes made the globe feel small. Sometimes he was open about his visits to exotic locations like foreign preserves. Other times he omitted the destinations of his excursions. He was playfully boastful about his journeys, often referring to himself as the world's greatest adventurer.

In his writings, Patton was shameless about his ambition to woo Lena to be his bride. He detailed the gradual progress he made, playing music for her on his violin, writing her poems, beguiling her with stories, engaging her in conversation. It was clear that he obsessed over her. He knew what he wanted and never relented until she was his. Kendra was currently rereading the culminating entry of the romantic account:

Success! Victory! Jubilation! I should no longer be alive, though I have never felt more so! After the tiresome months, nay, years of waiting, of hoping, of striving, she reposes in a room in my home as I pen these exultant words. The truth of it refuses to settle in my mind. Never has a fairer maiden walked on dry land than my precious Lena. Never has a human heart felt more satisfied than mine.

I unwittingly put her affection to the test today. It shames me to confess my folly, but the disgrace is eclipsed by my elation. While adrift on the pond, I leaned too close to my love, and her wretched sisters promptly took advantage of my laxity and hauled me overboard. Tonight I should be

slumbering in an aquatic grave. I was insignificant compared to them in the water. But my love swam to my rescue. Lena was magnificent! She bettered no fewer than eight of the watery maids in order to wrest me from their clutches and deliver me to the shore. To complete the miracle, she joined me on land, at long last accepting my invitation and renouncing her claim on immortality.

After all, what is immortality when confined to a sad little pond with such petty companions? I will unveil wonders to her that others of her kind have never imagined. She shall be my queen, and I her most ardent admirer and protector.

I suppose I should thank her spiteful sisters for endeavoring to steal my life. Had such a dire situation failed to arise, I might never have inspired Lena to action!

It has not eluded my attention that many around me have elected to mock and deride my adoration behind my back. They anticipate a recurrence of the calamitous escapade that ruined my uncle. If only they could somehow sample the authenticity of my affection! This is no paltry dalliance with a dryad, no trifling indiscretion swollen out of proportion. History will not be imitated; rather, a new standard of love shall be established for the ages. Time will certify my devotion! On this I would gladly stake my very soul!

No matter how many times Kendra read those words, they never failed to thrill her. She could not help wondering if one day a person might experience such strong feelings for her. Having already heard Lena's side of the story, Kendra knew that the adoration expressed by Patton had been reciprocated over a lifelong romance. She tried to prevent her thoughts from wandering to Warren. Sure, he was nice-looking, and brave, and funny. But he was also way too old, and her distant cousin on top of it!

Kendra thumbed through the pages of the journal, enjoying the smell of the old paper, unable to avoid hoping that one day she would find someone like Patton Burgess.

An umite candle rested on the nightstand beside her bed. Vanessa had introduced Kendra to umite wax, a substance made by South American fairies dwelling in hivelike communities. When you wrote with an umite wax crayon, the words were invisible unless you read them by the light of a candle made from the same substance. Vanessa had used umite wax to

scrawl her final message on the floor of her cell. And Kendra had discovered that Vanessa had taken notes using umite wax in the journals she had studied.

Whenever Kendra lit the candle, she found herself guided to key pieces of underlined information, accompanied by occasional notes scrawled in the margins. She had identified the notes that Vanessa had left while deducing that the grove with the revenant was the hiding place for the inverted tower. She also found several false trails Vanessa had followed referencing other dangerous areas of Fablehaven, including a haunted tar pit, a poisonous bog, and the lair of a demon named Graulas. Kendra could not make sense of all the observations Vanessa had jotted—some were in an indecipherable shorthand.

Kendra sat up and opened a drawer, planning to light a match and use the candle to scour more pages. She had to do something to keep her mind off of her impending trip to Atlanta!

“Are you missing the library again?” Seth asked, startling her as he walked into the room.

Kendra turned to face her brother. “You caught me,” she congratulated him. “I’m reading.”

“I bet the librarians back home are panicking. Summer vacation, and no Kendra Sorenson to keep them in business. Have they been sending you letters?”

“Might not hurt you to pick up a book, just as an experiment.”

“Whatever. I looked up the definition for *nerd* in the dictionary. Know what it said?”

“I bet you’ll tell me.”

“If you’re reading this, you are one.”

“You’re a riot.” Kendra turned back to the journal, flipping to a random page.

Seth took a seat on his bed across from her. “Kendra, seriously, I can sort of see reading a cool book for fun, but dusty old journals? Really? Has anybody told you there are magical creatures out there?” He pointed at the window.

“Has anybody told you some of those creatures can eat you?” Kendra responded. “I’m not reading these just for fun. They have good info.”

“Like what? Patton and Lena smooching?”

Kendra rolled her eyes. “I’m not telling. You’ll end up drowning in a tar pit.”

“There’s a tar pit?” he said, perking up. “Where?”

“You’re welcome to look it up yourself.” She gestured at the huge stack of journals beside her bed.

“I’d rather drown,” Seth admitted. “Smarter people than you have tried to trick me into reading.” He sat still, staring at her.

“What’s going on?” she asked. “Are you bored?”

“Not compared to you.”

“I’m not bored,” Kendra said smugly. “I’m going to Atlanta.”

“That’s below the belt!” Seth protested. “I can’t believe they’re making you a Knight and not me. How many revenants have *you* destroyed?”

“None. But I did help take down a demon, a witch, and a huge, winged, acid-breathing, three-headed panther.”

“I’m still mad I missed seeing the panther,” Seth muttered sourly. “Tanu and Coulter got their invitations today. Sounds like you guys are leaving tomorrow.”

“I’d let you go in my place if I could,” Kendra said. “I don’t trust the Sphinx.”

“You shouldn’t,” Seth said. “He let you win at Foosball. He pretty much told me. The guy is a pro.”

“You’re just saying that because he creamed you.”

Seth shrugged. “Guess what? I have a secret.”

“Not for long, now that you’ve said that much.”

“You’re never getting it out of me.”

“Then I’ll die unfulfilled,” she said dryly, grabbing a new journal from the stack and opening it. She could feel Seth watching her as she pretended to read.

“Have you ever heard of nipsies?” Seth finally asked.

“Nope.”

“They’re the smallest fairy people,” Seth informed her. “They build little cities and stuff. They’re about half an inch tall. The size of tiny bugs.”

“Cool,” Kendra said. She continued to feign disinterest, eyes scanning the shapes of words. It rarely took Seth long to crack.

“If you knew something that might be dangerous, but telling people about it could get you in trouble and make you lose a lot of money, would you tell anyone?”

“Grandpa!” Kendra called. “Seth has a secret to tell you about the nipsies!”

“You’re a traitor,” Seth grumbled.

“I’m just helping Smart Seth defeat Idiot Seth.”

“I guess Smart Seth is glad,” he said reluctantly. “But be careful. Idiot Seth is the guy to watch out for.”

* * *

“So,” Grandpa said, taking a seat behind the desk in his office, “how is it you know about the nipsies, Seth?”

“Common knowledge?” He felt uncomfortable in the large armchair. He silently vowed to make Kendra pay for this.

“Not very common,” Grandpa said. “I keep quiet about them. The nipsies are abnormally vulnerable. And they live very far from the yard. Do you know a secret about them?”

“Maybe,” Seth hedged. “If I tell you, will you promise I won’t get in trouble?”

“No,” Grandpa said, folding his hands on the desk expectantly.

“Then I’m not saying another word until I consult an attorney.”

“You’re just digging yourself in deeper,” Grandpa warned. “I don’t negotiate with delinquents. On the other hand, I have been known to show mercy for forthrightness.”

“The satyrs told me the nipsies are at war with each other,” Seth blurted.

“At war? The satyrs must be mistaken. I don’t know of a more peaceful society in all of Fablehaven, except perhaps the brownies.”

“It’s true,” Seth insisted. “Newel and Doren saw it. The Sixth and Seventh Kingdoms were attacking the others. The bad nipsies say they have

a new master. They look different from the others, with gray skin and red eyes.”

“The satyrs were very descriptive,” Grandpa noted suspiciously.

“They might have shown me,” Seth admitted grudgingly.

“Your grandmother would go through the roof if she knew you were spending time with Newel and Doren,” Grandpa said. “I can’t say I disagree. It would be hard to think of a worse influence on a twelve-year-old boy than a pair of satyrs. Follow their lead, and you’ll grow up to be a hobo. Wait a minute. Were the satyrs stealing from the nipsies again?”

Seth tried to keep his expression composed. “I don’t know.”

“I’ve spoken with Newel and Doren before about taking from the nipsies. I had been apprised that the nipsies had managed to remedy the situation. Let me guess. You’ve been selling the satyrs more batteries, against my wishes, which compelled them to find a way to reenter the Seven Kingdoms?”

Seth held up a finger. “If they hadn’t, we would not know the nipsies were at war, and they might have gone extinct.”

Grandpa stared at him. “We’ve spoken before about stolen gold. Around here, it has a way of causing more trouble than it’s worth.”

“Technically, it wasn’t stolen,” Seth said. “The nipsies gave it to Newel for fending off the Sixth and Seventh Kingdoms.”

Grandpa’s lips pressed together into a thin line. “I’m grateful that you shared this with Kendra, and that she helped you bring it to me. I’m grateful to learn that there is an unusual situation with the nipsies. However, I’m disappointed that you went behind my back to sell batteries to those eternal adolescents, that you accepted dubiously acquired gold as payment, and especially that you strayed so far from the yard without permission. You will not be permitted out of this house unaccompanied for the duration of the summer. And you will not go on chaperoned excursions for three days, which means you will miss joining Tanu and Coulter to check up on the nipsies this afternoon. Furthermore, you will return the gold to me, so I can restore it to the nipsies.”

Seth lowered his eyes, gazing into his lap. “I knew I should have kept my mouth shut,” he mumbled miserably. “I was just worried . . .”

“Seth, telling me was the right choice. You did the wrong thing in disobeying the rules. You should know by now how disastrous that can be.”

“I’m not a moron,” Seth said, looking up fiercely. “I made it back just fine, and with useful information. I was careful. I stayed on paths. I had the satyrs with me. Sure, I made some mistakes before I knew much about this place. Terrible ones. I’m sorry for that. But I’ve also done some things right. Lately, I roam around here all the time on my own without telling anybody. I stick to places I know. Nothing bad ever happens.”

Grandpa picked up a knickknack from his desk, a tiny, humanlike skull encased in a crystal hemisphere, and absently passed it back and forth between his hands. “I know you’ve learned a lot from Coulter and the others. You are more capable than you once were to safely negotiate certain areas of Fablehaven. I can understand why that would increase the temptation to ignore boundaries. But these are dangerous times, and there are many perils within these gated woods. Journeying as far from the yard as you did, to an unfamiliar location, relying on the judgment of Newel and Doren, shows a disturbing lack of common sense on your part.

“If I ever choose to expand the areas of Fablehaven where you’re allowed to venture alone, I’ll have to make you aware of many forbidden but intriguing regions that must be avoided. Seth, how can I ever trust you to keep the more complicated rules if you stubbornly refuse to follow the simple ones? Your repeated failure to keep the basic rules is the main reason I haven’t given you more freedom to explore the preserve on your own.”

“Oh,” Seth said awkwardly. “I guess that makes sense. Why didn’t you tell me staying in the yard was a test?”

“For one thing, it might have made the rule seem even less important.” Grandpa set down the flat-bottomed crystal with the skull inside. “None of this is a game. I created the rule for a reason. Bad things really can happen if you wander the woods unaccompanied, even when you think you know what you’re doing. Seth, you sometimes act as if you think growing up means the rules don’t apply anymore. On the contrary—a big part of growing up is learning self-control. You work on that, and then we can talk about expanding your privileges.”

“Can I earn time off for good behavior?”

Grandpa shrugged. “You never know what might happen if that miracle occurs.”

* * *

A petite fairy with short hair as red as a ripe strawberry alighted on the edge of a marble birdbath and peered into the water, her translucent dragonfly wings almost invisible in the sunlight. Her crimson slip of a dress shone like rubies. She twirled and peered over her shoulder at her reflection, pouting her lips and tilting her head at different angles.

A yellow fairy with black highlights marking her dazzling butterfly wings stood preening nearby. She had pale skin and long, honey-blonde tresses. The yellow fairy tittered, a sound like miniscule bells tinkling.

“Am I missing something?” the red fairy asked with false innocence.

“I was trying to imagine my reflection with ugly, colorless wings,” the yellow fairy replied.

“Funny coincidence,” the red fairy remarked, smoothing a hand over her hair. “I was just picturing myself with big, gaudy wings that distracted from my beauty.”

The yellow fairy arched an eyebrow. “Why not pretend you have wide, elegant wings that augment rather than detract?”

“I tried, but all that came to mind was a horrid backdrop of clumsy yellow curtains.”

Kendra could not resist smiling.

She had developed a new habit of pretending to take a nap outside near a birdbath or a flower bed and listening to the fairies gossip. The fairies did not often speak to her if she tried to initiate a conversation. After leading the fairies into battle and becoming fairykind, Kendra had grown too popular for her own good. All of the fairies were jealous.

Among the happy consequences of the gift the fairies had bestowed was Kendra’s ability to understand the language they spoke, along with several other related magical tongues. They all effortlessly sounded like English to her. She enjoyed using the talent to eavesdrop.

“Look at Kendra sprawling on that bench,” the yellow fairy muttered in a confidential tone, “lounging around like she owns the yard.”

Kendra fought back laughter. She loved when the fairies discussed her. The only conversations she liked more were when they bad-mouthed Seth.

“I have no problem with her,” the redhead chimed in her tiny voice. “In fact, she made me this bracelet.” She held up her arm to display the trinket, thin as a spider’s thread.

“It’s too small for her awkward fingers to have made it,” the yellow fairy objected.

Kendra knew the yellow fairy was right. She had never made a bracelet, let alone for a fairy. It was funny—even though the fairies rarely spoke to Kendra, they often debated over whom she favored the most.

“She has many special talents,” the red fairy insisted. “You’d be astonished by the gifts Kendra offers to her closest friends. Those of us who fought alongside her to imprison Bahumat share a special bond. Do you recall that day? I believe you were an imp at the time.”

The yellow fairy kicked water at the red fairy and stuck out her tongue.

“Please, darling,” the red fairy said, “let’s not stoop to impish behavior.”

“We who spent time as imps know secrets that you don’t,” the yellow fairy said slyly.

“I’m sure you’re an expert about warts and crooked limbs,” the red fairy agreed.

“Darkness affords different opportunities than light.”

“Like a ghastly reflection?”

“What if we could be dark *and* beautiful?” the yellow fairy whispered. Kendra had to strain to hear.

“I pay no heed to such rumors,” the red fairy replied haughtily, flitting away.

Kendra held very still until, through her cracked eyelids, she saw the yellow fairy take flight. The exchange had ended on a strange note. The restored fairies did not often refer to their time as imps. Those who had been imps normally seemed ashamed. The red fairy had dealt the other a low blow. What had the yellow fairy meant about being dark and beautiful, and why had the red fairy ended the conversation so abruptly?

Kendra arose and walked toward the house. The sun was plunging toward the horizon. Upstairs, her suitcase was packed. Tomorrow she would be driven to Hartford, and then fly to New York to meet a connecting flight to Atlanta.

The thought of meeting with the Knights of the Dawn filled her with worry. It all seemed so mysterious. Even without the threat of traitors, it did not sound like a place where she belonged. Her chief comfort was

remembering that Warren, Coulter, and Tanu would be there as well. Nothing too terrible would happen with them around.

As Kendra walked up the steps to the covered porch, she saw Tanu and Coulter reach the yard in a cart pulled by Hugo. When the golem came to a stop, Tanu and Coulter sprang to the ground and started toward the house. They both wore serious expressions and walked purposefully. There was no panic in their movements, but it looked like they had bad news.

“How’d it go?” Kendra called.

“Something very strange is going on,” Tanu replied. “Go tell Stan we need to talk.”

Kendra ran into the house. “Grandpa! Tanu and Coulter found something!”

Her cry brought not only her grandfather but Grandma, Warren, and Seth as well. “Are the nipsies still at it?” Seth asked.

“I don’t know,” Kendra answered, turning to face the back door as Tanu and Coulter entered.

“What is it?” Grandpa asked.

“When we approached the meadow of the Seven Kingdoms, a shadowy figure fled,” Tanu said. “We gave chase, but the scoundrel was too quick.”

“It wasn’t quite like anything we’d ever seen,” Coulter said. “Maybe three feet tall, it wore a dark cloak and ran low to the ground, in a crouch.” As he used his hands expressively, Kendra was reminded that Coulter was missing a pinky and part of the neighboring ring finger.

“A hermit troll?” Grandpa asked.

Tanu shook his head. “A hermit troll could not have entered the meadow. And this did not quite fit the description.”

“We have a theory,” Coulter affirmed. “We’ll get to that in a second.”

“What’s a hermit troll?” Seth asked.

“The smallest of the trolls,” Warren said. “They never stay in one place long, setting up temporary lairs anywhere from a quiet attic, to under a bridge, to inside a barrel.”

“Go on,” Grandpa encouraged Tanu.

“We got inside the hill and found the Sixth and Seventh Kingdoms gearing up for war again, in spite of the extensive damage Newel had caused.”

“Stan,” Coulter said, “you wouldn’t have believed it. The Sixth and Seventh Kingdoms are draped in black, with most of the citizens bearing arms. The nipsies in those kingdoms were as Seth described, with gray skin, dark hair, and red eyes. They tried to bribe Tanu and me to assist them, and issued threats when we refused. If I didn’t know better, I would say they had fallen.”

“But nipsies don’t have a fallen state,” Grandma said. “At least nothing documented. Fairies can turn to imps, nymphs can become mortal, but who ever heard of a nipsie being transfigured?”

“Nobody,” Tanu said. “But there they were. Which leads me to my theory. I think the creature we were chasing was some species of fallen dwarf.”

“Dwarfs don’t fall either!” Grandpa huffed, clearly perturbed.

“Tell that to this one,” Coulter muttered.

“It’s our best guess,” Tanu said. “We interrogated the nipsies to see how all of this originated. Evidently it began when they were exploring the preserve, looking for ways to keep the satyrs out. That was how the dark ones met their new master.”

“When we started fishing for specifics, they clammed up,” Coulter said.

“What could make a nipsie fall?” Grandpa mused, as if speaking to himself.

“I’ve never seen anything like it,” Coulter said.

“Nor heard of anything like it,” Tanu added.

“Nor I,” Grandpa sighed. “Normally, my first call would be to the Sphinx. Maybe it still should be. Friend or foe, he has always given sound advice, and none can match his knowledge of lore. Does the condition appear to be spreading?”

Tanu noisily cracked his knuckles. “According to some of the normal nipsies, after the Fifth Kingdom was invaded, a good portion of those nipsies were carried off and became like the others.”

“Do you want Tanu and me to skip meeting with the Knights?” Coulter offered.

“No, you should attend,” Grandpa said. “I want all three of you watching over Kendra and learning what you can.”

“I overheard the fairies saying something strange today,” Kendra said. “It might be related. They were talking about a way to be dark like imps, but beautiful. One fairy seemed enamored by the idea. The other flew away immediately.”

“Strange things are certainly afoot at Fablehaven,” Grandpa said. “I had better go make some calls.”

Grandpa, Grandma, and Warren left the room.

“Seth, a word, if I may,” Tanu said. Seth crossed to the hulking Samoan, who shepherded him into the corner. Kendra lingered to hear. Tanu glanced at her and went on.

“I noticed some interesting tracks in the meadow of the Seven Kingdoms,” Tanu said casually. “Looked like the satyrs had some help gaining entry.”

“Don’t tell Grandpa,” Seth pleaded.

“If we were going to tell him, we already would have,” Tanu said. “Coulter and I figured you were in enough hot water already. Just keep in mind, Hugo is not a toy for helping satyrs steal.”

“Gotcha,” Seth said with a relieved smile.

Tanu looked at Kendra. “Can you keep this one under your hat?” His eyes demanded a yes.

“Sure,” she said. “I’ve filled my daily quota for ratting on Seth.”

Chapter 4



New Knights

When the baggage carousel jolted to life, passengers from Kendra's flight pressed to be closest to the opening from which their belongings would emerge. A parade of suitcases commenced, many of them black and about the same size. Several had ribbons tied around the handles to help the owners differentiate between them. Kendra had placed smiley-face stickers on hers.

It was peculiar hanging out with Tanu, Coulter, and Warren at the baggage claim. She associated them with magical potions, enchanted relics, and supernatural creatures. This setting seemed much too common. Tanu dipped a pretzel into a small plastic container of molten cheese. Warren turned to the final page of his paperback. Coulter penned an answer on the crossword from the in-flight magazine. Around them waited a random assortment of passengers. A pair of business travelers stood nearest, wearing slightly rumpled suits and expensive wristwatches.

Kendra lunged forward when her suitcase appeared, darting between a nun and a grungy guy in a tie-dyed shirt and sandals. Tanu accepted the bag after she yanked it off the carousel. Their other luggage followed soon after.

Tanu wadded his napkins into his cheese cup and chucked it into a garbage can, then collected his baggage. Coulter threw out the magazine.

“Anybody want to read about a genetically enhanced superspy?” Warren asked, waving his paperback. “It’s a bestseller. Lots of action. Twist ending.” He held it toward the trash receptacle.

“I might check it out,” Kendra said, uneasy about the thought of discarding an undamaged book. She zipped the rescued paperback into her suitcase, then extended the handle so she could wheel the bag around.

The four of them headed away from the baggage claim toward a set of automatic doors. A man in a suit and a black cap was holding a sign with the name *Tanugatoa* printed in marker.

“We have a chauffeur?” Kendra asked, impressed.

“For going out of the city, a limousine cost only a little more than a taxi,” Tanu explained.

“Why isn’t my name on the sign?” Warren complained.

“My name is the rarest,” Tanu said with a smile. He greeted the man with the sign and waved him off from trying to help carry bags. They followed the man out to the curb and along a sidewalk to where a black limousine with tinted windows idled. The driver, a well-dressed Middle Eastern man, loaded their suitcases into the trunk and then held the door as they entered the vehicle. Warren kept his smaller suitcase.

“I’ve never ridden in a limo before,” Kendra confided to Coulter.

“It’s been a while for me too,” Coulter said.

She and Coulter sat on one side, facing Tanu and Warren on the other, with plenty of room between. Kendra ran a hand over the plush upholstery. The air smelled like pine, with a faint undercurrent of cigarette smoke.

After Tanu confirmed the address with the driver, the limousine nosed out into a clogged lane. They made small talk as the driver found the highway.

“How long is the trip?” Kendra asked.

“About an hour,” Coulter said.

“Any last-minute tips?” Kendra asked.

“Don’t reveal your name to anyone,” Coulter said. “Don’t mention Fablehaven, your grandparents, or where you come from. Don’t tell your age. Don’t show your face. Don’t allude to any of your abilities. Don’t mention the Sphinx. Don’t speak unless you must. Most of the Knights

eagerly gather information. Goes with the territory. Whether they're good or bad, I say the less they know the better."

"So what *can* I do?" Kendra asked. "Maybe I should just wear the invisibility glove and hide in a corner!"

"Let me qualify Coulter's recommendation not to speak," Tanu said. "Feel free to ask questions of your own. Get to know people. The fact that you're new gives you a valid excuse to solicit information. Just try not to reveal much. Gather info, don't dispense it. Be wary of any stranger who takes too much interest in you. Don't go anywhere alone with anyone."

"We'll stay close, but not too close," Warren said. "We all know other Knights, a few of them rather well. They will be able to spot us. We don't want to make it too easy for others to associate you with us."

"Do we have you wound up yet?" Coulter asked.

"I'm pretty nervous," Kendra confessed.

"Relax, have fun!" Warren encouraged.

"Right, while I try to follow all of my instructions and avoid getting abducted," Kendra moaned.

"That's the spirit!" Warren cheered.

Other cars on the highway had their lights on as dusk approached. Kendra settled back in her seat. The others had warned her it might be a late night. She had tried to sleep on the plane, but had felt too anxious, and the seat had not reclined enough. Instead she had used headphones to listen to the flight's different audio channels, including hit-and-miss selections of stand-up comedy and pop music.

Now, in the dim limo, she had a little more room, and drowsiness caught up to her. She decided not to fight it. Her eyelids drooped and she spent a few minutes on the edge of sleep, hearing the others make occasional comments as if from underwater.

In her restless dream, Kendra found herself roaming a carnival holding a blue cloud of cotton candy on a disposable white stick. At the age of four, Kendra had gotten separated from her family at a fairground for almost half an hour, and the scene before her was quite similar. Calliope music hooted and shrilled. A nearby Ferris wheel ground round and round, elevating riders high into the evening sky before plunging them back down, the mechanism squealing and growling like the ride was about to collapse.

Kendra caught glimpses of family members in the crowd, but when she tried to shoulder through the throng to reach them, they were gone. On one such occasion, she thought she saw her mom walk behind a popcorn stand. When Kendra followed, she found herself confronted by a tall stranger with a gray afro. Smiling like he knew a secret, the man tore away a big piece of her cotton candy and stuck it in his mouth. Kendra held her treat away from him, glaring, and a fat woman wearing braces plucked at it from behind. Soon Kendra found herself pushing through the multitude, trying to get away from the many strangers devouring her cotton candy. But it was no use. The entire crowd was stealing from her, and soon all she retained in her grasp was a naked white stick.

When Coulter jostled her awake she felt relieved, although a lingering unsettled feeling persisted. She must be even more stressed about the evening than she realized to have such an obnoxious dream!

Warren had opened his bag and was dispersing robes and masks. The long robes were constructed of a thin, strong material, dark gray, with a slight shimmer. "We're almost there," Warren informed her.

Unfastening her seatbelt, Kendra pulled the robe over her head. Warren handed her a silver mask. Coulter put on his. All four masks looked identical. Smooth and shiny, the simple, grinning mask covered her entire face. It felt a little heavier than she liked.

Kendra tapped her knuckles against the metallic forehead. "Are these things bulletproof?"

"They're not flimsy," Tanu said.

"Use your hood," Coulter suggested, his voice somewhat muffled by his mask. His hood was up, leaving none of his head exposed. He could have been anyone.

Warren handed Kendra light, snug gloves that matched the cloak. She removed her shoes and stepped into gray slippers. Warren and Tanu put on their masks.

"How will I know you?" Kendra asked.

"Tanu will be easiest because of his size," Warren said. "But he isn't the only large Knight." Warren raised a hand and laid two fingers beside his temple. "This will be our sign. You need never make it. We'll keep you in view."

The limousine turned off the road and advanced through open gates along a smooth driveway flanked by white statues of maidens clad in togas, armored heroes, animals, mermaids, and centaurs. Up ahead the mansion came into view.

“A castle,” Kendra gasped.

Illuminated by numerous lights in the yard and dozens of electric sconces, the fortress loomed bright in the dwindling twilight. Built entirely of yellowish stone blocks, the broad stronghold boasted multiple rounded towers of varying height, a lowered drawbridge, a raised portcullis, lancet windows, arrow loops, and battlements atop the walls. Liveried servants stood at attention at either side of the drawbridge, bearing lanterns.

Kendra turned to her masked companions. “I know you call yourselves Knights, but seriously?”

“Fairy collectors,” Warren grunted. “They tend to be an eccentric crowd, but Wesley and Marion Fairbanks might take the prize.”

The limousine pulled to a stop. The driver opened the door facing the drawbridge. They got out, and Tanu pulled the chauffeur aside, speaking softly and handing him some money.

A servant wearing a powdered wig and red knickers over white stockings approached and offered a dignified bow. “Welcome, honored guests. Please follow me.”

Kendra saw a battered white van pulling up behind the limo. The driver was wearing a silver mask. Off to one side of the grounds a pair of helicopters sat on the lawn. In another area a few dozen cars were parked, ranging from luxury vehicles to junk-lot candidates.

The costumed servant escorted Kendra and her friends toward the drawbridge. Her robe reached her ankles, allowing her to take normal strides without feeling too billowy. The mask limited her peripheral vision, but otherwise she could see fine.

The group passed into a cobbled courtyard, lit by electric cressets. Swirls of insects orbited the light sources. A few clusters of robed figures in silver masks strolled the area conversing. Above them, banners and flags hung limply in the still night air. The servant led Kendra and the others across the courtyard to a heavy, ironbound door, opened it with a key, stepped aside, and bowed.

Warren led the way into an ornate antechamber at the mouth of a cavernous hallway. A desk sat off to one side of the antechamber, before a pair of curtained booths. A person in a silver mask sat at the desk. Behind stood four robed figures, their silver masks trimmed with gold.

A short woman wearing a mauve gown greeted them. "Welcome, travelers, to our humble retreat. May you find safe harbor here until duty whisks you elsewhere." She had an average build, and looked to be in her fifties. Her chestnut hair was plaited in an antiquated style. A ring on her left hand held an obscenely huge diamond.

"A pleasure to see you again, Mrs. Fairbanks," Warren said with a genteel air. "Our thanks for opening your home to us."

She flushed with pleasure. "Anytime. No invitation required!"

Behind her stood a jovial man in a powdered wig eating chicken and vegetables off of a skewer. "Quite so," he said, juice dribbling down his chin.

"A pleasure as always, Wesley," Warren acknowledged, inclining his head.

Biting into a mushroom, the man in the wig nodded back.

Warren turned to face the four masked figures in front of the booths. "North," he said, jerking a thumb at himself. "West." He gestured at Tanu and Coulter. Then he indicated Kendra. "Novice."

"The novice is East," said the man seated at the desk.

Warren leaned in to Kendra. "These are the four Lieutenants. They verify who we are under the masks, as a security measure. Each oversees a certain group, named by the points of the compass. The Eastern Lieutenant will confirm your identity."

Warren went into a booth with one of the figures in a gold-trimmed mask. A different Lieutenant marshaled Tanu into the other booth. Warren emerged promptly, mask in place, and another Lieutenant, the tallest one, guided Kendra into the vacant booth.

"Remove your mask, please," said a gruff voice.

Kendra took off the mask.

The Lieutenant nodded. "Welcome. You may proceed. We'll speak more shortly."

Kendra replaced her mask and exited the booth at the same time as Coulter left the other one. Together they followed Warren and Tanu down the extravagant hall, treading on a long red carpet edged with intricate embroidery. Tapestries hung from the walls and full suits of gleaming armor flanked the corridor. Warren and Tanu passed through white double doors into a spacious salon dominated by a tremendous chandelier. Robed figures stood about, most of them conversing in groups of two or three. Sofas, chairs, and divans were spaced around the room to allow for many separate groups to sit and chat in comfort. The outside of the home might look like a fortress, but inside it was definitely a mansion.

Tanu and Warren split up after entering the room. Following their lead, Kendra wandered over to a corner on her own. A couple of masked figures nodded at her as she passed. She nodded back, terrified to say a word.

Finding a place where she could stand with her back to the wall, Kendra surveyed the crowd. She was a good height for her age, but in this room, she was on the short end of the spectrum. A few of the other Knights were unusually tall, a few were abnormally fat, several looked broad and burly, a decent number were obviously women, and one was small enough to be eight years old. All wore the same silver masks and similar robes. Kendra counted more than fifty Knights in total.

The nearest Knights were a group of three, talking and laughing. After a while, one of them turned and stared at Kendra. Kendra tilted her face away, but it was too late, the figure was already crossing to her. “And what are you doing here in the corner?” asked a teasing female voice with a heavy French accent.

Kendra had not identified the stranger as a woman until she spoke. A good answer refused to enter her mind—she felt much too self-conscious. “Just waiting for the meeting.”

“But the small talk is part of the meeting!” the woman enthused. “Where have you been lately?”

A direct question. Should she lie? She settled on vagueness. “Here and there.”

“I recently returned from the Dominican Republic,” the woman said. “Absolutely perfect weather. I was tracking an alleged member of the Society, a man who was asking questions about acquiring a dullion.” Kendra had seen a dullion before, made of straw, when she was fleeing her

home earlier in the summer. Vanessa had explained that they were like golems, although not quite as powerful. “Rumor has it there is a warlock on the island who can create them. Can you imagine the implications if that art has survived? I have been unable to confirm the tale, so who knows. I don’t recognize you, and you sound young, are you new?”

The woman spoke so frankly that Kendra felt considerable pressure to open up. Besides, it would be almost impossible for Kendra to disguise her youth. “I’m fairly young, yes.”

“I started young myself, you know—”

“There you are,” Warren interrupted. Beside him stood a tall figure in a silver mask with gold trim.

“If you will excuse us,” the Lieutenant apologized to the Frenchwoman. “This young lady has an appointment with the Captain.”

“I was about to guess she was a novice,” the woman gushed. “So nice to meet you, hopefully we can work together sometime.”

“Nice to meet you,” Kendra replied as Warren took her elbow and guided her away.

The three of them exited the room and strode down the grandiose hallway to a smaller corridor. Some distance down the corridor, they stopped at a mahogany door. “Your presence is irregular,” the Lieutenant informed Warren.

“Inducting a minor is irregular as well,” Warren said. “I promised her grandfather she wouldn’t leave my sight.”

“You know me, Warren,” the Lieutenant said. “Where would the child be safer than here?”

“Again, the operative word is *child*,” Warren insisted.

The Lieutenant gave a curt nod and opened the door. The three of them entered. Three people were already in the room. One stood over by a wide fireplace, wearing a silver robe and a golden mask. The other two people wore silver masks and robes like Kendra’s.

“Warren?” asked the figure in the gold mask in a feminine Southern accent. “What are you doing here?”

“Captain, this candidate is a minor,” Warren said. “I have been mandated by her guardian not to let her out of my sight. It is the condition of her attendance.”

“Understandable,” the figure in the golden mask said. “Very well, I suppose we are ready to begin.”

Kendra leaned over to Warren. “How did she know who you—”

“You’re curious how I knew it was Warren entering with you?” the Captain asked. She tapped her mask. “This golden mask sees through all the silver ones. I have to know all the Knights under my command. I hand select them, and I keep watch. In case any of you are wondering, no, this is not my real voice, it’s another special feature of my mask. Lieutenant, shall we proceed?”

The Lieutenant removed his mask. He had bushy red hair and freckles on his broad brow. He looked oddly familiar, but Kendra could not place him. “You three novices are receiving knighthood today. Today’s recruits have been assigned to the East, and so I am your Lieutenant, Dougan Fisk. You will know my face, and I yours. Please remove your masks.”

Kendra looked to Warren. He nodded, taking off his own mask. Kendra pulled hers off as well.

One of the other people wearing a silver mask was shorter than Kendra. Without her mask, Kendra saw that she was quite elderly, probably older than Grandma, with a narrow, wrinkled face and steel gray hair pulled into a bun. The other person in the room was a boy a few inches taller than Kendra. He was slim, and could not be past his teenage years, nice-looking, with tan, flawless skin, thin lips, and dark eyes. He looked at Kendra and for a moment appeared absolutely awestruck, staring at her with such naked admiration that she wanted to hide behind her mask before she blushed. After the initial stunned reaction, he managed to regulate his expression. He raised his eyebrows slightly, the corners of his mouth twitching toward an uncertain smile.

“The Captain almost always keeps the mask on,” Dougan explained. “Our brotherhood exists mainly to combat a secretive and subtle organization, the Society of the Evening Star, and so secrecy is required on our part as well. We use checks and balances to monitor one another. The Captain knows all of the Knights. The four Lieutenants each know the Knights assigned to them, along with the identity of the Captain. Each Knight knows the Lieutenant he or she reports to, as you now know me. And each of the Knights knows some other Knights, as you are now

meeting one another. Be most careful about revealing your membership in this brotherhood to others, even after they have reason to guess it.”

“Wh-wh-wh-why are we East?” the teenage boy asked, tripping painfully over the first consonant.

“No good reason, just a tool of delegation,” the Captain said. “Despite being called the Knights of the Dawn, this is not a military body. Titles like ‘Captain’ and ‘Lieutenant’ are strictly for organizational purposes. We compartmentalize information for the security of all. Your participation in this group is strictly voluntary. You can quit the brotherhood at any time. We do demand secrecy, however. If we did not trust that you could handle that requirement, you would not be here.”

“As part of agreeing to be a Knight, you’ll occasionally receive assignments specific to your area of expertise,” Dougan said. “Generally, until you resign, by accepting membership in the brotherhood, you are committing to come when called and to serve where needed. All costs incurred will be reimbursed. In addition, you will receive a stipend to more than cover lost wages. If you betray secrets or perform in a manner that causes us unusual concern for the safety of the Knights, we reserve the right to expel you from the brotherhood.”

“We are friends to all magical creatures and to the refuges where they dwell,” the Captain said. “We are foes to all who seek to harm and exploit them. Have you any questions?”

“D-d-don’t you find it peculiar that we can’t know who our leader is?” the teenage boy asked.

“Not ideal,” the Captain admitted. “But, regrettably, necessary.”

“The word that comes to mind is *cowardly*,” the teenager said.

Kendra felt her pulse quicken. She would never have expected such boldness from a teenager with a stuttering problem. It made her feel simultaneously excited and uncomfortable. The Captain was about the right height to be the Sphinx. How would he react?

“I’ve been called worse,” the Captain said, remaining friendly. “You are not the first Knight to suggest dispensing with the masks. But given a recent breach in security that I am not at liberty to discuss, compartmentalizing our information has become more crucial than ever.”

“I get not sharing everything with everybody,” the teenager said. “I j-j-j, j-j-j, I only wish I knew who was giving me assignments.”

“I suspect, were our positions reversed, I would feel as you do, Gavin,” the Captain said. “Have you paused to consider that perhaps behind this mask is a person known to the Society? Perhaps I wear this mask not for my benefit, but to protect the other Knights, to prevent the Society from using me to get to them?”

Gavin stared at his feet. “M-makes sense.”

“Chin up, I called for questions. Are there any other concerns?”

“I beg your pardon,” said the older lady, “but aren’t these two a little young for this kind of service?”

The Captain picked up a poker and jabbed a log in the fire, sending up a flurry of sparks. “Given these dangerous times, we’ve tightened our entry requirements more than ever. On top of a spotless background, and overwhelming evidence of reliable character, prospective Knights must also have unique strategic value. Kendra and Gavin both possess unusual talents that qualify them to lend highly specialized assistance. Not unlike your usefulness, Estelle, as a gifted archivist and researcher.”

“Don’t omit my world-renowned expertise with a broadsword,” the elderly woman bragged. She winked at Kendra and Gavin. “That was a joke.”

“Anything else?” the Captain asked, facing each of them in turn. None of them volunteered any further questions or comments. “Then I will formally induct you and leave you to mingle. Keep in mind, now as always, you are welcome to decline the invitation to join our community. If you wish to proceed, raise your right hand.” The Captain raised his.

Kendra, Gavin, and Estelle lifted their hands.

“Repeat after me. I pledge to keep the secrets of the Knights of the Dawn, and to aid my fellow Knights in their worthy goals.”

They repeated the words, and then lowered their hands.

“Congratulations,” the Captain said. “Your knighthood is official. Glad to have you on our side. Take a few minutes to get acquainted before we begin the gathering.” The Captain crossed to the door and exited the room.

“Not so bad, was it?” Warren said over Kendra’s shoulder, patting her on the back. “I’m Warren Burgess, by the way,” he said to the other new Knights.

“Estelle Smith,” the elderly woman said.

“Gavin Rose,” the teenager said.

“Kendra Sorenson,” Kendra said.

“Warren and I go way back,” Dougan said.

“Since before you were a Lieutenant.” Warren lowered his voice slightly. “Since we last spoke, you’ve seen the Captain without his mask. Just between the five of us, who is he?”

“You sure it’s a he?” Dougan asked.

“Ninety percent. Manly build, manly walk.”

“You’ve been out of touch for a while,” Dougan said. “I thought you’d abandoned the cause.”

“I’m still around,” Warren said, not elaborating that he had spent the previous few years as a catatonic albino. “Kendra, you’ve met Dougan’s brother.”

“His brother?” Kendra asked. Then she realized why Dougan looked familiar. “Oh, Maddox! That’s right, his last name was Fisk.”

Dougan nodded. “He’s not officially a Knight, hears his own drum beating too loudly for that, though he’s helped us out on occasion.”

“But here we are, monopolizing the conversation!” Warren apologized. “Gavin Rose, you say? Any relation to Chuck Rose?”

“M-m-my father.”

“No joke? I never knew Chuck had a kid. He’s one of our best guys. Why isn’t he here with you?”

“He died seven months ago,” Gavin said. “Christmas day, in the Himalayas. One of the Seven Sanctuaries.”

Warren’s smile vanished. “I’m sorry to hear that. I’ve been out of the loop.”

“P-p-p-people wonder why I want to follow in his footsteps,” Gavin said, looking at the floor. “I never knew Mom. I have no siblings. Dad kept me a secret from all of you because he didn’t want me to get involved, at least not until I was eighteen. But he shared what he did with me, taught me a lot. I have some natural aptitude for it.”

“There’s an understatement,” Dougan chuckled. “Chuck’s best friend, Arlin Santos, brought Gavin to our attention. You remember Arlin, don’t you, Warren? He’s here tonight. We had been hearing rumors for years that Chuck was secretly raising a child. Little did we know how much he took

after his old man, and then some. We actually have assignments for Gavin and Kendra immediately following the gathering.”

“An assignment she can do here?” Warren asked.

Dougan shook his head. “Going someplace. Tomorrow morning.”

Warren scowled. “Not without me, and not unless I sign off. Dougan, she’s fourteen.”

“I’ll fill you in,” Dougan promised. “It’s important. We’ll keep her safe.”

There was a knock at the door.

“Masks,” Dougan said, covering his face. “Enter,” he called, once the others had done likewise.

A figure in a silver mask peered in. “Time for the gathering,” a nasally male voice announced.

“Thank you,” Dougan nodded at the speaker. “Off we go, then.”



First Assignment

Dougan and Warren led the way down the lavish main hall. As Kendra passed a suit of armor, she glimpsed her warped reflection in the breastplate, an anonymous silver mask under a hood. Gavin fell into step beside her.

“Nice how we got to know each other so well,” he said bitterly.

“They didn’t leave us much time,” Kendra agreed.

“I don’t always stutter, you know. It gets worse when I’m uncomfortable. I hate it. Once I get going, I focus on my words too much, and the problem snowballs.”

“It isn’t a big deal.”

They advanced down the hall in silence. Eyes aimed downward, Gavin rubbed the sleeve of his robe between his fingers. The quietness became awkward.

“Kind of a cool castle,” Kendra said.

“Not bad,” he replied. “It’s funny, I thought for sure I’d be the youngest Knight, and then pretty much the first person I meet has me beat by two years. Maybe it will turn out that the Captain is really just a freakishly tall third-grader.”

Kendra smiled. “I turn fifteen in October.”

“Eighteen months younger, then. You must have quite a talent.”

“I guess somebody thinks so.”

“Don’t feel any pressure to talk about it. I can’t really share mine either.” They were almost to the end of the hall. Gavin rubbed the side of his mask. “These masks are the worst. Instant claustrophobia. I’m still not sold on the idea. It seems to me like masks would make it easier for traitors to hide. But I guess these guys have been at it longer than I have. The system must have some benefits. You know what the assembly is about?”

“No. You?”

“A little. D-d-d-dougan mentioned they’re concerned about the Society and tightening security.”

At the end of the hall they passed through a grand doorway into an airy ballroom. Strands of tiny white lights illuminated the room, the glossy wood floor gently reflecting the mellow luminance. Twenty round tables stood around the ballroom, positioned to make every seat as close as possible to a lectern on a stage. Each table had six chairs, and most were occupied by Knights. Kendra estimated there were now at least a hundred present.

Only the tables farthest from the stage had vacant chairs. Warren and Dougan claimed the last two seats at a table toward the middle of the room. Kendra, Gavin, and Estelle crossed to the rear table farthest from the entrance, filling in the remaining three seats. Kendra had scarcely scooted her chair forward when the Knights arose together. The Captain, spotlighted, strode to the lectern, golden mask flashing. The Knights burst into applause.

The Captain motioned for the Knights to be seated. The clapping subsided and the Knights sank back into their chairs.

“Thank you all for assembling on such short notice,” the Captain said into a microphone, his voice now a dignified male with a clipped English accent. “We try to keep united gatherings to a minimum, but I felt recent circumstances warranted a special convocation. Not all eligible Knights were able to attend. Seven were unreachable, two were hospitalized, and twelve were engaged in activities that I granted priority over today’s gathering.”

“You know I do not relish wasting words. Over the past five years, the Society has become more active than during any other period in history. If

preserves keep falling at the present rate, none will be functional within two decades. Furthermore, we know that our brotherhood has been infiltrated by members of the Society. I am not referring to leaked information—I am referring to full-fledged members of the Society wearing masks and robes among us.”

This last remark caused a stir as Knights throughout the room murmured to each other. Kendra heard more than one exclamation of outrage.

The Captain raised his hands. “The confirmed traitor has been apprehended, and the worst damage she intended to do was curtailed. Some of you may have noticed old friends who are not present tonight. Some of those may be among the twenty-one Knights unable to attend for legitimate reasons. Others may be among the seventeen Knights I have discharged over the past two months.”

This announcement initiated another round of hushed comments. The Captain waited for the whispered remarks to end.

“I am not saying all seventeen of these Knights are traitors, but they are Knights with suspicious ties, who have spent too much time fraternizing with questionable individuals. They are Knights who have been unnecessarily free with covert information. Let their fate serve as a warning to us all. We will not tolerate the sharing of secrets, and we will not endure even the appearance of disloyalty. The stakes are too high, the danger too real. Allow me to read the names of the discharged Knights, in case they try to solicit further information from any of us.” He went on to list seventeen names. None were familiar to Kendra.

“If any of you know concrete reasons why I should reconsider the ruling against a certain individual, please feel at liberty to consult with me after this meeting. I take no joy in disenfranchising allies. All of these Knights could have been useful to us in the coming days, weeks, months, and years. My intent is not to deplete our ranks. But I would rather be weakened than crippled. I ask each of you to set a new standard in loyalty, in discretion, and in vigilance. Do not share secrets, even with other Knights, unless the information is desperately relevant to the recipient. Please report any suspicious activities, along with any new intelligence you encounter. Despite our most diligent efforts, traitors could remain among us.”

He paused, letting his words sink in. The room was silent.

“I also gathered you here tonight to petition you for information. Each of you is familiar with the preserves hidden across the globe. Beyond these, there are certain refuges not commonly known, even among the Knights of the Dawn. Not even I know all of them. Some of you know about some of these places. To my unspeakable alarm, even our most hidden sanctuaries are now coming under attack. In fact, they are rapidly becoming the focus of Society activity. I ask those of you who can identify the locations of any of these special refuges, or even rumors as to where they may be, to report such information to your Lieutenant or directly to me. Even if you feel sure we are already aware of all you know, I encourage you to come forward. I would rather hear redundant reports than risk missing anything. Since the Society is successfully finding these most confidential refuges, it is time for the Knights to take a more active role in protecting them.”

Another round of discussion began. One of the masked figures at Kendra’s table muttered, “I knew this was coming.”

Kendra did not like it. If the Sphinx was the Captain, as well as a traitor, this would all be working to his advantage. He would be able to pass along everything the Knights of the Dawn knew to the Society of the Evening Star. All she could do was hope she was wrong.

“Allow me to conclude my remarks dwelling on the positive. All signs indicate that we are entering the darkest chapter of our long history. But we are rising to the occasion. Amid our increasing trials, we continue to score key victories, and we remain a step ahead of our adversaries. We must not relax our efforts. Only with relentless diligence and daily acts of heroism will we overcome our opponents. They are determined, they are patient, they are smart. But I know each of you, and I know we are up to the challenge. The coming season may be our darkest, but I am convinced it will also be our greatest. Preparations are in motion to weather the coming storm. Many of you will receive new assignments tonight. Much has been asked of you. Much is being asked of you. Much will be asked of you. I salute your past, present, and future valor. Thank you.”

As the Captain strode away from the lectern, Kendra rose to join the standing ovation. She clapped with her hands but not her heart. Were they really a step ahead of the Society of the Evening Star? Or had she just heard the leader of the Society preaching in disguise?

Gavin leaned toward her. “Pretty good speech. Nice and short.”

She nodded.

The applause died and the Knights began strolling away from the tables. Gavin and Estelle wandered off, and Kendra found herself surrounded by masked strangers. She moved toward a nearby curtained wall and found glass doors that opened to the outside. Kendra tried the handle, found it unlocked, and slipped out into the night.

Overhead, beyond a mesh roof, stars brightened a moonless sky, countless pinpricks of light. Kendra found herself in a small, screened room with a screen door on the far side. Passing through the door, Kendra entered an enormous screened cage. Lush foliage, including numerous trees and ferns, thrived all around. A man-made stream wound among the vegetation, bridged by meandering paths. A rich perfume of blossoms saturated the air.

Throughout the caged wilderness, glowing softly among the branches and fronds, glided an exotic variety of fairies. Several congregated above a place where the stream pooled, gazing down at their luminous reflections. Most of the fairies had extravagant wings and unusual coloring. Long, gauzy tails shimmered in the darkness. A fuzzy gray fairy with mothlike wings and tufts of pink fur perched on a nearby branch. A white, sparkling fairy drifted into a bulbous blossom, turning the flower into a delicate lantern.

A pair of fairies sped over to Kendra and floated in front of her. One was large and feathery, with elaborate plumage fanning out around her head. The other had very dark skin and fanciful butterfly wings with tiger stripes. At first Kendra thought they were paying her unusual attention, before she recognized that they were enjoying their reflections in her mask.

Kendra remembered that Mr. and Mrs. Fairbanks were fairy collectors. Of course, the fairies could not be kept indoors—if a captured fairy remained inside overnight, she changed into an imp. Apparently the vast cage did not qualify as indoors.

“The curve of the mask makes your head look fat,” the feathery fairy giggled to the other.

“From my perspective, your rump looks rather blimpish,” the striped fairy snickered.

“Now, girls,” Kendra said, “be kind.”

The fairies appeared dumbstruck. “Did you hear that?” the feathery fairy said. “She spoke in perfect Silvian!”

Kendra had spoken English, but something about her being fairykind caused many magical creatures to hear her words in their native tongues. She had conversed that way with fairies, imps, goblins, naiads, and brownies.

“Take off your mask,” the striped fairy ordered.

“I’m not supposed to,” Kendra said.

“Nonsense,” the feathery fairy insisted, “show us your face.”

“No humans are around,” the striped fairy added.

Kendra raised her mask, giving them a peek before covering her features again.

“You’re *her*,” the feathery fairy gasped.

“It’s true, then,” the striped fairy squealed. “The Queen has selected a human handmaiden.”

“What do you mean?” Kendra wondered.

“Don’t play coy,” the feathery fairy chided.

“I’m not,” Kendra said. “Nobody ever said anything about being a handmaiden.”

“Take off your mask again,” the striped fairy said.

Kendra lifted the mask. The striped fairy extended a hand. “May I?” she asked.

Kendra nodded.

The fairy laid a tiny palm against her cheek. Gradually, the fairy grew brighter, until she was beaming orange stripes onto the surrounding foliage. Kendra squinted her eyes against the fiery brilliance.

The striped fairy removed her hand and drifted away, the intensity of her radiance fading only slightly. Other fairies flocked to them, hovering curiously.

“You’re dazzling,” Kendra said, holding up a hand to shield her eyes.

“Me?” the striped fairy laughed. “None of the others are looking at me. I’m barely the moon reflecting the light of the sun.”

“I’m not glowing,” Kendra said, noticing that the twenty fairies surrounding them were indeed all staring at her.

“Not on the same spectrum as I am,” the striped fairy said. “But you shine much, much brighter. If you were radiating on my spectrum, we would all be blinded.”

“Are you all right, Yolie?” the feathery fairy asked.

“I may have overdone it, Larina,” the striped fairy answered. “Care to share the spark?”

The feathery fairy streaked over to the striped fairy. Yolie kissed the feathery fairy on the forehead. Larina flared brighter as the striped fairy dimmed. When they parted, their luminance was about equal.

Larina examined the intensified vibrance of her multihued feathers. A bright aura shone around her like a rainbow. “Magnificent!” she cried.

“This is more manageable,” Yolie said, still gleaming.

“Is she truly a mortal handmaiden?” asked the sparkling white fairy who had illuminated the blossom.

“Can there be any doubt?” Larina exclaimed.

“You got brighter because you touched me?” Kendra asked.

“You are a reservoir of magical energy like I have never encountered,” Yolie said. “Surely you can feel it?”

“I can’t,” Kendra said. Yet she knew she had magical energy inside of her. How else could she recharge depleted magical relics? Kendra glanced over her shoulder at the screen door behind her and the curtained glass doors of the ballroom. What if somebody came out while her mask was off and she was speaking to fairies? Kendra replaced her mask. “Please don’t tell any of the other people about me. I have to keep my identity a secret.”

“We won’t tell,” Larina pledged.

“We had better diffuse our energy,” Yolie suggested. “We’re too bright. The difference is too plain.”

“In the plants?” Larina proposed.

Yolie giggled. “The garden would flourish too quickly. The surplus energy would be unmistakable. We should spread it among ourselves, then share just a little with the plants.”

The surrounding fairies cheered, then closed in on the two brightest. Kisses were exchanged until all the fairies shone only mildly brighter than they had originally.

“Have you any words for us?” Larina asked.

“Thank you for keeping my secret,” Kendra said.

“You could make it an order in the name of the Queen,” Yolie prompted.

“An order?”

“Sure, if you want the secret kept.”

Several of the other fairies glared at Yolie. A few quivered with rage.

“Okay,” Kendra said uncertainly. “I order you in the name of the Queen to keep my identity a secret.”

“Is there anything else we can do for you?” Larina asked. “Life here is so frightfully tedious.”

“I can always use information,” Kendra said. “What do you know about the Captain of the Knights of the Dawn?”

“Knights of the Dawn?” Larina asked. “Who pays them any mind?”

“I’m a Knight,” Kendra said.

“Forgive us,” Yolie said. “We consider most mortal affairs somewhat . . . trivial.”

“I promise the question is not trivial,” Kendra said.

“We haven’t paid enough attention to the Knights to know what you’re asking,” Larina apologized. “All we know about the Knights is that Wesley Fairbanks would trade all his wealth to be one.”

“Are Mr. and Mrs. Fairbanks good people?” Kendra asked.

“As far as we can tell,” Yolie said. “They treat us kindly and give us every possible consideration. Some of us have even condescended to speak with Marion in English on occasion.”

“Do they know any secrets?” Kendra asked.

The fairies all looked at one another, as if hoping one of them might be aware of something. “I’m afraid not,” Yolie finally said. “The couple knows little about our kind. We are simply wondrous novelties to them. Maybe we can put the word out to seek the identity of the Captain of the Knights of the Dawn.”

“I’d appreciate it,” Kendra said. “You don’t happen to know anything about secret fairy preserves, do you?”

Kendra heard a door open behind her. Jumping and turning, she saw a figure in a cloak and a silver mask hurry to the screen door. Behind her mask, she licked her lips. Who could it be?

“Kendra?” asked Warren. “They want to issue your assignment.”

“Okay,” she said, whirling to face the fairies. “Secret preserves?”

“Sorry,” Larina said. “We don’t really know about secret preserves. Most of us are from the wild.”

“Thanks for being so helpful,” Kendra said.

“Our pleasure,” Yolie chirped. “Come visit again.”

Warren held the screen open and Kendra exited. “Be glad you weren’t spotted surrounded by chatty fairies,” he said.

“It just sort of happened,” Kendra apologized.

“Tanu and I saw you go out. We got into a conversation blocking the door. I kept an eye on you through the curtains. Learn anything?”

“Not much. Except that these fairies apparently didn’t get the memo to give me the cold shoulder.” Part of her wanted to say more, but only Grandpa, Grandma, Seth, and the Sphinx knew that Kendra was fairykind. Disclosing what the fairies had said about her being the Queen’s handmaiden might give too much away. Most of her friends at Fablehaven thought that her abilities were a consequence of being fairystruck, which was somewhat less unheard of than her actual condition.

Nobody had become fairykind in more than a thousand years, so nobody could fill Kendra in on all the specifics. Although she knew it meant that the fairies had shared their magic with her in a way that caused it to dwell inside of her as it did in them, she had never heard herself referred to as the Queen’s handmaiden, and was unsure what the expression meant. She knew being fairykind enabled her to see in the dark, understand languages related to Silvian, resist certain forms of mind control, recharge magical objects, and apparently transfer some of her energy to fairies. The Sphinx had implied that she probably had other abilities waiting to be discovered. Because her abilities could make her a target of people wishing to exploit her talents, Grandpa insisted on keeping her fairykind status a secret even from trusted friends.

Warren opened the door into the ballroom, where a tall, broad figure awaited. “Is everything all right?” Tanu asked.

Warren nodded. He led Kendra across the crowded room and back into the grand hallway.

“Who’s meeting with us?” Kendra asked.

“Your Lieutenant,” Warren said. “The quick appointment must mean the mission is important. All of the Knights are eager to speak with the Captain and their Lieutenants.”

“What do you make of everything the Captain shared in his speech?” Kendra asked.

“We’ll discuss that when we have more privacy.”

They returned to the same room where they had met the Captain earlier. A person in a gold-trimmed mask stood by the fireplace. Once Warren and Kendra closed the door, Dougan removed his mask, prompting Kendra and Warren to do the same.

“How did you like your first meeting as a Knight?” Dougan asked Kendra.

“It made me nervous,” she admitted.

“Good, that was part of the aim,” he said. “We need to keep on our toes now more than ever. Are you ready for your assignment?”

“Sure,” Kendra said.

Dougan gestured toward a sofa. Warren and Kendra sat down together. Dougan remained standing, hands clasped behind his back. “Warren, have you ever heard of Lost Mesa?”

Warren’s eyebrows knitted together. “Can’t say I have.”

“Clearly you know about some of the secret preserves, like Fablehaven,” he said. “Lost Mesa is another of the secret preserves.”

“The refuge in Arizona,” Warren deduced. “I know of it, though I hadn’t heard the name. I’ve never been there.”

“Lost Mesa is on Navajo land. What do you know about the objects hidden on the secret preserves?”

“There are five secret preserves, each with a hidden artifact,” Kendra said. “Together, the artifacts can open Zzyzx, the main demon prison.”

“The Captain told me you would know,” Dougan said. “Protecting these artifacts from exploitation is the top priority of the Knights of the Dawn. We have strong reason to suspect that the Society has learned the location of Lost Mesa. We sent in a small team to recover the artifact there, in order to transfer it to a safer repository. The team has encountered some trouble, so I am personally going there to complete the operation. I need

Kendra to come with me, so that she can recharge the artifact before we extract it. We understand she has that ability.”

Warren held up his hand. “A few questions. First off, what sort of trouble did the current team encounter?”

“They found the caverns where the artifact lies hidden,” Dougan said. “The traps guarding the prize proved too much for the three of them. One of the team members perished, and a second was badly injured.”

“Sounds like an ideal situation for involving a fourteen-year-old girl,” Warren said. “Why exactly do you need to charge the artifact?”

“The Captain thinks that if the artifact is operational, we can use its power to better conceal it.”

“Does he know which artifact it is?”

“He or she does not,” Dougan answered.

“Won’t activating the artifacts make them that much more dangerous if they fall into the wrong hands?”

Dougan folded his arms. “Do you really think the Society won’t find a way to charge them if they ever lay hands on them? If anything, charging the artifacts now will make Kendra safer. The Society won’t be after her to jump-start their prison keys.”

Warren got up from his seat and wiped his hands down his face. “Dougan, level with me, is the Captain the Sphinx?” He stared at the Lieutenant intently.

“That’s one of many popular theories,” Dougan smiled. “No theory I’ve heard has it right.”

“That is exactly what I would say if I were trying to conceal the truth, especially if one of the theories were accurate.”

“It’s also what you’d say if the theories were all false,” Dougan said. “Warren, I have to warn you, this line of questioning is unacceptable.”

Warren shook his head. “I can’t elaborate why, but the question is important. I don’t care who the Captain is, as long as he isn’t the Sphinx. Just swear that to me.”

“I’m not swearing one way or the other. Don’t push me, Warren. I’ll already have to converse with the Captain about your sudden interest in his or her identity. Don’t make it worse. I took an oath. For all of our sakes, I can’t expose anything about the leader of the Knights.”

“Then Kendra isn’t going to Lost Mesa,” Warren said. “If necessary, she’ll resign her knighthood.” Warren turned to face her. “Would you mind having the shortest career in the history of the Knights of the Dawn?”

“I’ll do whatever you think is best,” Kendra said.

“I don’t appreciate being strong-armed,” Dougan growled.

“I don’t like being kept in the dark,” Warren countered. “Dougan, you know me. I don’t ask for intelligence just to satisfy my curiosity. I’ve got a reason.”

Dougan rubbed his forehead. “Look, will the two of you swear to keep the following information private? Not a word to anyone!”

“I promise,” Warren said.

Kendra nodded.

“The Captain is not the Sphinx,” Dougan said. “We like that rumor, because it distracts people from the truth, so don’t spoil it. Now you tell me, what would it matter if the Captain were the Sphinx?”

“What do you know about the events at Fablehaven earlier this summer?” Warren asked.

“Were there events out of the ordinary?” Dougan asked.

“Then I can’t tell you,” Warren said. “None of this is a huge deal, just me being overly cautious. Which I tend to be when the fate of the world is on the line. If the Captain sees fit to fill you in on what happened, maybe we can talk more.”

“I hear you. I told you what you wanted. Are you ready to step aside and allow Kendra to come to Lost Mesa with me?”

“Who else is going?”

“Just me, Kendra, and Gavin.”

“The new kid?”

“Gavin was recruited because we need his help negotiating the caverns,” Dougan explained. “Will you step aside?”

“No. But if you promise to keep Kendra far from the caverns, and if you let me join you, and if she agrees, I’ll think about it. I may even come in handy. I’m not too shabby at bypassing traps myself.”

“I’ll have to check with the Captain,” Dougan said.

“Understandable,” Warren allowed. “I’ll need to speak with Kendra privately to gauge her willingness.”

“Very well,” Dougan said, replacing his mask and striding to the door. “Sit tight. I’ll be back soon.” He exited.

Warren crouched next to Kendra. “What do you think?” he whispered.

“Could the room be bugged?”

“Doubtful. But not impossible.”

“I don’t know,” Kendra said. “I keep worrying that Vanessa may have us jumping at shadows. If the Sphinx were a friend, and if you came along, I would totally go, no hesitation.”

“Here’s my take,” Warren whispered. “If the Sphinx is a friend, sure, I’ll be glad to help, but if he’s an enemy, it will be even more important for me to get onto that preserve. I find the fact that they are after another artifact incredibly suspicious, especially since they seem intent on charging it. I’m still not convinced that the Captain is not the Sphinx. Dougan is a good guy, but he would lie to protect a secret of such magnitude. Even if the Captain isn’t the Sphinx, he could just as easily be a puppet. At the very least, the Sphinx frequently trades secrets with the Knights.”

“The Sphinx might be on our side,” Kendra reminded him.

“He might,” Warren said. “But if he were on our side, I don’t picture the Sphinx wanting anyone, himself included, to know the location of so many artifacts. On top of Vanessa’s accusations, the idea of seeking multiple artifacts in such a short period of time smells fishy. After all, they were hidden separately for a reason.” He leaned closer, his lips almost touching her ear, and spoke in the quietest whisper Kendra could imagine. “I need to get onto the preserve, not to help them recover the artifact, but to recover it myself. It will surely mark the end of my association with the Knights of the Dawn, but no one person should know the location of so many artifacts, especially when there is an implication that he may be our enemy.”

“So we should go,” Kendra concluded.

“This makes things very complicated for you,” Warren continued in his faint whisper. “It would be risky to simply go to Lost Mesa and help them extract the artifact, let alone to try to steal it from them! You can play innocent. I won’t involve you directly. I’ll make it look like I was using this role as your protector for my own ends. There’s a chance Dougan may try to hold you responsible. I can’t guarantee your safety, but we’ll make sure

Tanu, Coulter, and Stan all know where you are, so they can ensure that you end up back home.”

Kendra closed her eyes and pressed a hand to her forehead. The thought of trying to pull this off made her stomach twist. But if the Society ended up opening Zzyzx, it would mean the end of the world as she knew it. Preventing that was worth taking a gut-wrenching risk, right?

“Okay,” Kendra said. “If you can come, let’s do it.”

“I hate to put you in this position,” Warren whispered. “Stan would wring my neck. But even though I hate the risk, and even though we might be wrong, I think we have to try.”

Kendra nodded.

They sat in silence, listening to the logs snap and pop in the fireplace. Although the wait stretched much longer than Kendra had anticipated, she experienced no boredom. Her mind continued reexamining the situation, trying to foresee how everything would play out. It was impossible to predict, but she found herself holding firm to the resolution that she and Warren had to go to Lost Mesa and see what they could learn. And perhaps what they could steal.

Nearly an hour later, Dougan returned, removing his mask as he came through the door. “Sorry about the wait,” he said. “The Captain is swamped right now. The Captain mentioned that there were circumstances I could not know involving trouble at Fablehaven that would have justifiably made you extra cautious. Warren, if Kendra is willing to embark for Lost Mesa in the morning, you will be welcome to join her.”

Warren and Dougan looked to Kendra. “Fine with me,” she said, feeling a little sorry for Tanu and Coulter. No matter how this was explained to Grandpa and Grandma, they were going to be furious!

Chapter 6



Plague

Seth threw the baseball as high and hard as he could, deliberately making it a tough catch for Mendigo. The primitive wooden puppet sprang into action the instant the ball took flight, dashing across the lawn. The human-sized limberjack wore a baseball glove on one hand and a cap on his head. The golden hooks that served as joints jingled as he dove over a hedge, stretching out to trap the ball in his mitt.

The nimble puppet landed in a somersault, then whipped the ball back at Seth as soon as he rolled to his feet. The ball hissed through the air, streaking straight instead of arcing high, and slapped into Seth's glove, stinging his hand. "Don't chuck it so hard," Seth instructed. "My hands have nerves!"

The limberjack stood in a crouch, ready to make the next impossible grab. After playing catch with Mendigo in the yard and having a few rounds of batting practice, Seth was convinced Mendigo could land a multimillion-dollar contract in the major leagues. Mendigo never dropped the ball and never threw wild. When pitching to Seth, the puppet would put the ball wherever Seth asked, at whatever speed he wanted. Batting, Mendigo could smack line drives in any direction he was told, or he could just as easily smash home runs with his quick, fluid swing. Of course, eligibility might be an issue. Seth wasn't sure about Major League Baseball's policy regarding giant magical puppets.

“Showboat,” Seth called, throwing the baseball high. Mendigo was already running before the ball left Seth’s hand. As the puppet closed in on the baseball, he shifted the glove from his hand to his foot and performed a smooth cartwheel, catching the ball with his gloved foot while upside down. The limberjack tossed the ball back to Seth, still with some zip, but not as hard as his previous throw.

Seth winged the ball sidearm in a new direction. Playing with Mendigo was a fun distraction, even though he knew the puppet was really his babysitter. Things had been tense since Coulter and Tanu had returned with news that Warren and Kendra had embarked on a mission for the Knights of the Dawn. Even without knowing all of the details, Seth felt sick with envy.

Grandpa and Grandma had taken the news hard, becoming even more protective of Seth than usual. Technically, his three-day period prohibiting even chaperoned excursions was over, but they had forbidden him from accompanying Coulter and Tanu on their assignment this afternoon.

Grandpa had been monitoring the nipsies while the others were gone, and had found that the warlike nipsies were relentless in their thirst to conquer the others. Nothing he tried could dissuade them. In the end he decided that the only way to save the untainted nipsies was to relocate them. Coulter and Tanu were currently searching for a new habitat for the good nipsies. A routine assignment, but Grandpa had suspended Seth from the woods until they figured out the story behind the new subspecies of dark creatures.

Mendigo returned the ball to Seth, who threw it to the right, lower than his previous toss. Mendigo started after it and then halted, letting the ball drop to the grass and roll into a flower bed. Seth put his hands on his hips. Unlike Hugo, Mendigo had no will—he only followed orders. And the current order was to play catch.

Continuing to ignore the ball, Mendigo rushed toward Seth at full speed. The action was baffling. Once, Mendigo had served Muriel the witch, but some fairies had helped Kendra break that connection earlier in the summer. Mendigo only took orders from the staff of Fablehaven now. He had proven so useful that Grandpa had arranged for Mendigo to be allowed past the barriers protecting the yard and house.

So why was Mendigo charging him? “Mendigo, stop!” Seth cried, but the puppet paid him no heed. Grandpa had issued Mendigo a standing order

not to allow Seth out of the yard. Was the limberjack confused? Seth was nowhere near the edge of the lawn.

When Mendigo reached Seth, he dipped a shoulder, wrapped both arms around his legs, hoisted him into the air, and sprinted for the house. Slung over the wooden shoulder, Seth looked up and saw a group of dark fairies streaking toward them. They were unlike any fairies Seth had ever seen. Their wings did not glisten in the sunlight. Their raiment did not sparkle. In spite of the clear sky and the hot sun, each of the dozen fairies was shrouded in shadow. Faintly, a thin, dark contrail followed each one. Instead of light, these fairies radiated darkness.

The fairies gained swiftly, but the house was not far away. Mendigo swerved to avoid inky streaks of shadow hurled from the fairies. Wherever the black energy struck, vegetation instantly withered. Grass turned white and sere, blossoms wilted and faded, leaves crumpled and dried. A dark streak zapped Mendigo on the back, and a black circle appeared on the brown wood.

Bypassing the stairs, Mendigo clambered over the railing of the deck and clattered to the back door. The puppet dropped Seth, who thrust the door open and ordered the limberjack inside. Yanking the door shut, Seth hollered for Grandpa.

Seth now understood Mendigo's behavior. The puppet had one permanent command above all others—to protect the people of Fablehaven. The limberjack had sensed the fairies coming, and had known they meant trouble. Seth had a queasy feeling that if not for Mendigo, he might be a brown, shriveled corpse out on the lawn, the human version of a spoiled banana.

“What is it, Seth?” Grandpa asked, emerging from the study.

“I was just attacked in the yard by evil fairies,” Seth gasped.

Grandpa glowered at him. “Have you been trapping fairies again?”

“No, I promise, I didn't do anything to provoke them,” Seth insisted. “These fairies are different. They're wild and dark. Look out the window.”

Seth and his Grandpa went to a window. The dismal flock of fairies were working their magic on a row of rosebushes, turning green leaves brown and vivid petals black. “I've never seen such a thing,” Grandpa breathed, reaching for the door.

“Don't!” Seth warned. “They'll come after you.”

“I have to see,” Grandpa said, pushing the door open.

At once the fairies darted toward the deck, firing shadowy streaks. Grandpa promptly retreated indoors. The fairies hovered just beyond the deck. Several were laughing. A couple made faces. They desiccated a few potted plants on the deck before flitting away.

“I’ve never heard of anything like these creatures,” Grandpa said. “How did they get in the yard?”

“They flew in as if they belonged,” Seth replied, “just like any fairy would.”

“Fairies are creatures of light.” Grandpa spoke weakly, uncertainly, as if hesitant to believe what was happening.

“Some of the nipsies turned dark,” Seth reminded him.

Frowning, Grandpa rubbed his chin. “These fairies aren’t in a fallen state. When a fairy falls she becomes an imp, and would be banned from the yard. These fairies are in a darkened state—an undefined alteration that leaves them with full access to the gardens. I’ve never heard of anything like it. Perhaps I ought to place a temporary ban on all fairies, until we get this sorted out. I’m not sure I can exclude only the dark ones.”

“Is Grandma still shopping?” Seth asked.

“Yes,” Grandpa said. “She won’t be back for at least an hour. Dale is down at the stable. Tanu and Coulter are still out scouting for a place to relocate the good nipsies.”

“What should we do?” Seth inquired.

“I’ll telephone Ruth,” Grandpa said. “Warn her to be careful when entering the yard. I’ll send Mendigo to fetch Dale.”

“Can we get in touch with Tanu and Coulter?” Seth asked.

“No, but they have Hugo with them,” Grandpa said. “We’ll have to trust that they can take care of themselves.” He turned to address the big puppet. “Mendigo, at full speed, go retrieve Dale from the stables, keeping him safe from harm. Steer clear of any dark creatures like those fairies.”

Grandpa opened the door, and Mendigo raced out onto the deck, vaulted the railing, and sped across the lawn. “What should I do?” Seth asked.

“Keep watch from the windows,” Grandpa said. “Don’t go outside. Let me know if you see anything unusual. After I call your grandmother, I’m

going to make a more concerted effort to get the Sphinx on the line.”

Grandpa hurried away, and Seth went from room to room, checking through all of the windows, trying to spot the dark fairies. After three laps, he gave up. Apparently they had flown away.

To test his assumption he opened the door and ventured out onto the deck. Hadn't Grandpa done the same thing a moment ago, but with the fairies in sight? Seth was ready to retreat, but no gloomy fairies attacked. Had Grandpa already banished them from the yard? Seth sat down in a chair, gazing out at the garden.

He realized this was the first time he had been outside unsupervised since getting busted for visiting the nipsies. He felt an instant itch to bolt into the woods. Where would he go? Maybe to the tennis court to check in on how Doren and Newel were doing. Or to the pond to chuck rocks at the naiads.

No. After the scare with the fairies, he had to grant reluctantly that Grandpa was probably right about this being a foolish time to roam the woods. Besides, if he got caught, he would probably lose Grandpa's trust forever and end up grounded for all eternity.

He noticed a few normal fairies fluttering around the yard. They approached the dead roses and began healing them with glittering flashes. Wilted petals blushed. Curled leaves unfurled. Brittle limbs became supple and green.

The fairies were evidently not banned yet—the others must have voluntarily deserted the yard. Seth watched the fairies continue restoring the damaged vegetation. He did not try to move in for a closer look. Even the pretty fairies had no fondness for him. They were still resentful that he had accidentally turned one of them into an imp the previous summer. They had punished him, the fairy had been restored, and he had apologized a lot, but the fairies still mostly spurned him.

As his excitement over the dark fairies wore off in their absence, Seth ached with boredom. If Grandpa would trust him with keys to the dungeon, he could probably find a way to pass the time down there. He wished Mendigo would return. He wished he could switch places with Kendra, off on an adventure so secretive nobody had trusted him with the details. He even almost wished he was shopping with Grandma!

What could he do? There were toys in the attic bedroom, lots of them, but he had played with them so much over the summer that they failed to entice him anymore. Maybe he could rip up some of his clothes and leave them for the brownies to mend. It was always interesting to see the improvements they made.

Seth stood up, ready to go inside, when a vaporous personage emerged from the woods. The misty, translucent figure glided toward the deck. Seth realized to his horror that the ghostly apparition looked like Tanu, except wispy and insubstantial.

Had Tanu been killed? Was this his spirit come to haunt them? Seth watched as the gaseous form drew nearer. Its face looked grave.

“Are you a ghost?” Seth called.

The vaporous Tanu shook his head, and motioned as if drinking something from a bottle.

“A potion?” Seth asked. “That’s right, you have a potion that turns you into gas, like the one Kendra said Warren used when you were battling the giant panther!”

Tanu nodded, drifting nearer. A light breeze arose, forcing him off course and temporarily dissipating his misty body. When the breeze died, Tanu re-formed and continued until he reached the deck. Unable to resist, Seth passed a hand through the insubstantial Samoan. The gas felt more like powder than mist. None of it stuck to his hand.

Tanu gestured for Seth to open the back door. Seth complied and followed Tanu into the house. “Grandpa, Tanu came back! He’s made of gas!”

Indoors, Tanu held together better, which made him look more solid. Seth swatted a hand through Tanu’s stomach, making the vapor shift and swirl.

“What is it, Tanu?” Grandpa asked, hustling into the room, cell phone in hand. “Was there trouble?”

The Samoan nodded.

“Where’s Coulter? Is he all right?”

Tanu shook his head.

“Dead?” Grandpa asked.

Tanu shook his head slightly and shrugged.

“Does he need our help?”

Tanu tilted a hand from side to side.

“He doesn’t need our help immediately.”

Tanu nodded.



“Are we in immediate danger?”

Tanu shook his head.

“How long before you’re back to normal?”

Tanu scrunched his brow, then held up one hand, the fingers spread wide.

“Five minutes?” Grandpa verified.

Tanu nodded.

The back door opened, and Dale entered with Mendigo. “What’s going on?” Dale asked, taking in Tanu’s altered state. “Mendigo showed up at the stables and abducted me.”

“We have a problem,” Grandpa said. “Dark fairies attacked Seth in the yard.”

Eyes wide, Tanu gestured vigorously.

“Dark fairies attacked you too?” Seth asked.

Tanu stabbed a finger at Seth, nodding emphatically.

“Have you noticed anything unusual with any of the creatures today?” Grandpa asked Dale.

“Nothing like dark fairies,” he replied.

“I called Ruth. She’ll be careful coming into the house. I still can’t reach the Sphinx.”

“When will he solidify?” Dale asked, his eyes flicking over to Tanu.

“In a few minutes,” Grandpa said.

“Mind if I grab some water?” Dale asked.

“Might do us all some good,” Grandpa said.

They went to the kitchen, where Dale poured each of them a tall glass of cool water from the fridge. While Seth sipped at his drink, Tanu coalesced into his old self. A brief fizzing sound accompanied the rapid transformation.

“Sorry about that,” Tanu said. “I’m not sure I would have escaped without the aid of a potion.”

“What happened?” Grandpa asked calmly.

Tanu took a sip of water. “As planned, we were scouting for a new home for the gentle nipsies. We were investigating that crescent-shaped meadow near where the Forgotten Chapel used to stand. You know the one?”

“Sure,” Dale said.

Grandpa nodded.

“I would, if I was ever allowed to explore,” Seth grumbled.

“We came across a swarm of squabbling fairies, weaving around like dogfighters, some light, some dark. From what we saw, when the dark ones got their mouths on the light ones, the light fairies were extinguished—they became dark. But the light fairies didn’t appear to be converting any dark ones.”

“How many fairies?” Grandpa asked.

“Must have been nearly thirty,” Tanu answered. “The brawl looked about even at first, but before long, the dark outnumbered the light three to one. Coulter and I decided we ought to break it up before all the fairies were changed. He has that crystal that makes people dizzy, and thought he might be able to disrupt the battle enough to give the light fairies a chance to escape.

“The instant we stepped into the clearing, the dark fairies left off tangling with the light ones and swarmed us. There was almost no time to think. Coulter urged me to go gaseous. Hugo put himself between us and the onslaught, and they hit him hard with murky magic that withered the grass on his body and left him spotted with black marks. Holding his crystal high, Coulter ordered Hugo to retreat to the barn, which was the right call. There was little Hugo could do against so many tiny enemies. The golem obeyed, and the fairies swooped at Coulter. The crystal disrupted their flight. Most crashed to the ground. A few managed to land on Coulter. They started biting him, and then he vanished.”

“Did he put on his invisibility glove?” Seth asked hopefully.

“No glove,” Tanu said. “He just disappeared. I drank the potion as the fairies came at me, and dissolved into a gaseous state just in time. They were mad, darting through me, shooting bursts of blackness at me, but when they saw that it was in vain, they flew away.”

“They couldn’t have killed Coulter,” Dale said. “Dark or not, the treaty would still bind them. You were on neutral ground. They couldn’t kill Coulter unless he had killed somebody at Fablehaven.”

“For that very reason, I don’t think he’s dead,” Tanu said. “But they placed some sort of curse on him that either made him invisible or teleported him away. I stayed and scoured the area, but found no evidence

that he was invisible. No depressions in the grass where he might have been lying or standing. I would have heard him if he made a sound, but I detected nothing. That's all I know. I came straight here."

"You're sure Coulter didn't change into a darkened state himself?" Grandpa asked. "He simply vanished?"

"That's what I saw," Tanu said. "Maybe he turned into grass, or into a mosquito, or into oxygen. Maybe he shrank. I suppose there's a chance that somehow the rules don't apply to these dark creatures, and Coulter no longer exists in any form."

Grandpa sighed, bowing his head. When he raised it, he looked wretched. "I worry that I'm unfit to continue as caretaker. Have I grown too old? Have I lost my touch? Perhaps I should resign and ask the Conservators' Alliance to appoint a new overseer in my stead. It seems we've had one catastrophe after another lately, with the people I love most paying the price for my incompetence."

"This isn't your fault," Tanu said, resting a hand on his shoulder. "I know you and Coulter are old friends."

"I'm not asking for sympathy," Grandpa said. "I'm simply trying to be objective. I've been captured twice in the past year. The preserve was taken to the brink of collapse each time. I may have become more of a hindrance than a help to Fablehaven and those who live here."

"A fellow can't always avoid tough circumstances," Dale said. "But you can weather the trouble and come out on top. You've done it before, and I expect you'll do it again."

Grandpa shook his head. "I haven't solved anything lately. If not for my grandchildren risking their lives, along with help from the rest of you and a healthy dose of good fortune, Fablehaven would be in ruins."

Seth had never seen Grandpa Sorenson look so defeated. How could he revive him? He spoke up quickly. "The first time, I caused all the trouble. The second time, Vanessa betrayed us. You never did anything wrong."

"And this time?" Grandpa asked, his voice calm and sad. "Not only did I inadvertently let your sister end up on a dangerous mission thousands of miles away, I also sent my oldest friend to his grave. How did I miss the warning signs?"

"The only thing that could make you unfit to lead would be belief in such nonsense," Tanu said gently. "Nobody could have seen this coming.

You think Coulter or I would have approached the fairies so haphazardly had we sensed the danger? These are turbulent times. Fablehaven has been under deliberate assault from formidable foes. You've come through it so far, and so have we. I've traveled far and wide, and I can't think of anybody I would rather have watching over this preserve than you, Stan."

"I'll second that," Dale said. "Don't forget who'd most likely end up assigning the new caretaker if you resigned without appointing a successor."

"The Sphinx?" guessed Seth.

"His is the most trusted voice among the conservators," Grandpa admitted.

"Coulter is probably alive somewhere," Tanu said. "Pull yourself together, Stan. We need a plan."

"Thanks, Tanu, Dale, Seth." Grandpa pursed his lips, his eyes hardening. "We need information. The Sphinx is proving to be unreachable. Given the extremity of our circumstances, I think it's time to investigate what else Vanessa knows."

* * *

Slaggo and Voorsh led a skinny, birdlike humanoid down the dank dungeon corridor. The manacled prisoner had a head like a seagull and was covered with gray, molting feathers. Slaggo held a torch, and Grandpa walked alongside, shining a flashlight on the threesome. When the flashlight beam strayed too high, reflecting off the birdman's beady black eyes, he threw his head back and let out a fierce squawk. Voorsh yanked on a chain fastened to an iron collar, making the grungy birdman stumble sideways. Grandpa switched off the flashlight.

"Ready?" Grandpa asked, eyeing Tanu, Dale, and Grandma. Tanu held handcuffs, Dale clutched a truncheon, and Grandma gripped a crossbow. They each gave a single nod.

Grandpa opened the front of the Quiet Box, revealing an empty space where a person could stand. The goblin wardens guided the birdman into the compartment. Grandpa closed the door and the box rotated halfway around, exposing an identical door on the opposite side. Grandpa opened the door and revealed Vanessa standing inside, wearing one of Grandma's

old housecoats, a faint smile on her lips, the torchlight accenting her elegant features. Her skin had less color than the last time Seth had seen her, but her dark eyes smoldered. He had to admit she remained strikingly beautiful.

“How long has it been?” she asked, stepping out of the box and extending her hands so Tanu could cuff them.

“Six weeks,” Grandpa said, as Tanu secured the handcuffs.

“Where are my animals?”

“We released some,” Grandpa said. “Others we gave away to those capable of caring for them.”

Vanessa nodded as if satisfied. Her faint smile stretched into a smirk. “Let me guess. Kendra is no longer here, and some disaster is transpiring at Fablehaven.”

Grandpa and Grandma exchanged a wary glance. “How did you know?” Grandma asked.

Vanessa stretched her cuffed hands high above her head and arched her back. She closed her eyes. “Certain precautions the Sphinx takes are predictable once you understand how he operates. It’s the same way I anticipated that he was going to backstab me and lock me away in that miserable box.”

“How did you predict this?” Grandpa asked.

Keeping her legs straight, Vanessa bent forward and touched the ground between her feet. “You released me from the box, and you all look serious, so obviously there has been trouble. Consider the circumstances. The Sphinx cannot afford to let his identity as the leader of the Society of the Evening Star be discovered. Even without the note I left, there were enough clues to what he was doing that you might have eventually become suspicious. He successfully acquired the artifact and freed the previous occupant of the Quiet Box. He had no more use for this preserve. Therefore, his next move would probably be to set some plan in motion to destroy Fablehaven and all of you with it—except Kendra, who he suspects may still be useful. I’m sure he created an excuse to get her away from here just in time. You’re all in tremendous danger. You see, when the Sphinx commits a crime, he disposes of all the evidence. Then, to be safe, he burns down the neighborhood.” Vanessa swung her handcuffed arms from side to side, twisting at her waist. “I can’t tell you how nice it feels to stretch.”

“Can you guess how he is trying to destroy Fablehaven?” Grandpa asked.

Vanessa arched an eyebrow. “Some of the Sphinx’s strategies are predictable. His methods are not. But whatever he has set in motion will probably be impossible to stop. Fablehaven is doomed. I expect I would be safer if you just put me back in the Quiet Box.”

“Don’t worry, Vanessa,” Grandma said. “We will.”

“I take it you don’t fully comprehend the current threat?” Vanessa asked Grandpa.

“It is like nothing we’ve ever seen.”

“Tell me about it; maybe I can help. I’ve been working for the Society for some time now.” Vanessa started jogging in place, lifting her knees high.

“Creatures at Fablehaven are turning dark,” Grandpa said. “The change has been most evident in the nipsies and fairies so far—creatures of light who are transforming in appearance and attitude into creatures of darkness. I’m not talking about fairies falling and becoming imps. We’ve seen fairies draped in shadow using their magic to wither and ruin rather than to nourish and beautify.”

“And the condition is spreading?” Vanessa asked, legs pumping rapidly.

“Like a magical plague,” Grandpa said. “Making matters worse, the dark fairies can cross all the same boundaries as the light fairies, including into the yard.”

An expression of admiration appeared on her face. “Leave it to the Sphinx to invent new ways to eradicate preserves. I’ve never heard of an epidemic like you’re describing. Let me guess. Even doubting the Sphinx, you’ve turned to him for help, but heard nothing.”

Grandpa nodded.

“He is not replying because he expects you will soon be dead. You have two options. Abandon the preserve. Or try to figure out how to stop this plague the Sphinx has created, fail, and then abandon the preserve. My guess is you’ll go with the second choice.”

“Abandoning Fablehaven is not an option,” Grandpa said. “Not until we do all we can to save it. Certainly not until we learn the secret behind this plague so we can prevent it from recurring elsewhere.”

Vanessa stopped high-stepping, panting lightly. “Whether or not you can salvage Fablehaven, trying to discover the nature of the plague makes sense. Any leads?”

“Not yet,” Grandpa said. “Only today did we realize how virulently the condition is spreading.”

“I could help if you let me,” Vanessa offered. “Magical creatures are my specialty.”

“Along with controlling victims in their sleep,” Grandma reminded everyone.

“You could post a guard,” Vanessa suggested.

“We promised ourselves before we opened the box that you would be going back inside,” Grandpa said.

“Very well, when all else fails and you change your minds, you’ll know where to find me,” she said. “The Quiet Box isn’t as bad as I expected, really. After standing there waiting in the darkness for a while, you slip into a trance. Not full sleep, but you shut down, lose all sense of time. I was never hungry or thirsty—although I could use a drink now.”

“Can you offer us sure evidence that the Sphinx is a traitor?” Grandma asked.

“Proof will be hard to come by. I know the names of other traitors. I was not the only one to infiltrate the Knights of the Dawn. And I know one secret that would absolutely blow your minds. But of course I’ll divulge further information along those lines only in exchange for my freedom. Where is Kendra, by the way?” She asked the question with pretended innocence.

“Helping with a covert mission,” Grandpa said.

Vanessa laughed. “Is he extracting another artifact so soon?”

“I said nothing about—”

Vanessa laughed louder, cutting him off. “Right,” she chuckled. “Kendra’s not in Arizona or Australia. Still, hard to believe, after all this time, the Sphinx has stopped pacing himself and is sprinting for the finish line. Any clue who went with her?”

“We’ve told her enough,” Grandma said.

“Fine,” Vanessa said. “Good luck with the Sphinx. Good luck with the plague. And good luck with seeing Kendra again.” She stepped backwards

into the Quiet Box, regarding them smugly.

“And good luck with getting out of there,” Grandma said. Vanessa’s eyes widened as Grandma slammed the door. Grandma turned to the others. “I’ll not have her trying to use our fears to hold us hostage.”

“We may eventually need her help,” Grandpa said.

The Quiet Box turned, and Grandma opened the door. Slaggo and Voorsh took custody of the birdlike man. “I’m willing to work twice as hard in hopes of avoiding that eventuality.”

“We lack communication with Warren, so Vanessa’s knowledge of possible traitors won’t help Kendra in the near future,” Grandpa said.

“Vanessa can offer no proof that the Sphinx is the leader of the Society. And it sounds like she’d be guessing as much as we are as to how to combat this plague. I suppose we can refrain from further questions for now.”

“What now?” Seth asked.

“We need to determine how this plague started,” Grandpa said, “in order to find a way to stop it.”

Chapter 7



Lost Mesa

The empty dirt road extended into the distance ahead of Kendra until it faded in a blur of shimmering heat. Her view of the desert landscape wobbled as the pickup jounced over the washboard surface of the desolate lane. It was rough country—uneven plains interrupted by rocky gorges and sheer plateaus. Lukewarm air gushed from the dashboard vents, refusing to actually get cool.

They had not stayed on roads the entire time. Part of the ride had taken them over miles of trackless terrain, emphasizing the isolation of their hidden destination. Driving directions from an Internet search were not going to lead a traveler anywhere near Lost Mesa.

The driver was a quiet Navajo man with leathery skin, probably in his fifties. He wore a spotless white cowboy hat and a bolo tie. Kendra had tried to engage him in conversation—he answered all direct questions, but never elaborated or made inquiries of his own. His name was Neil. He had been married once for less than a year. He had no kids. He had worked at Lost Mesa since his teenage years. He agreed that the day was hot.

Warren, Dougan, and Gavin all reclined in the bed of the pickup with the luggage, wearing hats that shielded their faces from the sun. All Kendra had to do was remember how hot and dusty they were to silence any possible complaints about the truck's feeble air conditioner.

“Almost there,” Neil said, the first unsolicited words he had uttered since “I’ll take your suitcase” back at the small airport in Flagstaff.

Kendra leaned forward, scanning up ahead for a landmark besides sun-baked dirt and turquoise sagebrush. The only feature out of the ordinary was a low barbed-wire fence coming into view, with a battered wooden gate that spanned the road. The three-wire fence stretched out of sight in either direction. A faded No Trespassing sign hung on the gate, red background with white letters.

“I don’t see much besides a fence,” Kendra said.

Neil glanced at her, eyes so squinted they looked closed. “You see the fence?”

“Sure. Barbed wire. Does it keep anybody out?”

“I’ve been driving this road thirty years,” he said. “I still can’t see the fence till after I pass it. Powerful distracter spell. I have to focus on the road. It’s tough every time, fighting the urge to turn around, even though I know exactly where I’m going.”

“Oh,” Kendra said. Her goal had not been to advertise that distracter spells had no effect on her, but she could think of no false explanation to explain how she had seen the fence so easily. There it was, three parallel strands of barbed wire affixed to slim, rusted posts.

When the truck reached the gate, Neil slowed to a stop, climbed down, opened the gate, climbed back up, and drove through. The instant the car passed the fence line, a massive plateau sprang into view up ahead, so dominating the landscape that Kendra could not fathom how she had failed to notice it up until now. The looming mesa was not only enormous, it was striking, with bands of white, yellow, orange, and red coloring its steep sides.

“Welcome to Lost Mesa,” Neil said, stopping the truck again.

“I’ve got it!” Warren called as Neil opened the door to climb down again. Warren ran over and shut the gate. Neil closed his door as Warren leapt back into the truck.

Kendra began to notice that the imposing plateau was not the only variation in the landscape on this side of the fence. Tall saguaro cacti were suddenly plentiful, rounded green arms pointing skyward. Joshua trees mingled with the saguaros, contorted limbs twisting into unlikely shapes.

“There weren’t cactuses like this a minute ago,” Kendra said.

Neil shook his head. "Not like these. We have a diverse forest here."

The truck sped up. The road was now paved. The asphalt looked dark enough to have been recently laid. "Is that *the* lost mesa?" Kendra asked, looking up at the plateau.

"The table that went missing when the preserve was founded. Here we call it Painted Mesa. Almost nobody knows, but part of the reason the Navajo people ended up with the largest reservation in the country was to conceal this hallowed place."

"Do Navajos run it?" Kendra asked.

"Not solely. We Diné are new here compared to the Pueblo people."

"Has the preserve been here long?" Kendra asked. She finally had Neil on a roll!

"This is the oldest preserve on the continent, founded centuries before European colonization, first managed by the ancient race outsiders call Anasazi. Persian magi actually established the preserve. They wanted it to stay a secret. Back then, this land was unknown across the Atlantic. We're still doing a good job at remaining off the map."

"Painted Mesa can't be seen from outside of the fence?" Kendra asked.

"Not even by satellites," Neil said proudly. "This preserve is the opposite of a mirage. You don't see us, but we're really here."

Kendra glimpsed fairies flitting among the cacti. A few were bright, with butterfly or dragonfly wings, but most were colored in more earthy shades. Many had scales or spines or protective carapaces. Their wings reminded Kendra of locusts and beetles. One furry brown fairy flapped leathery bat wings.

As the truck rounded a corner, new species of cacti came into view. Some had leaves like swords; others had long, spindly arms; still others had reddish needles. Sitting up next to a clump of spherical cacti, nose twitching as it tested the air, a large rabbit with a short pair of forked antlers caught Kendra's eye.

"That rabbit has horns!" Kendra exclaimed.

"Jackalope," Neil said. "They bring good luck." He glanced at Kendra without moving his head. "You had milk this morning?"

"Warren has some buttery stuff that works like the milk," Kendra said evasively. Warren did have a substance like that, derived from the milk of a

giant walrus on a preserve in Greenland. He had even eaten some today, so his eyes would be open to the magical creatures of Lost Mesa. Kendra neglected to mention that Warren had not shared any with her because she no longer required milk to observe magical beings.

The truck topped a rise, and the main buildings of Lost Mesa came into view. Kendra first noticed the huge pueblo complex, which looked like two dozen boxy adobe homes artfully stacked together. The windows were dark, with no glass. Wooden beams jutted from the reddish-brown walls. Beside the pueblo stood a white hacienda with a red-tiled roof. The horseshoe-shaped hacienda looked considerably more modern than the pueblo complex. A tall water tower overshadowed the hacienda, built on long stilts.

Across a vacant area from the houses stood two other structures. One was a vast wooden building with a curved aluminum roof. Even though she saw no runway, Kendra wondered if it might be an airplane hangar. The other was a low, domed structure that sheltered a wide area. The gigantic black head of a cow even bigger than Viola protruded through a large opening just above ground level. The cow was munching hay from a vast trough. Seeing that enormous head at ground level revealed to Kendra that the domed roof must cover a tremendous pit where the colossal cow lived.

The truck snaked along the curvy road, pulling to a stop on a tiled area outside the hacienda. Before Neil had cut the engine, the main door opened, and a short Native American woman emerged. Her silver hair was pulled up in a round bun, and she wore a colorful shawl across her shoulders. Although her copper skin was seamed, her eyes were lively, and she walked with vigor.

Several other people followed the woman out the door. A potbellied man with narrow shoulders, long limbs, and a heavy gray mustache walked alongside a tall, slender Native American woman with a broad jaw and high cheekbones. Behind them came a freckly woman with short brown hair pushing a pudgy, round-faced Mexican man in a wheelchair.

Kendra dropped down from the truck, while Warren, Dougan, and Gavin hopped out of the bed. "Welcome to Lost Mesa," said the older woman with the bun. "I am Rosa, the caretaker here. We're glad to have you with us."

They exchanged introductions. The tall younger woman was Rosa's daughter, Mara. She said nothing. The gangly man with the mustache was

named Hal. Tammy was the woman pushing the wheelchair, and she seemed to know Dougan. The guy in the wheelchair was named Javier. One of his legs was missing. The other was in a splint.

It was decided that Warren and Dougan would go talk to Rosa, Tammy, and Javier inside the hacienda. Neil and Mara helped Warren and Dougan tote their bags into the house, leaving Kendra and Gavin alone with Hal, who had been appointed to show them around the preserve.

“Don’t that beat all,” Hal said once the others were out of sight. “The sky starts falling around here, and they send us a couple of teenagers. No disrespect intended. First thing an able mind learns at Lost Mesa is that looks can deceive.”

“Wh-wh-who died?” Gavin asked.

Hal raised his eyebrows. “If they didn’t tell you, I’m not sure it’s my place.”

“Javier was injured at the same time?” Gavin wondered.

“So I’m told,” Hal said, hooking his thumbs into the belt loops of his jeans. The movement made Kendra notice his heavy silver belt buckle with a majestic elk engraved on the front.

“Hot today,” Kendra said.

“If you say so,” Hal allowed. “Monsoon season is under way. We saw rain two nights this week. Things have cooled off a few degrees since July.”

“Wh-what are you going to show us?” Gavin asked.

“Whatever you like,” Hal said, flashing a smile that showed a gold tooth. “You two are getting the V.I.P. treatment, in part because you could end up with the R.I.P. treatment. Heaven forbid.”

“D-d-do you know why we’re here?” Gavin asked.

“None of my affair. Some foolishness up on Painted Mesa, I expect. Something risky, judging from Javier. I’m not one to pry.”

“Tammy was working with Javier and whoever died?” Kendra asked.

“That she was,” Hal affirmed. “Things went awry, so they called in the cavalry. You kids been to a preserve like this before?”

Gavin nodded.

“Yeah,” Kendra said.

“Then I reckon you can guess what the cow is for.” He jerked his head toward the domed structure. “We call her Mazy. She’s been skittish lately,

so don't slide up too close, especially when she's eating. A few folks live in the pueblo over yonder, but you'll have rooms in the house, for which you'll be grateful, once you feel the draft from the swamp coolers."

"What about the building that looks like a hangar?" Kendra asked.

"That's the museum," Hal said. "One of a kind, for all I know. We'll save it for the finale." He picked up a covered white plastic bucket with a metal handle and slung it into the bed of the truck Neil had driven. Pulling a set of keys from his pocket, Hal opened the passenger door. "Let's take a ride. We can all squeeze up front."

Kendra climbed up and scooted into the middle. Hal sauntered around to the driver's side, using the steering wheel to pull himself up. "Nice and cozy," Hal said, turning the key in the ignition. He glanced over at Kendra and Gavin. "Don't tell me you two are sweethearts."

They both hastily shook their heads.

"Now, don't go protesting too much," he laughed, backing up the truck before starting down a dirt road. "Aside from the buildings and Painted Mesa, I know this place looks like a whole lot of nothing. But you'd be surprised at the hidden springs and ravines and sandstone mazes. Not to mention that most of the activity around here takes place beneath the surface."

"Caves?" Gavin asked.

"Caverns that would put Carlsbad to shame," Hal exclaimed. "Some individual chambers could house an entire football stadium with room to spare. I'm talking about no fewer than seven elaborate cave systems that go on for hundreds of miles all told. I expect one day we'll find how they all interconnect. If this place were open to the public, it'd be the caving capital of the world. 'Course, as you might expect, you never know what a spelunker might run across in the tunnels below Lost Mesa. Better to stay on the surface, enjoy the gorgeous gorges and the beautiful buttes."

"What kind of creatures are in the caves?" Kendra asked.

"I make a point of not knowing. One of these days I'll kick the bucket, sure enough, but curiosity will not be my downfall. That said, you don't have to go looking to know those caverns teem with every manner of haunt and bugaboo that have plagued the human race since time began. Here we go. Take a gander up ahead."

They came around the side of a bluff, bringing into view an old Spanish mission with a single belfry. The brown walls of the building rose and fell in gentle curves. The truck drove around to the back, where they found a cemetery enclosed by a low wall.

Hal brought the truck to a stop. "This and the pueblo are the oldest structures on the property," he said. "One of the most memorable features is the boneyard. It not only houses the biggest zombie collection in the world, it's one of the oldest to boot!" He opened his door and got out.

Kendra turned to gauge Gavin's reaction, but he was already climbing down as well. She heard the tinkling of many bells coming from the graveyard. "Zombies?" Kendra asked incredulously, sliding out of the truck, soles slapping the dirt. "As in dead people?"

"Not people," Hal clarified. "Not like you and me." He retrieved the plastic bucket from the back of the truck. "They don't have any more brains than a leech. And they aren't any more human either."

"Is this safe?" Kendra asked.

Hal led the way to a short iron gate in the cemetery wall. "Zombies have only one drive. Hunger. Satisfy that drive, and they aren't too harmful. We've got as good a system here as I've ever heard of."

Kendra followed Hal and Gavin through the gate and into the graveyard. None of the headstones were ostentatious. They were small and old, white as bone, worn so smooth that only a few occasional letters or numbers were faintly visible. Planted beside each grave was a bell on a small pole with a cord attached. Each cord disappeared underground. Of the nearly two hundred bells in the graveyard, at least thirty were ringing.

"Took some doing," Hal said, "but they got these zombies pretty well trained. It was done before my time. When the zombies get hungry, they ring their bells. If they ring long enough, we bring them some mash." He held up the bucket. "Long as we satisfy their hunger, they stay put."

Hal walked over to the nearest clanging bell. He crouched, lifted up a clear tube that ran into the ground, and unstopped it. Then he took a funnel from his back pocket. "Mind holding this?" he asked Gavin.

Gavin held the funnel in the tube while Hal took the lid off the bucket and began pouring goopy red fluid. Kendra looked away as the chunky liquid sluiced through the tube. Hal quit pouring, stopped up the tube, and

moved to the next active bell. Kendra noticed that the first bell was no longer ringing.

“What if you quit feeding them?” Gavin asked, inserting the funnel into the next tube.

“I expect you can guess,” Hal said, pouring the gruesome sludge. “The hunger would build until they clawed their way to the surface to find food on their own.”

“Why not get them nice and full, then dig them up and burn them?” Kendra asked.

“That wouldn’t be very charitable,” Hal scolded, proceeding to a new grave. “Maybe you don’t understand. Unlike some of the undead, zombies have no human spark. Ending the suffering of a human trapped in a state like this, I could view that as mercy. But a zombie has no humanity. A zombie is something else. An endangered species, truth be known. Not pretty or cuddly, not very bright, not very quick. Tenacious predators, deadly under certain circumstances, but not overly adept at defending themselves. We found a way to keep zombies satisfied without letting them harm anyone, a way to preserve the species, so we do it, unsavory or not. We’re not much different from a wildlife conservationist trying to protect ugly bats or spiders or mosquitoes from extinction. These refuges exist to protect all magical creatures, the fair ones and the foul ones alike.”

“Makes sense, I guess,” Kendra said. “Mind if I go wait in the truck?”

“Suit yourself,” Hal said, tossing her the keys. They glanced off her fingers and fell to the dry ground beside one of the tubes. After a brief hesitation, Kendra snatched them and trotted out of the graveyard.

As she walked to the car, she fleetingly wished she could trade places with her brother. Feeding bloody meals to subterranean zombies would probably be a favorite pastime in Seth’s version of paradise. And she would be more than happy to hang out with her grandparents, read old journals, and sleep in a familiar bed.

Inside the truck, Kendra blasted the air conditioner, aiming the tepid currents from all the vents directly at herself. It was only a slight improvement over trying to cool down using a hair dryer. She pictured herself running from a hoard of ravenous zombies on a hot day, eventually collapsing from heatstroke and getting devoured. Then she imagined Hal giving a rousing eulogy at her funeral, explaining how Kendra’s death was a

beautiful sacrifice allowing the noble zombies to live on, delighting future generations by mindlessly trying to eat them. With her luck, it could totally happen.

Hal and Gavin finally returned from the cemetery. Hal tossed the bucket into the back and climbed into the driver's seat. "Almost used up all my mash," Hal said. "Good thing I normally bring more than I need. Twenty bells is what I consider a busy day. Thirty-two is close to the record."

"Wh-wh-wh-wh-where to now?" Gavin asked. Kendra noticed one of his hands clenching into a fist as he stuttered.

"We'll hit a few sights, then wind up back at the museum." Hal drove them to an old mill with a covered well out front. Then he showed them the irrigated fields where a group of men and women toiled to raise corn and other crops. He pointed out a bowl-shaped cavity in the ground where a meteor had supposedly landed, and drove them around a tremendous Joshua tree with hundreds of limbs. At last, they came back into sight of the hacienda and the pueblo complex. Hal pulled the truck to a stop in front of the museum.

Kendra and Gavin followed Hal to a small door beside a pair of larger doors on rollers. Hal unlocked the door and they entered. The hangar contained a single cavernous room. Daylight flooded in through high windows. Hal reached over and flipped on the lights, banishing the remaining shadows.

"Welcome to the Museum of Unnatural History," Hal said. "The world's largest collection of freestanding magical creature skeletons and other related paraphernalia."

Directly in front of Kendra loomed a humanlike skeleton more than twice the height of a man. The skull tapered to a blunt point and had three eye sockets arranged like the points of a triangle. A bronze plaque labeled the creature a Mesopotamian Triclops.

Beyond the nearest skeleton were many others: the bones of a horse supporting the bones of a human upper body instead of an equine head and neck; the skeleton of an ogre positioned as if combating nine dwarfish skeletons; a cow skull the size of a motor home; a mobile suspending delicate fairy skeletons; and a titanic humanoid skeleton with curved fangs

and disproportionately thick bones that extended over half the distance to the high ceiling.

Kendra also beheld other exotic displays. A huge, scaly skin hung on hooks, limp and dry, apparently shed by a creature with four arms and a serpentine body. A vibrant collection of eggshells, large and small, was arranged inside a glass case. Strange weapons and armor lined an entire wall. Enormous golden antlers branched outward above a doorway.

Despite the numerous eye-catching exhibits in the room, Gavin immediately stalked toward what was undoubtedly the main attraction. Kendra and Hal jogged after him, catching up as he stopped in the center of the room with his hands on his hips.

Protected by a circular railing, taking up one quarter of the total floor space, was the skeleton of an immense dragon. Kendra gazed at the long, slender bones of the wings, the razor claws on the four feet, the vertebrae of the winding tail and elegant neck, and the vicious teeth on the massive horned skull. The milky bones were semitransparent, as if made of clouded glass or quartz, giving the tremendous skeleton an ethereal appearance.

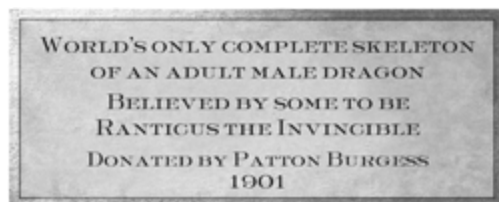
“Who would dare put actual dragon bones on display?” Gavin seethed through clenched teeth.

“Actual bones is right,” Hal said. “Unlike some of the exhibits, which are re-creations and whatnot, this is entirely the original skeleton of a single dragon. Good luck finding another like it.”

“Who did this?” Gavin reiterated, eyes blazing.

Hal finally seemed to notice he was upset. “There’s a plaque right in front of you.”

Gavin stormed forward to read the bronze plaque attached to the railing.



Gavin gripped the railing, tendons standing out on the backs of his hands. He took a shuddering breath and then whirled, body tensed, eyeing

Hal like he was ready to throw a punch. “Have none of you ever heard that the remains of a dragon are sacred?”

Hal returned his gaze, unperturbed. “You have some special connection with dragons, Gavin?”

Gavin lowered his eyes, his body going slack. After a moment, he spoke, his voice calmer. “My-my dad worked with dragons.”

“No fooling,” Hal said with admiration. “Not many men have the constitution for that kind of work. Mind if ask your dad’s name?”

“Charlie Rose.” He did not lift his eyes.

“Your dad is Chuck Rose?” Hal gasped. “He’s the closest thing we’ve had to a dragon tamer since Patton himself! I never knew Chuck had a kid! ‘Course, he always was a mite secretive. How’s your old man?”

“Dead.”

Hal’s face fell. “Oh. Hadn’t caught wind of that. I’m sorry to hear it, I truly am. No wonder the sight of a dragon skeleton would put you ill at ease.”

“Dad fought hard to protect dragons,” Gavin said, finally lifting his gaze. “Their welfare was his top priority. He taught me a lot about them. I don’t know much about Patton Burgess.”

“Patton ain’t exactly news no more. Passed on more than sixty years ago. Makes sense that your father wouldn’t have brought him up too much. Those who love dragons would avoid the subject. Rumor has it—never confirmed, mind you—that Patton was the last living person to slay a full-grown dragon.”

Kendra tried to keep her expression steady. If she revealed how she knew about Patton Burgess, it would tie her to Fablehaven. Better to avoid the appearance of knowing anything about the topic.

“Slayed a full-grown dragon?” Gavin asked with a smile, clearly not believing a word. “Did he claim to have killed this dragon?”

“Way my granddad tells it, and my granddad met him, Patton never claimed to have killed a dragon. Fact is, he claimed the opposite. In this case, Patton said he found old Ranticus by following shady merchants who were pillaging his organs and selling them off piece by piece.”

“Ranticus was numbered among the twenty lost dragons,” Gavin said. “One of the minority who never sought refuge in a sanctuary.”

“We don’t mean any harm keeping him on display,” Hal said. “It’s out of respect more than anything. Preserving what we can. Ain’t like we charge admission.”

Gavin nodded. “B-b-because of my dad, dragons mean more to me than any other creature. I’m sorry if my reaction was out of line.”

“No harm done. Sorry I didn’t know your pedigree—I would have handled that differently.”

“Like not brought me in here?” Gavin asked.

“You’re onto me,” Hal admitted.

“The bones are beautiful,” Kendra said, turning her attention back to the fantastical skeleton.

“Lighter and stronger than anything I can think of,” Hal said.

Gavin turned to face the exhibit as well. “Only other dragons can properly dispose of them. Time and the elements are no match.”

They regarded the dragon remains in silence for several minutes. Kendra felt as though she could stare at the skeleton for the rest of the day. It was as if dragons were magical right down to their bones.

Hal rubbed his round belly. “Anybody else itching for some grub?”

“I could eat,” Gavin said.

“How do you eat with that mustache?” Kendra asked as they started toward the exit.

Hal stroked the whiskers lovingly. “I call it my flavor saver.”

“Sorry I asked,” Kendra said, scrunching her face.

They passed out of the warehouse in silence. Hal ignored the truck and ambled toward the hacienda. “I can honestly say that I’m glad to have met you two,” Hal said as they approached the front door. “One of you may be a little squeamish about zombies, and the other a mite sympathetic to dragons, but we’ve all got our oddities. Come to mention it, I’m doubly glad you’re here, since Rosa never lays quite as full a table as when we have company.”

“You like Rosa?” Gavin asked.

“Like her fine,” Hal said. “What with her being my spouse and all I oughtn’t complain. Lost Mesa is different from some preserves in that it has always been managed by a female caretaker. Comes from Pueblo culture, where the women inherit the property. I expect Mara will take over the

position before long. She's a tough one—loyal as they come, but none too friendly."

Hal opened the door and led them down a hall to an airy dining room. The hacienda was less hot and more humid than outside. Kendra noticed a large evaporative cooler humming in a window. Warren and Dougan already sat at the table with Rosa and Mara.

"We wondered when you'd show up," Rosa said. "Where'd you take them, Colorado?"

"Here and there," Hal said unflappably. "Fed the zombies and such." He stole a blue corn chip from a basket on the table, jerking his hand away before Rosa could swat it with a ladle.

"That must have been appetizing," Warren said, shooting Kendra a glance.

"W-w-we're ready for food," Gavin said.

"We're ready to feed you," Rosa said with a smile. "Enchilada soup, tamales, and corn casserole."

Tammy wheeled Javier into the room, and they started passing the food around. Kendra tried to put zombies out of her mind when Rosa ladled the reddish soup into her bowl. The food looked and tasted different from other Mexican fare Kendra had eaten. Even though she found it a little too spicy, she enjoyed it.

The conversation during dinner was all small talk, with Hal saying the most, and Mara saying nothing. After the meal, Warren and Dougan excused themselves, taking Kendra and Gavin with them. Warren led Kendra into a bedroom with a view of the courtyard and closed the door.

"Dougan is filling in Gavin," Warren said. "This will be your room. We should be out of here in no time. We're going after the artifact tomorrow. They agreed to let me tag along. All you'll have to do is sit tight."

"What happened last time?" Kendra asked.

Warren moved closer and spoke lower. "It was Javier, Tammy, and a guy named Zack. The entrance to the vault is up on top of Painted Mesa, and I guess getting there is a pain. Neil knew a way, so he guided them up, but waited outside the entrance. Rosa had entrusted them with the key to the vault, so they got inside without much trouble and made it past a couple of traps. Then they ran into a dragon."

“A live one?” Kendra said.

“Zack, the leader, was dead before they knew what was happening. Javier lost a leg and injured the other one. He wasn’t bitten—he got swiped by the tail. He and Tammy were lucky to escape with their lives. They couldn’t relate much about what the dragon looked like, but they both act certain about what attacked them.”

“Gavin’s dad worked with dragons,” Kendra said.

“Which is why they brought him along. Apparently Gavin is a natural dragon tamer. You need to keep that quiet for his sake. It’s the main reason his father kept him a secret. It could make him as big a target as you.”

“What’s a dragon tamer?”

Warren sat down on the bed. “To understand that, first you have to understand dragons, arguably the most powerful race of magical creatures. They live for thousands of years, they can grow to the size of apartment buildings, they have frighteningly keen intellects, and they have deep magic woven into every fiber of their bodies. Just about any mortals who try to converse with dragons find themselves instantly transfixed and rendered utterly powerless. A dragon tamer can avoid this effect and actually hold a conversation.”

“And then they can control the dragon?” Kendra asked.

Warren chuckled. “Nobody controls a dragon. But dragons are so accustomed to overpowering all other beings simply with their gaze that they find a human who they cannot break most intriguing. It’s a dangerous game, but sometimes dragons will grant favors to such individuals, including allowing them to live.”

“So Gavin will try to talk his way past the dragon?” Kendra asked.

“That’s the idea. I just found out about the dragon, but they informed him earlier. I guess he’s game to try. And I’m fool enough to tag along.”

“What if talking fails? Could you guys kill it?”

“Are you serious? With what? Their scales are like stone, their bones like adamant. They each have a unique arsenal of powers at their disposal, not to mention teeth, tail, and claws. And keep in mind, all but a select few people become petrified in their presence. Dragons are the supreme predator.”

“Hal acted like Patton Burgess might have killed a dragon,” Kendra said.

“How’d you end up talking about slaying dragons?”

“They have a dragon skeleton in their museum. Donated by Patton.”

“Patton always denied the rumors that he ever killed a dragon. I see no reason to doubt him. In olden times, great wizards learned how to use magic to destroy dragons, which was how they persuaded them to take refuge in the Seven Sanctuaries. But a wizard who could slay a dragon has not walked the earth for hundreds of years. The only people I’ve heard of killing dragons in our times are poachers abusing hatchlings. Poachers of that sort are rare, courtesy of their short life spans.”

“What are the Seven Sanctuaries?” Kendra asked.

“Higher preserves than the kind you have seen,” Warren said. “Some magical creatures are too powerful to endure human supervision. These are sent to the Seven Sanctuaries. Almost nobody knows their locations, myself included. But we’re straying from the topic.”

“You’re going to try to steal an artifact from a dragon,” Kendra said.

“Close. I’m going to sneak past a dragon in order to help Dougan obtain an artifact in order to steal it from Dougan in order to hide it in a better spot.”

“You think Gavin can really talk his way past a dragon?” Kendra asked.

“If he’s everything Dougan claims, maybe. His father was the most renowned dragon expert in the world. Even among caretakers and Knights of the Dawn, dragons remain the stuff of legend. I’ve never seen a live one. Almost none of us have. But Chuck Rose lived among them for months at a time, studying their habits. He even photographed one.”

“How’d he die?”

Warren sighed. “A dragon ate him.”

Chapter 8



Shadowman

Seth squeezed toothpaste onto his brush and started scrubbing his teeth. He hardly saw his reflection in the bathroom mirror. Things at Fablehaven were getting so intense he had almost stopped envying Kendra for being away. Almost. He still sometimes pictured her and Warren rappelling into an Egyptian tomb, mowing down mummies and cobras with machine guns. An adventure that awesome would outshine a mysterious plague making the fairies lose their light.

After spitting into the sink and splashing water on his face, Seth headed out of the bathroom and up the attic stairs. He had just participated in a long conversation with Grandpa, Grandma, Tanu, and Dale, and he was trying to sort through all the new information so he could figure out a way to save everybody. If only he could prove that his defeating the revenant hadn't been a fluke, the next time a secret mission became necessary, maybe they would bring him along.

At the top of the stairs he paused, leaning against the side of the doorway. The fading light of dusk glowed purple through the window of the attic playroom. Grandpa and the others had been trying to list all the possible sources of the plague. According to them, there were four major demons at Fablehaven: Bahumat, who was trapped in a secure prison under a hill; Olloch the Glutton, who was frozen in the woods until some idiot fed

him; Graulas, a very old demon who was basically hibernating; and a demon nobody had ever seen named Kurisock, who lived in a tar pit.

Against his will, Seth glanced at the journals piled beside Kendra's bed. She had known about the tar pit already because of reading. Could those pages contain info Grandpa and the others might have overlooked? Probably not. And if so, they were welcome to do the reading themselves.

The adults had expressed the opinion that, of the four demons, Bahumat and Olloch were currently the most dangerous, because they had never agreed to the Fablehaven treaty. Normally, all of the magical creatures admitted to Fablehaven had to pledge to abide by the treaty, which established boundaries for where they could roam and limits to how much they could harm other creatures. There were borders that Graulas and Kurisock had sworn not to cross, rules they had made binding vows not to break. Only people foolish enough to enter their domains were at serious risk from those two. But Bahumat had been at Fablehaven since before the treaty was established, and Olloch had come to Fablehaven as a guest, which imposed certain automatic restraints but left room for him to cause trouble if he gained enough power. At least that was how Seth understood it.

The important part was that the plague probably wasn't caused by any of the four demons, at least not acting directly. None of them had sufficient access. There were some candidates in the dungeon, but Dale had checked, and they were all still safely imprisoned. There was a hag in the swamp who had helped train Muriel, but Grandma had maintained that starting the plague was far beyond her abilities, and the others agreed. There was a poisonous bog full of evil creatures, but their boundaries were clearly defined. Same with the inhabitants of a tunnel not far from where Nero lived. Grandpa had named many other dark creatures on the preserve, but none that were strong enough in dark magic to have possibly initiated the plague.

In the end, with no viable suspects, Seth had asked what creature haunted the old Fablehaven mansion. Before responding, the adults wanted to know how he knew a creature dwelled there. He had never brought up how he had visited the manor after escaping from Olloch, worried that everyone would be angry at him for choosing to go inside. He explained how he had been lost, and how he had hoped that from the roof he could get some perspective regarding his location. Then he told how a mysterious

whirlwind arose, chasing him from the house, leaving him shaken and terrified.

Grandpa explained that they weren't sure what dwelled in the mansion. Apparently the manor had been overthrown on Midsummer Eve more than a hundred years ago. The acting caretaker at the time, Marshal Burgess, lost his life, and caretakers had been warned ever after to avoid the old manor.

"Whatever found a new home in the mansion," Grandpa had concluded, "was something from this preserve. Even if it escaped from the poisoned bog, it should not have the power to create a plague like we're witnessing. An advantage to the treaty is that we know what creatures are here. We have them catalogued."

"How could any creature have remained in the mansion after Midsummer Eve?" Tanu had inquired. "The culprit should have been forced to return to its proper dwelling once the night ended."

"Theoretically any of them could remain if they managed to change the register, which appears to be what happened," Grandpa had explained. "The register is used to alter certain boundaries and grant access. Patton Burgess managed to tear the treaty from the register and escape with those essential pages. Otherwise the preserve might have fallen. The treaty now resides in the current register. But the damage done to the old manor was irreparable."

So the whirlwind wasn't the answer. The demons weren't the answer. None of the creatures at Fablehaven were apparently the answer. And yet the plague was happening. They had eventually decided to sleep on it, leaving the problem unresolved. The only decisive action taken all day was when Grandpa used the register to prohibit all fairies from entering the yard.

Seth wandered to the window to gaze out at the purple evening, and jumped back when he saw a black figure silhouetted against the glowing sky. Seth jostled against the nearby telescope, embracing the expensive piece of equipment before it could topple. Then Seth turned back to the window, half expecting the figure to be gone.

The figure remained, crouching, not a silhouette—a human-shaped, three-dimensional shadow. The shadowman waved at Seth. Hesitant, Seth waved back.

The shadowman shook his fists as if excited, then motioned for Seth to open the window. Seth shook his head. The shadowman pointed at himself,

then pointed into the room, then once again pantomimed opening the window.

Seth had gotten into major trouble the previous summer for letting a creature into the house by opening that same attic window. The creature had been disguised as a baby, but turned out to be a goblin, and once inside, the treacherous intruder had let other monstrosities in. Before the night was over, Grandpa had been kidnapped, and Dale had been temporarily turned to lead. Seth had learned his lesson. This year, he had stayed in bed on Midsummer Eve. Peeking out the window had hardly been a temptation.

Of course, Midsummer Eve was different from most days, being a night when the boundaries of Fablehaven were dissolved and all sorts of nightmarish monsters could come into the yard. But today was ordinary. On a regular evening, dangerous creatures should not have access to the yard in order to crouch outside Seth's window. Did that mean the shadowman was a friendly creature?

Then again, nice creatures had become menacing lately. Maybe this shadowman had once been able to enter the yard, and now that he was evil, he was using that status to trick Seth! Or maybe this was whoever had started the plague! The thought made Seth shiver. It had a ring of truth to it—the inky black figure looked like a likely candidate for starting a plague that replaced light with darkness.

Seth tugged the curtains shut and backed away from the window. What should he do? He had to tell somebody!

Seth clomped down the attic steps and raced to his grandparents' room. The door was shut, so he banged on it. "Come in," Grandpa invited.

Seth opened the door. Neither Grandpa or Grandma had changed into their nightclothes yet. "There's something outside my window," Seth whispered hastily.

"What do you mean?" Grandpa asked.

"A shadowman. A living shadow in the shape of a man. He wanted me to let him in. What creatures can enter the yard besides fairies?"

"Hugo and Mendigo," Grandma said. "And of course the brownies live under the yard and have access to the house. Anything else, Stan?"

"Everything else is by invitation only," Grandpa said. "I've let satyrs into the yard on occasion."

“What if this shadow guy started the plague?” Seth speculated. “A creature we didn’t know was on the preserve, some shadowy enemy who can come into the yard but not the house.”

Grandpa scowled thoughtfully. “The yard has failsafes to prevent most creatures, even surprise guests, from entering. Whatever the nature of this shadowman, not all of the rules seem to apply.”

“At least it couldn’t enter the house,” Grandma said.

Grandpa started toward the door. “We had better fetch Tanu and Dale.”

Seth followed Grandma and Grandpa as they collected Tanu and Dale and explained the situation. They mounted the steps to the attic in a line, Grandpa in front, Seth at the rear. Moving the telescope out of the way, they gathered around the curtained window, Grandma with her crossbow, Tanu holding a potion ready.

Grandpa pulled aside the curtains to reveal an empty stretch of roof barely visible in the dying twilight. Seth pushed his way forward to the glass, peering in all directions. The shadowman was gone.

“He was here,” Seth promised.

“I believe you,” Grandpa said.

“He really was,” Seth maintained.

They waited, watching as Grandpa shone a flashlight through the slightly warped panes. They located no sign of an intruder. Grandpa clicked off the flashlight.

“Keep the window closed tonight,” Tanu admonished. “If he returns, come for me. If not, I’ll search the roof in the morning.”

Tanu, Dale, and Grandpa left the room. Grandma waited at the top of the stairs. “You’ll be all right?”

“I’m not scared,” Seth said. “I just hoped I’d found something useful.”

“You probably have. Keep that window shut.”

“I will.”

“Good night, dear. You did the right thing to come and tell us.”

“Night.”

Grandma left.

Seth changed into his pajamas and flopped onto his bed. He began to suspect that the shadowman had returned, perching outside the window. The

fiend had probably not wanted the others to see him. But now if Seth peeked, he would be there, silently asking to enter.

Unable to banish the suspicion, Seth went to the window and threw aside the curtain. The shadowman had not returned.

* * *

The next morning, Tanu crept around on the roof outside the window but found no trace of a visitor. Seth was unsurprised. Since when did shadows leave footprints?

At breakfast, Grandpa tried to inform Seth he would be restricted to the house all day. After Seth's persistent complaining, Grandpa agreed to let him play with Mendigo in the yard if somebody supervised them from the deck.

Grandpa, Grandma, Tanu, and Dale spent the day poring over journals and other books from their extensive library, trying to find any hint of something like the plague afflicting the creatures of Fablehaven. They took turns reading on the deck. Mendigo had orders to bring Seth inside at the first appearance of anything suspicious.

The day passed uneventfully. Seth played football and baseball with Mendigo, and went swimming in the afternoon. At lunch and dinner, Seth listened as the adults discussed how frustrated they were about the lack of any information that explained what was transpiring at Fablehaven. Grandpa had still been unable to get a call through to the Sphinx.

After dinner, Seth begged his way outside for a few minutes. Hugo was there, having recently finished some chores in the barn, and Seth wanted to see what happened if Mendigo pitched to the golem.

The baseball bat looked tiny clutched in Hugo's massive hand. Seth told Hugo to hit the ball as hard as he could, then instructed Mendigo to throw a fastball right down the middle. Seth moved out of the way, worried about getting brained by a foul ball. He didn't think they would need a catcher.

Mendigo hurled a blazing pitch, and Hugo, swinging one-handed, whaled the ball into the sky. Seth tried to follow the baseball as it shrank into the distance, but failed. He knew the ball had still been rising when it

cleared the trees on the far side of the yard, so it had to have landed a good ways into the woods.

Seth turned to Tanu, who was sitting on the deck, enjoying the sunset as he sipped herbal tea. "Can I send Mendigo to fetch it?"

"Go ahead," Tanu said, "if you think the ball is worth fetching."

"It might just be a pile of mush," Seth laughed.

"That was quite a blast."

Seth told Mendigo to quickly retrieve the ball, but the puppet did not respond. When Tanu repeated the command, the limberjack dashed across the yard and into the woods.

That was when Seth saw the shadowman coming into the yard not far from where Mendigo had entered the trees. The phantom moved toward Seth with swift, deliberate strides. Seth retreated toward the deck. "There he is," Seth told Tanu, pointing. "The shadowman."

The Samoan stared in the direction Seth was indicating, looking perplexed. "In the trees?"

"No, right there, in the yard, coming through that flower bed!"

Tanu stared for a moment longer. "I don't see anything."

"He's on the lawn now, getting close to us, walking fast."

"I still don't see it," Tanu said, giving Seth a worried glance.

"You think I'm crazy?" Seth asked.

"I think we better get inside," Tanu said, backing toward the door. "Just because I can't see him doesn't mean you don't. Where is he now?"

"Almost to the deck."

Tanu motioned for Seth to follow and went in the back door. Seth entered after Tanu and they shut the door. "We have a situation," Tanu called.

The others hurried into the room.

"What now?" Grandpa asked.

"Seth sees the shadowman in the yard," Tanu said. "I don't."

"He's on the deck," Seth said, looking out a window by the door.

"Where?" Grandpa asked.

"Right there, by the rocker."

"Anybody else see it?" Grandma asked.

“Not me,” Dale said.

“He’s motioning for us to come outside,” Seth said.

Placing her hands on her hips, Grandma regarded Seth suspiciously.

“You’re not leading us on, are you? This would be a terrible joke, Seth. The situation at Fablehaven is much too—”

“I’m not making this up! I would never lie about something so important. I can’t imagine why you guys can’t see him!”

“Describe him,” Grandpa said.

“Like I said last night, it looks like the shadow of a man, but three-dimensional,” Seth said. “There isn’t much else to describe. He’s holding up his left hand, pointing at it with the other hand. Oh my gosh!”

“What?” Grandma prodded.

“He’s missing his pinky and part of his ring finger.”

“Coulter,” Grandpa said. “Or some form of him.”

“Or something that wants us to believe it’s some form of him,” Grandma added.

Grandpa strode to the door. “Warn us if he moves toward me,” Grandpa told Seth, cracking the door open. Leaning forward, Grandpa spoke through the opening. “If you’re a friend, stay where you are.”

“He’s not moving,” Seth said.

“Are you Coulter Dixon?” Grandpa asked.

“He nodded,” Seth said.

“What do you want?”

“He’s motioning for us to come with him.”

“Can you speak?”

“He shook his head. He’s pointing at me, and motioning for me to come.”

“Seth’s not going with you,” Grandpa said.

“He’s pointing at himself and then into the house. He wants to come inside.”

“We can’t invite you in. You could be our friend, with your mind intact, simply in an altered state, or—”

“He’s giving a thumbs-up and nodding,” Seth interrupted.

“Or you could be a twisted version of Coulter, with all his knowledge, but sinister intentions.” Grandpa closed the door and turned to the others. “We can’t risk letting him inside, or being led into a trap.”

“He’s making a pleading gesture,” Seth reported.

Grandpa closed his eyes, steadying himself, then opened the door again. “Help me understand what is happening. You are free to roam the preserve?”

“Thumbs-up,” Seth said.

“Even places where we normally would be unable to go?”

“Two thumbs up,” Seth said. “That one must be important.”

“And you have found something we need to see.”

“He’s shaking his hand like so-so.”

“You can lead us to vital information.”

“Two thumbs up.”

“And it is urgent? The situation is dire?”

“Thumbs-up.”

“What if only I come?” Grandpa offered.

“Thumbs-down.”

“Seth has to come?”

“Thumbs-up.”

“Could Tanu and I come with Seth?”

“He’s shrugging,” Seth said.

“You don’t know? Can you find out?”

“Thumbs-up.”

“Go find out if we can come. I can’t send Seth with you alone, I hope you understand. And none of us can accompany you until we can confirm you are not an evil version of yourself seeking to betray us. Give us some time to deliberate. Can you come back in the morning?”

“He’s shaking his head,” Seth relayed. “He’s pantomiming a ball. Now he’s shielding his eyes. I think he means he can’t go out in the sunlight. Yep, he heard me, he’s giving a thumbs-up.”

“Tomorrow evening, then,” Grandpa said.

“Thumbs-up.”

“Try to think of a way to prove we can trust you.”

“He’s tapping a finger to the side of his head, like he’ll think about it. Now he’s walking away.”

Grandpa closed the door. “I can’t foresee a way to prove he’s the same Coulter we love and trust. He could have all of Coulter’s knowledge yet still be a threat.”

“Why can’t he come into the house on his own?” Dale asked.

“I think he could if we left the door open,” Tanu said. “He’s insubstantial right now. Not immaterial enough to pass through a door, but he can’t open one on his own.”

“How do we confirm he’s on our side?” Seth asked.

“Your grandfather may be right,” Grandma said. “I’m not sure there’s a way.”

“The situation is dire enough that if he would let me go with him, I would simply take the risk,” Grandpa said. “But I’ll not let Seth do it.”

“I’ll take the risk,” Seth said. “I’m not afraid.”

“Why is he insisting Seth comes?” Dale asked.

“Only Seth can see him,” Tanu said.

“Of course,” Grandpa said. “No wonder he was adamant that we couldn’t come without Seth. I was too busy trying to find a deeper purpose in it.”

“Still,” Grandma said, “he was hesitant to allow others to join Seth. Why could it be that only Seth can see him?”

Nobody ventured a guess.

“You’re sure you aren’t making fools of us?” Grandma asked Seth again, studying him shrewdly.

“I promise,” Seth said.

“This isn’t a trick to get out of the house and into the woods?” Grandma pressed.

“Trust me, if all I wanted was to get into the woods, I’d already be there. I swear I would never make up a story like this. And I have no idea why only I can see him.”

“I believe you, Seth,” Grandpa said. “But I don’t like any of this. I wonder if our shadowy Coulter could reveal himself to more of us if he wanted? Could he be choosing to let only Seth see him? We need to do all we can to make sense of this. Unanswerable questions are piling up. I

propose we speak with Vanessa again. If she can be of any service, now is the time to call upon her. Perhaps in her work for our enemies she has witnessed something like this shadowman phenomenon.”

“She’s not a cure-all,” Grandma said. “Odds are all she’ll be able to do is imitate the same guesses we’re making.”

“Our guesses aren’t adding up to much,” Grandpa said. “Time could be running out. We should at least check.”

“I’ll go in the box, if it will speed things up,” Dale volunteered. “Long as you let me out.”

“She’ll be going back inside,” Grandma promised.

Grandma got her crossbow and Grandpa grabbed a flashlight. Tanu went to retrieve his handcuffs but returned empty-handed. “Anybody seen my handcuffs? All I can find are the keys.”

“Did you ever take them off of her?” Grandma asked. Something about the way she asked the question hinted that she already knew the answer.

They descended the steps to the basement. When they reached the Quiet Box, Dale opened the door and stepped inside. Grandma closed the door, the Quiet Box rotated, and when she opened it, Vanessa stood there with her wrists cuffed together.

“Thanks for leaving me shackled,” she said, stepping out of the box. “As if I didn’t already feel like part of a cheap magic act. What’s the latest?”

“Coulter is in some sort of darkened, shadowy state,” Grandpa said. “He can’t speak. He seems to want to share information with us, but we don’t know if we can trust him.”

“Neither do I,” Vanessa said. “Have you any guesses how the plague originated?”

“Do you?” Grandma responded, her tone accusatory.

“I’ve had some time to mull it over. What have you come up with?”

“Honestly, we can’t fathom how it could have originated here,” Grandpa said. “Bahumat is imprisoned, Olloch is frozen, the other major demons are bound by the treaty. We can’t think of any being at Fablehaven with the ability to initiate something like this.”

As he spoke, a smile appeared on Vanessa’s lips, gradually widening. “And the obvious conclusion hasn’t occurred to any of you?”

“That it came from outside of Fablehaven?” Grandma guessed.

“Not necessarily,” Vanessa said. “I have a different possibility in mind. But I don’t want to go back into the box.”

“There is no way for you to undo the connection you forged when you bit us?” Grandpa asked.

“I could lie and say there was,” Vanessa said. “You know the link is permanent. I would be happy to take an oath never to use those connections again.”

“We know what your word is worth,” Grandpa said.

“Considering that the Sphinx is now more my enemy than yours, you can rely on me much more than you know. I’m enough of an opportunist to recognize when the time has come to trade sides.”

“And to recognize when you can commit a large enough betrayal for the Sphinx to welcome you back,” Grandma said. “Or perhaps the Sphinx really is on our side, and whoever employs you would be glad for your return as soon as you manage to slip away.”

“Makes it complicated,” Vanessa admitted.

“Vanessa,” Grandpa said, “if you don’t help us rescue Fablehaven, you might be stuck in that box for the rest of eternity.”

“No prison lasts forever,” Vanessa said. “Besides, as blind as you seem, sooner or later you’ll arrive at the same conclusion I did.”

“Let’s make it sooner,” Grandpa said, raising his voice for the first time. “I’m on the verge of deciding the Quiet Box is too good for you. I could arrange a stay in the Hall of Dread. Your ability to haunt our sleep wouldn’t remain a concern for long.”

Vanessa paled.

Seth did not know too much about the Hall of Dread. He knew it was on the other side of the dungeon behind a bloodred door, and that the prisoners there required no food. Apparently Vanessa knew more details than he did.

“I’ll tell you,” Vanessa relented. “Granted, I’d rather go to the Hall of Dread than give away the key knowledge that might buy my freedom. But this is not that information. Nor does it get you much closer to comprehending how the plague began, although it sheds some light on

whom to blame. Are you sure the Sphinx took the previous occupant of the Quiet Box off the preserve with him?"

"We watched them drive away . . ." Grandma's voice trailed off.

"Did you observe them from all angles the entire time?" Vanessa pursued. "Is it possible the Sphinx might have released the prisoner before passing through the gate?"

Grandma and Grandpa looked at each other. Then Grandpa looked at Vanessa. "We watched them depart, but not closely enough to guarantee you're wrong. Your theory is plausible."

"Given the circumstances," Vanessa said, "I'd say probable. There is no other explanation."

The thought of that secret prisoner bundled in burlap roaming the preserve turning nipsies and fairies dark made Seth shudder. He had to admit, it was the most likely proposition they had considered.

"What do you know about the prisoner?" Grandma asked Vanessa.

"No more than you," Vanessa said. "I have no clue who the prisoner was, or how he or she or it started the plague, but the process of elimination sure makes the prisoner look like the culprit. And it definitely doesn't reflect well on the Sphinx."

"You're right, we should have seen this possibility," Grandpa said. "I wonder if, deep down, I still haven't come to terms with the reality that the Sphinx might be our greatest enemy."

"This is still all conjecture," Grandma reminded them, although without much conviction.

"Have you any other information that might help us?" Grandpa inquired.

"Not with solving the mystery of this plague," Vanessa said. "I would need time to study it firsthand. If you let me help, I'm sure I could be of service."

"We're short-handed enough without having to stand guard over you," Grandpa replied.

"Fine," Vanessa said. "Could you take the shackles with you this time?"

Tanu unlocked and removed the handcuffs. Vanessa stepped back into the box. She winked at Seth. He stuck out his tongue. Grandma closed the

door, the box rotated, and Dale emerged.

“I was starting to worry this was all an elaborate setup to get rid of me,” Dale said, shaking his arms as if clearing off invisible cobwebs.

“Did it feel like a long time?” Seth asked.

“Long enough,” Dale answered. “You lose your senses in there. Can’t hear a thing, can’t see a thing, can’t smell a thing. You start losing all sensation. You feel like a disembodied mind. It’s almost relaxing, but not in a good way. You start losing your grip of who you are. I can’t figure how Vanessa manages to string words into sentences after spending weeks in that emptiness.”

“I’m not sure anything could put her at a loss for words,” Grandma said. “She’s as slippery as they come. Whatever we do, we must place no trust in her.”

“No trust,” Grandpa said. “But she may be of further use for information. She acts like she still has a card to play, and she’s no fool, so she probably does. How can we discover the identity of the hooded prisoner?”

“Could Nero have seen something in his stone?” Grandma asked.

“Possibly,” Grandpa said. “If not, there’s a chance he still could.”

“I’ll go ask him,” Seth offered. His previous visit with the cliff troll had been exciting. The greedy troll had wanted to acquire him as a servant in exchange for using a seeing stone to locate Grandpa.

“You’ll do nothing of the kind,” Grandma said. “A massage enticed him into helping us once. The same offer might tempt him again.”

“Knowing Nero, having sampled your skills once, he’ll want you to sign on as his permanent masseuse before he’ll assist us,” Grandpa said. “Last time, he had never had a massage. The novelty of it was the key. You proved that curiosity will motivate him more than riches.”

“A special potion, perhaps?” Tanu suggested.

“Something modern?” Seth tried. “Like a cell phone or a camera?”

Grandpa put his hands together against his lips as if praying. “It’s hard to say what might do the trick, but something along those lines is worth a try. With creatures transformed by the plague lurking about, simply getting to Nero might be the hardest part.”

“What if Nero has been affected by the plague?” Dale wondered.

“If it turns light creatures dark, it might turn dark creatures darker,” Tanu speculated.

“Maybe we’d have better luck following Coulter,” Seth reminded them.

“We won’t be able to answer those questions until we make a choice and take a risk,” Grandpa said. “Let’s sleep on it and decide tomorrow.”

Chapter 9



Pathways

A squeal escaped Kendra when she awoke in the night, the roar of the thunderclap fading. She felt flustered and disoriented. The noise had jolted her out of sleep as abruptly as a punch in the face. Although this was her second night at Lost Mesa, the dark room initially appeared unfamiliar—it took a moment to make sense of the rustic furniture fashioned from knotty wooden posts.

Had the house been struck by lightning? Even though she had been asleep, Kendra felt certain she had never heard thunder that loud. It had been like dynamite exploding inside her pillow. She sat up and swung her legs over the edge of the bed. A brilliant strobe flickered, bright enough to throw shadows, accompanied almost instantaneously by another deafening detonation of thunder.

Covering her ears, Kendra walked to the window, staring out into the dim courtyard. With clouds blotting out all starlight and no lights on in the hacienda, the courtyard should have looked totally black.

She could make out cactus shapes in the dimness. The courtyard had a fountain in the center, tiled paths, gravel paths, and a variety of desert flora. She expected to see one of the taller cacti in flames from a lightning strike, but that did not appear to be the case. No rain was falling. The courtyard was still. Kendra felt tense, awaiting the next flash of light and crash of sound.

Instead of more lightning and thunder, rain began to fall. For a few seconds it pattered lightly; then it really began to pour. Kendra opened her window, enjoying the aroma the rain released from the desert soil. A fairy with wings like a june bug alighted on the windowsill. Glowing a soft green, she had an exquisite face and was pudgier than any fairy Kendra had seen.

“Got caught in the rain?” Kendra asked.

“I don’t mind the water,” the fairy chirped. “Freshens things up. This little cloudburst will pass in a few minutes.”

“Did you see the lightning?” Kendra asked.

“Hard to miss. You shine almost as brightly.”

“I’ve been told that before. Do you want to come into my room?”

The fairy giggled. “The windowsill is as close as I can come. You’re up late.”

“The thunder woke me. Do fairies often stay up all night?”

“Not all of us. Not me, usually. But I hate to miss a rainstorm. We get so few. I adore the monsoons.”

The rain was already falling more gently. Kendra stretched out a hand to feel the fat drops on her palm. Lightning flared up in the clouds, farther away than before, muted by the intervening mist. Thunder followed a couple of heartbeats afterward.

Kendra wondered what Warren was doing at the moment. He had departed for the vault with Dougan, Gavin, Tammy, and Neil about an hour before sunset. He might have returned already, for all she knew. Or he could be in the belly of a dragon.

“My friends might be out in this weather,” Kendra said.

The fairy tittered. “The ones trying to climb the mesa?”

“You saw them?”

“Yes.”

“I’m worried about them.”

The fairy sniggered again.

“It isn’t funny. They’re on a dangerous mission.”

“It *is* funny. I don’t think they went anywhere. They couldn’t find a way up.”

“They didn’t climb the mesa?” Kendra asked.

“Getting up there can be problematic.”

“But Neil knows a way.”

“*Knew* a way, from the look of things. The rain is relenting.”

The fairy was right. It was barely sprinkling now. The earthy, humid air smelled wonderful. “What do you know about Painted Mesa?” Kendra asked.

“We don’t go up there. Near the mesa, sure, the whole formation has a lovely aura. But there is old magic woven into that place. Your friends are lucky they couldn’t climb it. Good night.”

The fairy leapt from the windowsill and buzzed off into the night, veering up over the roof and out of sight. After the company, Kendra felt lonely. Lightning pulsed somewhere above her. Thunder growled a few seconds later.

Kendra closed the window and slid back into bed. Part of her wanted to check if Warren was safe in his room, but she felt uncomfortable intruding if he was asleep. She was sure to hear in the morning about what had happened.

* * *

Kendra had never tried huevos rancheros, but found she liked them a lot. The thought of mixing eggs with fresh guacamole had never occurred to her, and she had been missing out. Warren, Dougan, and Gavin sat eating with her while Rosa puttered in the kitchen.

“So you couldn’t find a way up,” Kendra said, cutting into her food with the side of her fork. She had found them eating after she awoke and showered. None of them had mentioned the mission yet.

“What tipped you off?” Warren asked.

“No bite marks,” Kendra said.

“Very funny,” Dougan said, checking over his shoulder as if worried somebody might be eavesdropping.

“Seriously,” Warren said.

Kendra realized she shouldn’t be telling Dougan and Gavin that she could talk to fairies. “One look at your faces told the whole story. You were acting too normal.”

“Neil said the mesa can be fickle,” Warren explained. “There are many ways up, but none are constant. They open only to certain people at certain times.”

“Rent a helicopter,” Kendra said, taking another bite.

“Neil says the mesa would never allow it,” Dougan said.

“I believe him,” Gavin said. “Y-y-y-you can feel the magic of the place; it makes you drowsy. You should have seen Tammy’s face when the path wasn’t there. She said it was unmistakable last time.”

“Neil didn’t like it either,” Warren said. “I guess his way up has been pretty reliable.”

“Ascending the mesa has always been a challenge,” Rosa said, wiping her hands on a dishtowel as she approached the table. “I warned you it might not be easy. Especially after the others went and disturbed things.”

Kendra thought of the revenant guarding the entrance to the vault at Fablehaven. Here, was the mesa itself the guard?

“The way to the top may be closed for some time,” Neil said, coming into the room, holding his white cowboy hat in one hand. He was wearing jeans and hiking boots. “There have been periods lasting fifty years or more when no pathway was available.”

“We can’t wait,” Dougan said. “We need to get up there.”

“Forcing the mesa is impossible,” Neil said. “Don’t lose hope yet. I want to take Kendra and scout around the base.”

“Kendra?” Warren asked.

“She saw the fence around Lost Mesa before we entered the preserve,” Neil said. “If the Twilight Way is closed, eyes like hers might help spot one of the other paths.”

Kendra noticed Gavin and Dougan regarding her with interest. “I’d be happy to look, if you think it might help,” she said.

“I’ll come with you,” Warren said.

Neil nodded. “Mara will join us as well. When will you be ready to leave?”

“Give us twenty minutes,” Warren said, glancing at Kendra to make sure that was acceptable.

“Sounds good,” she said.

Warren hurried through the rest of his food, and Kendra did likewise. When they were done, she followed him to her room. He closed the door.

“How did you really hear we couldn’t find a pathway up Painted Mesa?” Warren asked.

“A fairy told me last night,” Kendra said.

“I’m sure the others didn’t believe your comment was based solely on intuition, but I doubt they’ll openly pry. Remember to be careful about hinting at your powers. Dougan knows you can recharge magical items. That’s it. The others don’t even know that much.”

“Sorry,” Kendra said. “I’ll be careful.”

“We have to be cautious. I think we can trust Dougan and Gavin, but I don’t want to take anything for granted. I’m positive the Society has people in place to make sure the artifact ends up in their hands. Remember, at Fablehaven, the original plan was for Vanessa and Errol to steal the artifact themselves. The traitor here might be somebody who has lived on the preserve a while. Or it could be Tammy or Javier.”

“Hopefully it was Zack,” Kendra said.

Warren grinned. “Wouldn’t that be nice? I’ve done some digging. Tammy is along because she has a talent for finding and disabling traps. Javier is a seasoned ingredient collector, used to work for a couple of the top dealers. He has a lot of experience getting out of dodgy situations. Their reputations are solid, but so was Vanessa’s.”

“Are you worried about Neil or Mara?” Kendra asked.

“If the Sphinx is a suspect, anyone is a suspect,” he said. “Trust no one. Try to stay inside the hacienda unless I’m with you.”

“Think I’ll be able to find a trail?” Kendra asked.

Warren shrugged. “You can see through distracter spells. You’ve got a better shot of finding a secret path than I have.”

“We should probably get going.”

Neil and Mara were outside in a dirty Jeep with the engine running. Warren and Kendra climbed in back. They did not keep to roads for long. Out the front window, Painted Mesa loomed ever larger. During one stretch, Neil forced the Jeep up such a steep grade that Kendra worried it would rear up and tip over backwards. The bumpy, jarring drive ended in a flat area strewn with jagged boulders.

A few hundred yards of rugged terrain separated them from where a sheer stone face of the mesa rose into the sky. “It’s so high,” Kendra said, using her hand as a visor as she stared up at the colorful plateau. There was hardly a cloud in the bright blue sky.

Neil came up beside her. “You’ll be looking for handholds, a rope, a cave, a stairway, a path—anything that might grant access. To most eyes, most of the time, there appears to be no possible route to the top, even for an experienced climber. The pathways become available only at certain moments. For example, until lately, the Twilight Way appeared at sunset. We’ll circle the mesa multiple times.”

“Do you know of other paths besides the Twilight Way?” Warren asked.

“We know of others, but not where to look,” Neil said. “The only other reliable route is the Festival Road. It opens on festival nights. The next opportunity would be the autumnal equinox.”

“Scaling the mesa on a festival night would be madness,” Mara said, her voice a resonant alto. “Suicide.”

“Sounds like my kind of party,” Warren joked. Mara did not acknowledge that he had spoken.

“What if you get up there and can’t find a way down?” Kendra asked.

“There are normally many ways down,” Neil said. “The mesa is happy to see visitors leave. I’ve never had trouble, nor have I heard stories of others facing difficulties descending.”

“Those people might not be around to tell the stories,” Warren pointed out.

Neil shrugged.

“Could the Twilight Way open up again?” Kendra asked.

Neil tossed up his hands. “Hard to say. My guess would be not for many seasons. But we’ll check this evening—maybe your sharp eyes will catch sight of something I missed.”

Kendra noticed beige rabbit feet dangling from Neil’s pierced earlobes. “Are those lucky?” Kendra asked, indicating the earrings.

“Jackalope,” Neil said. “If we’re going to find a pathway, we’ll need all the luck we can get.”

She refrained from telling Neil the obvious—that the feet had clearly not been very lucky for the jackalope.

They hiked around the mesa. Little was said. Neil mostly studied the sheer rock faces from several paces away. Mara got up close, caressing the stone, sometimes leaning her cheek against the unyielding surface. Kendra scrutinized the mesa as best she could, from near and far, but noticed no evidence of a path.

The sun beat down relentlessly. Neil loaned Kendra a wide-brimmed hat and some sunscreen. When they finally circled back to the Jeep, Neil retrieved a plastic cooler. They ate sandwiches and trail mix in the shade.

During the afternoon, a warm breeze began to blow. Kendra saw the most interesting things when she faced away from the mesa and glimpsed an occasional fairy or jackalope in the distance. She wondered if the jackalopes resented Neil for his earrings. No creatures, insects included, ventured right up to the mesa. The atmosphere was heavy. Gavin had been right, there was something in the air that lulled you, made you drowsy.

They completed another meticulous lap around the mesa before hunkering down in the shade and eating the dried fruit and jerky Neil had brought for dinner. He told them a final loop around the mesa would put them in about the right spot to look for the Twilight Way when the sun went down.

As they hiked, leaden thunderheads began to blow in from the south. When they paused for a water break, Mara surveyed the oncoming clouds. “Going to be a real storm tonight,” she predicted.

By the time the sun neared the horizon, the wind was whistling through the rocks, a constant, eerie moan that rose to shrill hoots and shrieks during gusts. Ominous clouds obscured much of the sky, shot through with magnificent colors where the sun was sinking.

“It should be here,” Neil said, staring up at a blank cliff. “A winding trail.”

Mara leaned against the base of the precipice, eyes closed, palms pressed against the stone. Kendra stared hard, trying to will her eyes to see through whatever spells might be concealing the path. Neil paced around the area, clearly frustrated. Warren stood with his arms folded, nothing moving but his eyes. Behind them, the sun finally disappeared below the horizon.

A particularly strong gust blew Kendra's hat off and made her stagger. The wind cried out in disharmonious howls.

"We should get back to the Jeep," Neil said, eyes sweeping the mesa one last time.

"The Twilight Way is closed," Mara declared solemnly.

As they hiked back to where they had parked the Jeep, rain began to patter on the rocks around them, leaving dime-sized splotches on the stone. Within minutes, the rocks had darkened with wetness, becoming slick and treacherous in places.

Coming into sight of the Jeep, they scrambled over and around jumbled piles of damp stone. The rain fell hard now. Although her clothes were soaked, the warm air kept Kendra from shivering. She glanced back over her shoulder and saw a waterfall streaming down the side of the mesa. The sight made her pause. The water was not falling straight; it was coming at an angle, leaping and rolling, the lively rapids of a steep stream. Not a natural stream—the water was tumbling down a steep stairway, carved into the face of the mesa.

"Stop," Kendra called, pointing. "Look at that waterfall!"

The other three turned and stared at the mesa. "Waterfall?" Warren asked.

"Not a true waterfall," Kendra amended. "Water racing down a stairway."

"You see stairs?" Neil asked.

Kendra pointed from the base of the mesa to the top. "Looks like they run all the way up. They're so obvious now, I can't believe they were hidden before! You'll want to wait until they dry off. It would be a tough climb with all that water."

"The Flooded Stairs," Mara said with wonder in her voice.

"I still don't see anything," Warren said.

"Neither do we," Neil replied. "Take us to the foot of the stairs."

The others followed Kendra as she led them back to the base of the mesa. Reaching the stairs did not take long. Just beyond the end of the stairs, the water slurped into a dark fissure in the ground. Kendra edged up to the crevice and peered down. There was no end in sight. She could hear water churning in the distant depths.

“I’m surprised we didn’t fall in the hole when we were circling the mesa earlier,” Kendra said, turning to the others.

“I don’t see a hole,” Warren said.

“Can you lead me onto the stairs?” Neil asked.

Taking his hand, Kendra led him around the opening in the ground and along a rocky shelf until they stood together at the bottom step. Cold water gushed around their shins. “Do you see it now?” Kendra asked.

“Lead me up a few steps,” Neil said.

Treading carefully, for though the water was not deep, it was coming fast, Kendra placed her foot onto the first slick stone step. With Neil in tow, she climbed four stairs before she slipped, plunging a hand and both knees into the frigid stream before Neil hoisted her up.

“Enough,” Neil said.

They carefully returned to the shelf, then walked around the crevice to rejoin Warren and Mara. “I didn’t see the stairway until you started climbing,” Warren said. “And then it only seemed to go about five steps beyond the point you reached. I had to focus hard to keep my eyes on you.”

“I saw fifteen steps ahead of me before the stairs ceased,” Neil said.

“It keeps going and going,” Kendra verified, “turning here and there, reaching landings or ledges in some places. The stairs lead all the way to the top. Will the storm be over by morning?”

“When the rain ends, the stairs will be gone,” Mara said. “That is why, even with your gifted sight, you did not perceive the stairs or the fissure earlier. None have found the Flooded Stairs in centuries. Many assumed the pathway existed only in lore.”

“You have to climb the stairs in the rain?” Kendra asked. “That is going to be tough!”

“This could be our only opportunity,” Neil said to Warren.

Warren nodded. “We should get the others.”

“We’ll need Kendra to guide us,” Neil said. “I felt the strength of the spell. It took all I had to follow her lead. Without her, we have no chance.”

Warren frowned, water trickling down his face from his damp hair. “We’ll have to find another way.”

Neil shook his head. “This was a long shot, a miracle. Don’t count on finding another way, not for years. Maybe we should leave whatever is up

there alone. It is well guarded.”

“I’ll lead you up, if you need me,” Kendra said. “I’ll need somebody near me who can keep the water from sweeping me away.”

“No, Kendra,” Warren said. “There is no imminent danger compelling us. You don’t need to do this.”

“If we don’t recover what we came for, someone else might,” Kendra said. “I don’t have to go into the vault. Just up the mesa.”

“She could wait outside with me,” Neil offered.

“There can be strange activity on the mesa during a storm,” Mara warned. The wind wailed, underscoring her words.

“We’ll take refuge in the old weather room,” Neil said. “I passed the time quietly there on the last trip.”

Kendra looked at Warren. He did not look fully unwilling. She suspected he wanted her to do it, but not because he pushed her. “This is important,” Kendra insisted. “Why am I here if not to help where I can? Let’s do it.”

Warren turned to Neil. “You met no trouble on top of the mesa last time?”

“No real danger,” Neil said. “That may have partially been luck. The mesa is certainly not always safe.”

“Do you think you can protect Kendra?”

“I expect so.”

“Will this rain last a while?” Warren asked Mara.

“Off and on, for a few hours at least.”

They started back toward the Jeep. “We could round up the others and be ready to return within half an hour,” Warren said. “Do you have climbing equipment? Ropes? Harnesses? Carabiners?”

“For six of us?” Neil asked. “Maybe. I’ll gather all we have.”

They fell silent. That was it. The decision had been made. They were going to give it a try.

As Kendra followed the others, picking her way over and around wet rocks, she tried not to picture herself frozen with fear high on a watery stairway, a magnificent desert vista overwhelming her with paralyzing vertigo. In spite of Warren’s faith in her, she wished she could retract her offer.



Shadow Wounds

Seated on a chair on the deck, Seth examined the checkerboard in disbelief. Tanu had just jumped two of his checkers, and now outnumbered Seth seven pieces to three. But that was not the cause of his amazement. Seth reexamined his potential move, put his hand on one of his two kings, and jumped six of Tanu's pieces, zigzagging around the board.

He looked up at Tanu. The Samoan stared back with wide eyes. "You asked for it," Seth laughed, removing all but one of Tanu's red checkers. Tanu had already beaten him twice in a row, and things had been looking grim until the coolest move he had ever found opened up. "I used to think triple jumps were the ultimate."

"I've never seen so many jumps in one move," Tanu said, a smile creeping onto his face.

"Wait a minute," Seth said. "You set me up! You did that on purpose!"

"What?" Tanu asked with too much innocence.

"You wanted to see if you could create the biggest jump in the history of checkers. You must have been maneuvering the whole time to set that up!"

"You're the one who found the move," Tanu reminded him.

"I know pity when I see it. I'd much rather strike out than have somebody pitch to me underhand. Is this your way of getting back at me for

always going first?”

Tanu grabbed a handful of popcorn from a wooden bowl. “When you’re black you say ‘coal before fire.’ When you’re red you say ‘fire before smoke.’ How can I keep up with that?”

“Well, even if you staged it, jumping six guys felt pretty good.”

Tanu’s smile revealed part of a kernel caught between his teeth. “The longest possible jump would be nine, but I’m not sure I could make that happen during an actual game. Five was my previous best.”

“Hello!” came a voice from the edge of the yard, made smaller by the distance. “Stan? Seth? Are you there? Hello?”

Seth and Tanu both looked toward the woods. Doren the satyr stood beyond the perimeter of the lawn, waving both arms.

“Hi, Doren,” Seth called.

“What do you think he wants?” Tanu asked.

“We better go check,” Seth said.

“Hurry!” Doren urged. “Emergency!”

“Come, Mendigo,” Tanu said. The overgrown puppet followed as Seth and Tanu vaulted the deck railing and ran across the yard to the satyr. Doren’s face was red, and his eyes were puffy. Seth had never beheld the jovial satyr in such a state.

“What is it?” Seth asked.

“Newel,” the satyr said. “He was napping. Those foul little nipsies had their revenge on him, accosted him in his sleep.”

“How is he?” Tanu asked.

Doren grabbed fistfuls of his hair and shook his head. “Not good. He’s changing, I think, like the nipsies changed. You’ve got to help him! Is Stan around?”

Seth shook his head. Grandpa had gone with Grandma, Dale, and Hugo to negotiate with Nero, hoping the cliff troll could provide some information by using his seeing stone.

“Stan is away for the afternoon,” Tanu said. “Describe what is happening to Newel.”

“He woke up screaming with evil nipsies on him like fleas. I helped him brush them off, but not before they inflicted lots of tiny wounds on his neck, arms, and chest. Once we drove them out, careful not to kill them, we

thought all was well. His injuries were plentiful but miniscule. We even had a laugh about it, and started laying plans for a counterattack. We figured we could pack their grandest palaces with dung.”

“Then Newel took a turn for the worse,” Tanu prompted.

“Not long afterward, he started sweating and acting delirious. Felt like you could fry an egg on his forehead. He lay down, and soon he started moaning. When I left him, he seemed tormented by dark dreams. His chest and arms were looking hairier.”

“We might be able to learn something by observing him,” Tanu said. “How far away is he?”

“We have a shelter over by the tennis courts,” Doren said. “He wasn’t too far gone when I left him. Maybe we can reverse it. Potions are your specialty, right?”

“I’m not sure what we’re up against, but I’ll try,” Tanu said. “Seth, go back to the house and wait for—”

“No way,” Seth said. “He’s my friend, it isn’t far, I’ve been good lately, I’m coming.”

Tanu tapped a thick finger against his chin. “You’ve been more patient than usual these past few days, and it might be unwise to leave you alone. Your grandparents might have my head, but if you promise to let Mendigo return you to the house without complaint on my order, you can join us.”

“Deal!” Seth exclaimed.

“Lead the way,” Tanu told Doren.

The satyr took off at a brisk pace. They raced along a path that Seth knew, having visited the tennis court many times over the summer. Newel and Doren had built the grass court, and Warren had provided top-notch equipment. Both of the satyrs were quite adept at the sport.

Before long Seth had a stitch in his side. For such a big man, Tanu could cover ground quickly. The run did not seem to tire him.

“Newel is in the shed?” Seth panted as the tennis court drew near.

“Not the equipment shed,” Doren replied, not at all winded by the running. “We keep shelters all over the preserve. Never know where you might decide you want to rest your head. It isn’t far from the court.”

“Mendigo, carry Seth,” Tanu ordered.

The wooden puppet scooped Seth into his arms. Seth felt mildly offended—Tanu hadn't even bothered to ask his permission! The court was not much farther. Even though being carried was a relief, and it allowed Tanu and Doren to pick up their pace a little, Seth wished he had been the one to suggest it. He disliked feeling underestimated.

They left the path, tromped through some undergrowth, and emerged on the immaculate lawn of the freshly chalked tennis court. Without pause, Doren dashed across the court and plunged into the trees beyond. Branches whipped past Seth as Mendigo raced along behind the others, dodging around trees and bushes.

Finally a tidy wooden shack came into view. The walls looked weathered and splintery, but there were no gaps or cracks, and the solid door fit snugly. There was a single window beside the door with four panes and green curtains behind it. A stovepipe protruded through the roof. When they reached the tiny clearing where the shack stood, Mendigo dumped Seth on his feet.

"Keep your distance, Seth," Tanu warned, approaching the shack with Doren. The satyr opened the door and entered. Tanu waited on the threshold. Seth heard a vicious snarl, and Doren came flying out the door backwards. Tanu caught him, stumbling away from the doorway as he absorbed the airborne satyr's momentum.

A shaggy creature emerged from the shack. It was Newel, and yet it was not Newel. Taller and bulkier, he still walked upright like a man, but dark brown fur covered him from horns to hooves. The horns were longer and blacker, corkscrewing up to sharp points. His face was almost unrecognizable, the nose and mouth having fused into a snout, quivering lips peeled back to reveal sharp teeth like a wolf's. Most disturbing were his eyes: yellow and bestial, with horizontally slit pupils.

Growling savagely, Newel pounced from the doorway, hurling Tanu aside and tackling Doren. Newel and Doren rolled across the ground. Doren gripped Newel by the neck, muscles straining to keep those snapping teeth away.

"Mendigo, immobilize Newel," Tanu called.

The limberjack raced toward the struggling satyrs. Just before Mendigo reached them, Newel wrenched free from Doren, caught one of the puppet's

extended arms, and flung him through the air into the shack. Then Newel charged Seth.

Seth realized he had no way to fend off the vicious satyr. Running would buy him only a few seconds, and would take him farther from the help of the others. Instead, he crouched, and when Newel had almost reached him, he dove forward at his legs.



The tactic surprised the raging satyr, who tripped over Seth and did a somersault before regaining his feet. The side of Seth's head throbbed where a hoof had clubbed him. He looked up at Newel in time to see Tanu slam into him from the side, smashing the satyr to the ground like a linebacker with permission to kill.

Newel recovered swiftly, rolling away from Tanu and rising to a crouch. Newel leapt at Tanu, who sidestepped the lunge and wrapped the crazed satyr in a full nelson, arms twined under Newel's armpits and locked behind his neck. Newel struggled and squirmed, but Tanu bore down on him ruthlessly, using brute strength to maintain the hold. Mendigo and Doren rushed toward the combat.

After a loud cry between a roar and a bleat, Newel craned his head and sank his teeth into Tanu's thick forearm. Jaws clamped shut, Newel twisted and ducked, heaving Tanu over the top of himself, breaking the hold and sending the Samoan sprawling.

Doren charged his mutated friend, but Newel backhanded him with a crack like a gunshot, and Doren flopped to the ground. Then Newel danced away from Mendigo. Twice Newel grabbed for the giant puppet, but Mendigo dodged him. Dropping to all fours, Mendigo skittered back and forth in a spidery crawl before moving in and entangling Newel's legs. Stomping and kicking, the enraged satyr broke free, leaving Mendigo with a splintered arm.

"Go!" Doren shouted, rising, his cheek already swelling. "We can't win this. It's too late. I'll hold him off!"

Tanu tossed a small, unstopped bottle to Seth. Liquid sloshed from its mouth as he caught it. "Drink," Tanu said.

Seth upended the bottle and guzzled the fluid. It fizzed and bubbled as it went down with a sour, fruity taste. Newel rushed at Doren, who turned, planted his hands on the ground, and bucked his friend in the chest with both hooves. The blow sent Newel soaring.

"Run, Doren," Tanu urged. "Don't let him bite you. Mendigo, help me back to the yard as fast as you can."

The limberjack dashed to Tanu, who climbed on piggyback. Mendigo did not look sturdy enough to carry such a large man, but he took off at a fast pace.

Seth felt tingly all over, almost as if the carbonation of the potion was now gurgling through his veins. Snorting and rising, Newel directed his attention toward Seth, pouncing with teeth bared and arms outstretched. Seth tried to run but, although his legs moved, his feet could get no traction.

Newel passed right through him, and bubbling tingles erupted through Seth's body. As the effervescent sensation subsided, Seth noticed that his body was pulling back together. He was in a gaseous state!

"Newel!" Doren said sharply, backing away from his deranged friend. "Why are you doing this? Come to your senses!"

Newel sneered. "You'll thank me later."

"Leave me be," Doren said gently. "We're best friends."

"Won't take long," Newel growled in his guttural voice.

Seth tried to say, "Come and get me, you goat-faced psycho," but, though his mouth could make the right shapes, no sound came out.

Roaring, Newel rushed at Doren, who turned and ran in the opposite direction from where Tanu was heading. Apparently Newel was more interested in chasing his friend than pursuing the Samoan, because he did not even glance at Tanu and Mendigo. Doren crashed away through the undergrowth with Newel in close pursuit. Seth noticed for the first time that a slender cord of shadow was connected to Newel. The curling black line wound out of sight into the trees.

Seth was left alone in the small clearing, hovering a few inches above the ground, wispy particles of himself steaming from his body without ever truly dissipating. He tried again to move, swinging his arms and legs. Although he did not generate any more traction than he had previously, Seth began to glide forward. He soon found that it was not moving his arms or legs that mattered. All it took was the intent to move in a certain direction, and he gradually began to drift that way.

Arms hanging at his side, legs dangling motionless, Seth slowly glided after Tanu, hoping to reach the house before solidifying in case Newel decided to return. In his gaseous state, Seth could have abandoned paths and traveled in a straight line through the woods, but the paths were fairly direct, and he didn't particularly enjoy the sensation of dissolving around branches and other obstructions.

With his top speed barely matching the pace of a leisurely stroll, he remained anxious throughout the tedious journey. He worried about how

Tanu was doing, and whether Doren had outrun Newel, and what to do if Newel reappeared. But Newel did not return, and Seth remained gaseous until he drifted across the yard and up onto the deck.

Tanu opened the door and admitted Seth to the house. Mendigo waited nearby, a deep split in one wooden forearm. Tanu looked worried. "Did Doren make it away?" he asked.

Unable to speak, Seth shrugged and crossed his fingers.

"I hope so too. I think my wound is going to be a problem. Look."

Tanu held up his beefy arm. There was no blood, but much of the forearm looked like shadow instead of flesh. "Oh, no!" Seth mouthed.

"It's turning invisible," Tanu said. "Like what happened to Coulter, only slower. The invisible portion has been spreading. I have no idea how to slow it."

Seth shook his head.

"Don't worry. I didn't expect you to have the answer."

Seth shook his head more vigorously, making the particles of his face disperse with fizzy tingles. He drifted over to a shelf and pointed at a black binder, then pointed at Tanu's arm.

"You want me to take notes about my arm? I'll let you inform the others. You'll solidify soon."

Seth looked around the room. He glided over to a window, where the light of the sun was making a flowerpot cast a shadow. He pointed at the shadow, then indicated Tanu's arm.

"Shadowy?" Tanu asked. Understanding suddenly registered in his expression. "My arm looks shadowy to you, not invisible. Like how you see Coulter as a shadowman."

Seth gave Tanu a thumbs-up.

"I'd better go outside, in case I turn evil like Newel."

Tanu walked out to the deck. Seth floated along behind him. They stood together, silently staring into the yard. A frothy sensation surged through Seth, tickly tingles everywhere, as if he were a bottle of soda that somebody had shaken until it was wildly foaming over. After a fizzy hiss, the tingling stopped, and he found himself standing on the deck, his body solid once more.

"That was pretty cool," Seth said.

“Unique sensation, isn’t it?” Tanu said. “I have only one gaseous potion left. Come with me, I want to try something.”

“I’m sorry about your arm,” Seth said.

“Wasn’t your fault. I’m glad you avoided getting nipped.” They descended the stairs from the deck, passing from underneath the overhang into direct sunlight. Wincing and clutching his shadowy forearm, Tanu fled into the shade. “I was afraid of that,” he growled through clenched teeth.

“Did it hurt?” Seth asked.

“Coulter said he couldn’t visit us until sundown. I think I just confirmed why. When the sunlight hit my arm, the invisible part burned with unbearable cold. I can hardly imagine how that would feel spread over my whole body. Maybe I should wrap my arm and go find a shady spot far from the house.”

“I don’t think you’ll turn evil,” Seth said.

“You have a reason?”

“Newel didn’t behave like himself,” Seth said. “He was out of control. But Coulter acted calm. He seemed normal, except for being a shadow.”

“Coulter may just be more devious than Newel,” Tanu said. “He might have pounced on us if we’d given him the chance.” Tanu held up his arm. The area from his wrist to his elbow was lost in shadow. “It’s spreading faster.” Sweat beaded on his forehead. He sat down heavily on the deck stairs.

Across the lawn, Seth saw Grandpa Sorenson emerge from the woods. Behind him came Dale, and then Hugo giving Grandma a ride on his shoulder. “Grandpa!” Seth called. “Tanu got hurt!”

Grandpa turned and said something inaudible to Hugo. The golem picked him up, steadied Grandma, and loped across the lawn. Dale ran along behind. Hugo set Seth’s grandparents down beside the deck. Tanu raised his injured arm.

“What happened?” Grandpa asked.

Tanu recounted the incident with Newel, telling how the satyr had changed, how he had attacked them, how they had gotten away, and how the injury looked shadowy to Seth. Grandma knelt by Tanu, inspecting his arm.

“A single bite did this?” she asked.

“It was a big bite,” Seth said.

“Small injuries from nipsies were enough to transform Newel,” Tanu said.

“How are you feeling?” Grandma asked.

“Feverish.” The shadow had cloaked all of his hand except the fingertips and was also spreading up his arm. “I don’t think I have much time. I’ll give Coulter your best.”

“We’ll do all we can to restore you,” Grandpa promised. “Try to resist any evil inclinations.”

“I’ll give you two thumbs up if you can trust me,” Tanu said. “I’ll try with everything I have not to deceive you with that gesture. Can you think of a better way to prove I’m still on your side?”

“I can’t think of much else you could do,” Grandpa said.

“He’ll have to stay out of the sun,” Seth said. “It’s painfully cold to him.”

“The sun didn’t appear to affect Newel?” Grandma asked.

“No,” Seth said.

“Nor did it slow the fairies who came after Seth,” Grandpa said. “Tanu, stay on the deck until sundown. Confer with Coulter when he arrives.”

“Later, if I can hang on to my wits, I’ll explore the preserve, see what I can find,” Tanu mumbled, his mouth twisted into a grimace. “Did you learn anything from Nero?”

“We found him injured on the floor of the ravine, pinned beneath a heavy log,” Grandpa said. “Apparently he had been set upon by dark dwarfs. They stole his seeing stone and much of his treasure. He couldn’t tell us how the plague originated. The injuries he had sustained did not appear to be transforming him in any way. Hugo moved the log and Nero was able to scramble back up to his lair.”

Tanu began breathing heavily, eyes squeezed shut, sweat trickling down his face. His entire arm was lost in shadow. “Sorry to hear . . . it was a bust,” he wheezed. “Better . . . get inside . . . just in case.”

Grandpa placed a reassuring hand on Tanu’s healthy shoulder. “We’ll get you back. Good luck.” He stood up. “Hugo, I want you in the barn standing guard over Viola. Be ready to come if we call.”

The golem strode away toward the barn. Dale patted Tanu's good shoulder. Grandpa led the others into the house, leaving Tanu groaning on the deck steps.

"Can't we do anything for him?" Seth asked, peeking out the window.

"Not to prevent what is happening," Grandma said. "But we won't rest until we get Tanu and Coulter back."

Dale busied himself examining Mendigo's fractured arm.

"Did you see any darkened creatures on your way to Nero?" Seth asked.

"Not one," Grandpa said. "We kept to paths and moved quickly. I didn't realize how fortunate we were until now. If we determine that we can trust Tanu and Coulter, we may attempt a final excursion in the morning before sunrise. If not, it may be time to consider abandoning Fablehaven until we can return armed with a plan."

"Don't ignore help from Tanu and Coulter just because you need me there in order to see them," Seth pleaded.

"Like it or not, I must take that into consideration," Grandpa said. "I'll not place you in jeopardy."

"If I'm the only one who can see them, maybe it means there is something only I can do to help them," Seth reasoned. "There may be more important reasons for having me come than simply as a means to follow them. It may be our only hope for success."

"I won't rule it out," Grandpa said.

"Stan!" Grandma said reproachfully.

Grandpa turned to face her, and her expression softened.

"Did you wink at her?" Seth asked. "Are you just trying to shut me up?"

Grandpa regarded Seth with an amused expression. "You get more perceptive every day."



The Old Pueblo

Gavin joined Kendra in the entry hall toting a wooden spear with a head crafted from black stone. Despite the primitive design, the weapon looked sleek and dangerous, the head affixed securely, the tip and edges sharp. Still, Kendra wondered why he preferred the spear to a more modern weapon.

Kendra wore sturdy boots and a hooded poncho over her fresh, dry clothes. “Expect we’ll see any mammoths?” she asked.

Gavin grinned, hefting the spear. “You weren’t with us yesterday, so you didn’t hear all the details. Technically, the mesa isn’t part of the preserve. It’s older. Untamable. The t-t-treaty that founded this preserve won’t protect us while we’re up there. Rosa said that only weapons fashioned by the people who used to live on Painted Mesa are of any use against the creatures we’ll encounter. This spear is more than a thousand years old. They use special treatments to keep it like new.”

“Did the others have to use weapons last time?” Kendra asked.

“Supposedly not,” Gavin said. “They took them, but made it to the vault with no problem. The trouble came when they reached the dragon. But I worry that things may have changed since last time. The path they used has vanished. Plus, there was a disturbing weight to the air when we tried to climb the mesa yesterday. Honestly, I think you should back out of this, Kendra.”

Kendra felt like she was back at Fablehaven earlier in the summer, when Coulter refused to include her on certain excursions with Seth simply because she was a girl. Her hesitations about scaling the mesa suddenly fled. “How do you expect to find the stairs without me?”

“I don’t mind you guiding us to the bottom of the stairs,” Gavin said. “But if we can’t climb them without you, maybe we don’t have any business being up there.”

Kendra took a slow breath. “Even though I’m the only one who can find the way up, you somehow think you belong on the mesa more than I do?”

“I don’t mean it as an insult,” he said, holding up his free hand. “I just suspect you haven’t had much combat training.” He twirled the spear casually, making it swish through the air.

“That would look really nifty in a parade,” Kendra said flatly. “You’re sweet to worry.” With no particular training, hadn’t she led fairies in an assault that captured a powerful demon? Hadn’t she helped Warren retrieve the artifact from the vault at Fablehaven? What had Gavin done?

Gavin fixed her with an intense stare and spoke with conviction. “You think I’m a dumb teenage boy spouting off about girls having no business on an adventure. Not so. I’m worried about whether *I’ll* survive. I would hate to see you get hurt. Kendra, I insist you tell Warren you would rather stay behind.”

Kendra could not resist laughing. The surprise on his face, the way he went from so intense to so unsure, only added fuel to the fire. It took a moment to regain the power of speech. Gavin looked so crushed that she wanted to reassure him. “Okay, I was being sarcastic before, but you really are sweet. I appreciate the sentiment. I’m scared too—part of me would love to follow your advice. But I won’t be going into the vault, just camping on the mesa with Neil. I wouldn’t do this just for kicks. I think it’s worth the risk.”

Tammy entered the hall wearing a lightweight hooded jacket and carrying a tomahawk. She had tightened the hood so that only her eyes, nose, and mouth were visible. “I can’t believe we’re hiking up a waterfall,” she said. “The trail was tiring enough.”

“You didn’t see anything on top of the mesa last time?” Kendra asked.

“We saw something,” Tammy corrected her. “Something big. It had at least ten legs and it rippled when it moved. But it never came too close. The mesa shouldn’t be a problem. I’m worried about negotiating some of those traps again, though.”

Warren, Neil, Dougan, Hal, and Rosa came down the hall to the door. Dougan held a bulky stone axe. Warren carried a spear.

Hal sauntered over to Kendra, thumbs hooked in the belt loops of his jeans. “You’re really going to lead these nutcases up the mesa?” he asked.

She nodded.

“Reckon I could lend you this.” He held out a stone knife in a buckskin sheath.

“I’d rather she went weaponless, like Neil,” Warren said.

Hal scratched his mustache. “Neil does have a talent for staying alive. Live by the sword, die by the sword, is that it? Might not be a bad idea.” He tucked the knife away.

“We only have climbing gear for five,” Warren announced. “I’ll ascend at the rear without a harness, just keeping hold of the rope.”

“You have the key?” Rosa asked.

Dougan patted his backpack. “Wouldn’t be much use to reach the top without it.”

“We should get under way,” Neil recommended.

Outside, rain continued to drizzle. Neil drove the Jeep with Kendra, Warren, and Tammy. Dougan followed in the truck with Gavin as copilot. Windshield wipers swaying hypnotically, the Jeep sloshed through puddles and occasionally fishtailed in the mud. At one point, Neil gunned the engine and they roared through a stream, water spraying up from both sides of the Jeep like wings. They approached the mesa from a less direct route than before, winding more, and not climbing as steeply. The drive took almost twice as long.

At length they stopped in the same flat, boulder-strewn area where they had parked earlier. Neil cut the engine and killed the headlights. Everyone exited the vehicles and shouldered their gear. Warren, Dougan, and Gavin turned on large waterproof flashlights.

“You see the stairs?” Dougan asked Kendra, squinting into the rainy darkness.

“Barely,” Kendra said. She actually discerned the Flooded Stairs more clearly than she admitted, but wanted to avoid making it obvious that she could see in the dark.

They picked their way forward over wet rocks, looping around several depressions where water had pooled. Part of Kendra wondered why they bothered avoiding the water, considering the climb they were about to undertake. The hood of her poncho magnified the patter of the rainfall.

As they neared the fissure at the foot of the stairs, Kendra found herself beside Neil. “What happens if the rain stops while we’re on the stairway?” she asked.

“Truthfully, I have no idea. I would like to think the stairs will persist while we remain on them. We should probably hurry just in case.”

Warren helped Kendra into a harness, tightened some straps, and wound a rope through some metal clasps. Once they were all linked together, Kendra led the others along the narrow shelf between the cliff and the fissure.

“Don’t focus on the stairs,” Neil instructed the others. “Put your attention on following the person in front of you. It may take some effort.”

Kendra stepped into the rushing water at the base of the stairs and started climbing. The boots gave her better footing than the tennis shoes she had worn earlier. As the steps became steeper, it became impossible to ascend without using her hands. Her sleeves and pant legs became soaked. The rushing water made each step forward feel unstable.

After at least a hundred stairs, they reached the first landing. Kendra turned and looked down, shocked by how much steeper the ascent looked from this perspective than it had felt as she climbed. If she fell, she would undoubtedly tumble all the way down the crude stone stairway, and her corpse would be washed away into the fissure. She backed away from the edge, fearful of hurtling down the most painful waterslide of her life.

Kendra turned. Ahead, the water fell straight for about a hundred feet before noisily splashing on the landing. The stairs became as steep as a ladder, rising to the side of the cascade.

Kendra guided the others forward and started mounting the steepest steps yet, trying to ignore the sound and spray of the waterfall beside her. No stair was wide enough to place her entire sole on it, and the steps were often separated by more than two feet. She moved cautiously upward,

always keeping her hands on a higher step as she climbed, the aroma of wet stone filling her nostrils. She concentrated on nothing but the next step, ignoring the void behind her, ignoring the thought of slipping and peeling everyone off the stairs with her. The wind picked up, blowing her hood back and making her long hair flutter like a banner. Her arms trembled with fear and exertion.

Why had she volunteered for this? She should have listened to Gavin. He had tried to give her an out, but pride had prevented her from considering it.

She reached for the next step, got the best hold she could, lifted her right foot, and then her left foot. She pretended that she was only a few feet off the ground as she repeated the tiring process.

At last Kendra reached the top of the waterfall and another broad ledge. Neil boosted himself up behind her. Looking up, there remained a long distance to climb. She denied the impulse to look back or down.

“You’re doing well,” Neil encouraged. “Do you need a break?”

Kendra nodded. She had been so full of adrenaline while climbing beside the waterfall that she had not noticed how fatigued her limbs felt. Kendra pulled her hood up and waited a few minutes on the ledge before proceeding onward.

The stairway now rose back and forth in many short flights. Sometimes the flowing water followed the path of the stairs; sometimes it spilled over and took a shortcut. They scaled flight after flight to landing after landing. Kendra’s legs ached, and she started running out of breath, requiring more frequent pauses the longer she climbed.

The wind began to blow harder, lashing at her poncho, hurling the rain against her, making even the most stable flights of stairs feel treacherous. It was hard to tell if the storm itself was worsening, or if the wind was just more violent at the higher elevation.

After inching along a narrow ledge, Kendra found herself at the base of the last flight of steps, the wind whipping her hair sideways. The final flight was almost as steep as the stairs beside the waterfall, except this time they would have to climb up directly through the cascade.

“These are the last stairs!” Kendra shouted to Neil over the tempest. “They’re steep, and the water is falling fast. Should we wait and see if the storm dies down?”

“The mesa is trying to drive us back,” Neil replied. “Lead on!”

Kendra sloshed forward and started up, climbing with hands and feet. Water sucked at her legs and sprayed off her arms into her face. Whether she was moving or at rest, it felt like the rushing stream was on the verge of tearing away her hold on the slick stairs. Each step was a risk, taking her higher, increasing the distance that she would fall. The others followed in her wake.

One foot slipped as she trusted her weight to it, and her knee smacked down painfully against a step, water gushing around her thigh. Neil placed a steadying hand against the small of her back and helped her rise. Higher and higher she climbed, until the top was ten steps away, then five, then her head saw above the edge of the mesa, and she mounted the final few stairs. Kendra walked away from the stairway and the stream to solid rock strewn with puddles.

The others finished the climb and gathered around her, the wind buffeting them even more violently now that they huddled atop the mesa. Lightning blazed across the sky, the first Kendra had noticed since setting out. For a moment, the entire expanse of the mesa flashed into view. In the distance, toward the center, Kendra saw ancient ruins, layer upon layer of crumbling walls and stairs that must once have formed a more impressive pueblo complex than the structure neighboring the hacienda. Briefly her eye was drawn to the movement of many dancers prancing wildly in the rain on the near side of the ruins. Before she could consider the scene, the lighting flash ended. The distance and the darkness and the rain combined to obscure the revelers even from Kendra’s keen eyes. Thunder rumbled, muffled by the wind.

“Kachinas!” Neil cried.

The middle-aged Navajo rapidly loosed Kendra from the climbing gear, not bothering to remove her harness. Lightning flared again, revealing that the figures were no longer engaged in their frenzied dance. The revelers were charging toward them.

“What does this mean?” Warren shouted.

“These are kachinas or other kindred beings,” Neil yelled. “Ancient spirits of the wilderness. We’ve interrupted a ceremony welcoming the rain. We must get to the cover of the ruins. Keep your weapons handy.”

Tammy was having trouble loosening the rope tied to her, so she hacked it away with her tomahawk.

“How do we get there?” Warren asked.

“Not through them,” Neil said, starting to run in a crouch along the perimeter of the mesa. “We’ll try to loop around.”

Kendra followed, not liking the fact that the lip of the precipice was no more than ten yards away. Flashlight beams swayed and bobbed in the rain, making strips of shining drops visible along with oval patches of ground. Kendra chose not to turn her flashlight on; she found the light distracting. She could see at least fifty feet in all directions.

“We’ve got company!” Dougan called, his voice almost lost in the gale. Kendra looked over her shoulder. The beam of his flashlight was trained on a lean, shaggy figure with the head of a coyote. The humanoid creature clutched a staff topped with rattles and wore an elaborate beaded necklace. He threw back his head and howled, a high, warbling cry that pierced the tempestuous night.

Neil skidded to a halt. Ahead of him, blocking their progress, his flashlight lit up an eight-foot-tall, bare-chested oaf wearing a huge painted mask. Or was that his actual face? He brandished a long, lopsided club.

Swiveling, Neil charged toward the interior of the plateau. Suddenly, bizarre figures were everywhere. A tall, feathery being with the head of a hawk seized Tammy by one arm, dragged her several paces, twirled as if hurling a discus, and flung her off the edge of the mesa. Kendra watched in horror as Tammy spun through the air, arms flailing as if she were trying to swim, and disappeared from view. The creature had hurled her so far, and most of the mesa was so steep, that Kendra imagined the stricken woman might freefall the entire way to the bottom.

Kendra dodged away from a leering, humpbacked man carrying a long flute, and found herself in the grasp of a sleek, furry creature with the body of a human female and the head of a bobcat. Crying out, Kendra struggled, but the bobcat woman had a crushing grip on her upper arm and hauled her toward the rim of the mesa. The heels of her boots slid over the slick, rocky ground. She could smell the creature’s wet fur. What would it feel like, plunging toward the ground through the stormy night alongside the raindrops?

Then Gavin appeared out of the darkness, swinging his spear. The bobcat woman yowled and recoiled, dropping Kendra, clawed hands raised protectively, a diagonal wound gaping across her feline face. Gavin stabbed and whirled and slashed, driving the fierce creature back, deftly avoiding counterattacks, slicing and piercing her as she slowly retreated, fangs bared.

From her hands and knees, Kendra saw Dougan wielding his axe to drive back the coyote man. There was Warren, using his spear to keep a gigantic bronze scorpion at bay. And here came Neil, rushing toward her. Glancing over her shoulder, Kendra saw that she was only a few feet from the brink of the lofty precipice. She scrambled away from the edge.

The feathery, hawkish man had joined the bobcat woman in attacking Gavin. Gavin used the butt of his spear to thump the bobcat woman while jabbing with the other end to wound the screeching, feathered attacker.

Neil reached Kendra and hauled her to her feet. "Climb on my back and hold on," he ordered breathlessly.

Kendra was unsure how Neil would outrun their many enemies with her riding piggyback, but clambered onto him without argument. As soon as her legs wrapped around his waist, he began to change. He fell forward as if he meant to crawl, but did not drop as near to the ground as Kendra expected. His neck thickened and elongated, his ears slid higher on his head, and his torso swelled. In an instant, Kendra found herself astride a cantering chestnut stallion.

With no saddle or bridle, there was not much to cling to, and Kendra found herself bouncing further out of position with each stride the horse took. The giant man with a face like a mask obstructed their escape, heavy club poised to strike. The stallion slowed and reared, thrashing the large man with flailing front hooves. The massive figure toppled, but Kendra failed to maintain her grip and fell to the ground also, landing in a muddy puddle.

The stallion curveted around the area, bucking and plunging, trampling the fallen enemy and scattering others. Kendra looked around, and saw Gavin do a handspring to retrieve Tammy's fallen tomahawk. Twirling his spear adroitly, he now held off four opponents. A pair of motionless bodies lay crumpled near him.

His gaze met hers, and after a final wide sweep of his spear, he sprinted toward her. The creatures gave chase. Kendra rose to her feet. As Gavin

neared her, he hauled back one arm and flung the tomahawk in her direction. The weapon missed her by inches, the black stone bit embedding in the shoulder of a broad, lumpy man with a towering forehead and a deformed face. Kendra had not sensed him coming up behind her. The disfigured man fell with a throaty bellow, and then Gavin had her hand, and they were racing together through the rain.

Kendra heard hooves pounding off to one side. Handing Kendra the spear, Gavin seized her waist and heaved her up onto the chestnut stallion with astonishing strength. An instant later he had vaulted up behind her. He reclaimed the spear, using his free hand to steady her. "Go, Neil!" he cried.

Neil increased his speed to a furious gallop, tearing across the blustery mesa at a speed Kendra would not have thought possible. Blinded by the heavy rain, she was grateful to have Gavin stabilizing her. He appeared to have no trouble remaining astride the charging stallion, clutching the spear in his free hand as if he were jousting.

Blinking rapidly to try to peer ahead through the downpour, Kendra recognized the ruins coming into view. The horse leapt over a low fence, sending tingles through Kendra's stomach, and then they were swerving around rubble and broken walls. With a clatter of hooves on stone, the horse came to a stop outside the empty doorway of the most intact building among the ruins.

The horse melted away beneath Kendra and Gavin, leaving them standing beside Neil in the rain. His former clothes were gone. All he wore now were animal pelts. "Stay in here until I return," he ordered, jerking a thumb at the yawning doorway. He rubbed his side as if in pain.

"Are you all right?" Gavin asked.

"Holding my other form is hard," Neil said, nudging Kendra toward the building.

Lightning dazzled across the sky, throwing strange highlights and shadows across the ruins. Explosive thunder followed immediately, and Neil was a horse again, galloping off into the storm.

Gavin took Kendra's hand, and she led him into the shelter of the building. Part of the roof had collapsed, but the walls were whole, keeping the wind out except when it gusted through the doorway. "I lost my flashlight," Gavin told her.

Kendra had hers dangling from her climbing harness. It was not as big as some of the others, but when she switched it on, the beam was bright. The water pouring through the open portion of the roof was running across the mud-streaked floor and trickling down through an open hatch into an underground chamber.

“Look at you,” he admired, “holding on to your gear even when savage rain dancers are trying to toss you off of cliffs.”

“It was fastened to my harness,” she said. “Thanks for saving me. You were great back there.”

“It’s wh-wh-wh, wh-wh-wh. It’s wh-why they brought me along. Everybody has their thing. This is where I shine, whacking monsters with primitive spears.”

Kendra felt embarrassed. Her behavior when they were attacked had made it apparent that she had no idea how to handle herself in a fight. She braced herself, realizing she had better ’fess up before he could point out her deficiencies. “You were right, Gavin, I shouldn’t have come. I don’t know what I expected. You had to watch out for me instead of helping the others.”

“Wh-what do you mean? Because of you, I had an excuse to ride out of danger on Neil. You did much better than I expected.”

Kendra tried to smile. He was kind not to rub it in, but she knew she had been a liability. “I can’t believe Tammy is gone,” she said.

“I hope you don’t blame yourself for that,” he said. “It happened too quickly for anyone to have saved her. We didn’t really know what they had in mind until the hawk guy sent her soaring.” He shook his head. “They definitely wanted us off of their mesa. We crashed the wrong party.”

To make the loss less painful, Kendra found herself hoping that Tammy had been secretly working for the Society of the Evening Star. They waited without speaking, listening to the wind outside keening stridently among the ruins. The storm raged more forcefully than ever, as if exerting a final effort to sweep them off the plateau.

Somebody strode through the doorway. Kendra swung the flashlight over, expecting Neil. Instead the coyote man stood on the threshold, an angry gash visible beneath the wet, matted fur of his chest. She gasped and nearly dropped the flashlight. The intruder shook his staff. Even with the

wind howling, Kendra could hear the rattles. The coyote spoke in a human voice, chanting in a strange, warbling language.

“C-c-catch any of that?” Gavin asked softly.

“Nope.”

The coyote man sidled into the room, snarling. Gavin stepped in front of Kendra, and then advanced with his spear. As the coyote and Gavin drew close to each other, Kendra wanted to look away. Instead, squeezing the flashlight like a lifeline, she shifted the beam so it shone right in the coyote man’s eyes. He wove his head to avoid the glare, but she kept the beam on him, and Gavin poked at him with the spear.

Slowly Gavin prodded the intruder back. With a sudden grab, the coyote man seized the spear just below the head and yanked Gavin toward him. Instead of resisting, Gavin sprang forward and nimbly kicked the coyote man right where his chest was injured. Staggering back and whining in pain, the coyote man relinquished the spear and dropped his staff. Gavin charged, the stone spearhead biting into his enemy until the coyote man fled the room nursing new wounds.

Panting, Gavin backed away from the doorway. “If he returns, I’m going to make you a souvenir—coyote-on-a-stick.”

“He already left behind a souvenir,” Kendra said.

“Does that mean you’re claiming it?” Gavin asked, stooping to pick up the staff with the rattles attached. He shook it gently. “It’s certainly magical.” He tossed it to Kendra.

“Will he hunt me down to retrieve it?” Kendra asked apprehensively.

“If he ever tracks you down, give it back. I wouldn’t worry. Since the preserve surrounds this mesa, I imagine the coyote guy is stuck here.”

“What if he comes to retrieve it tonight?”

Gavin smirked. “Coyote-on-a-stick, remember?”

Kendra shook the stick hard, listening to the crackle of the rattles. Outside, the wind rose, lightning flashed, and thunder erupted, drowning out the rattling. She kept shaking it briskly, trying to hear the rattles over the wailing gusts outside. The wind shrieked even louder. Hail began drumming against the roof and pelting through the broken portion. Ice pellets skittered across the floor.

“I’d be careful how you shake that,” Gavin said.

She stopped, holding the rattle still. Within a few seconds, the hail stopped, and the wind wasn't gusting as hard. "This is controlling the storm?" Kendra exclaimed.

"Influencing it, at least," Gavin said.

Kendra studied the staff with amazement. She held it out to Gavin. "You earned it, you should keep it."

"N-n-nope," Gavin said. "It's your souvenir."

Kendra held the staff carefully, keeping it still. Over the next minute the storm went into a lull. The wind no longer blew as hard. The rain diminished to a sprinkle.

"Do you think the others are okay?" Kendra wondered.

"I hope so. Dougan has the key. If they don't show, we may have to fight our way back to the stairs." Leaning on the spear, Gavin glanced over at Kendra. "The way things played out, I know it seems like I made a good call about the danger, but this is much worse than I'd guessed, or I would have been more forceful with everyone about you not coming. Are you hanging in there?"

"I'm okay," she lied.

"That was smart, shining the light in the coyote's eyes. Thanks."

The wind and rain picked up again, but still didn't lash the mesa as furiously as earlier. Sheet lightning started flickering regularly, accompanied by growls of thunder. On the fifth flash, three men staggered through the doorway. Warren, Dougan, and Neil crossed the room to Kendra and Gavin. Dougan no longer had his axe. Warren held the top half of his broken spear. Neil limped between them, supported by the other men.

"Ugly business out there," Dougan said. "Have you had any visitors?"

"C-c-coyote man dropped by," Gavin said.

"He came inside the room?" Neil asked, his face haggard.

Gavin nodded. "I had to repel him with the spear."

"Then Kendra and I won't be safe here after all," Neil said. "In times past, the creatures who haunt the mesa would not have dared set foot here in the weather room. Then again, I know little about the rite we interrupted. We must have rendered all protections ineffectual."

"He definitely came inside," Kendra said. "He left this behind." She held up the staff. Neil frowned at it.

“It’s her souvenir,” Gavin insisted.

“We need to get inside the vault,” Neil said. “Anywhere will be safer than this mesa tonight.” Dougan and Warren helped him toward the hatch in the floor.

“Sorry I wasn’t much of a bodyguard,” Warren apologized to Kendra. “They struck so suddenly, and I saw Gavin taking much better care of you than I could have. Gavin, I’ve never met a man who could top your dad in a brawl, but you would have given him a run for his money.”

“Only thanks to all he taught me,” Gavin said with a proud grin.

Below them gaped the hatch. A long, upright log with pegs in it functioned as a ladder. Shining flashlights into the void, they saw the floor about twelve feet below. Gavin descended the ladder first, holding Kendra’s flashlight. Then came Dougan, then Kendra, then Neil lowering himself with his arms and one leg. After Neil reached the ground, Warren did not follow, and they heard the sounds of a scuffle. Spear in hand, Gavin raced up the ladder with incredible speed.

After a few tense moments, Warren and Gavin descended the ladder.

“What happened?” Kendra exclaimed. “Are you two all right?”

“No coyote-on-a-stick,” Gavin said regretfully. “He didn’t show up.”

“But others did,” Warren said. “The hawkman and a freakish oaf. I’m with Neil. We can’t leave anyone above ground. There are too many enemies abroad.”

“Will a dragon be any safer?” Kendra questioned.

Warren shrugged. “Neither option is inviting, but at least the vaults are designed to be potentially survivable.”

Kendra hoped Warren was right. She could not help remembering that only one and a half of the three people who had entered this vault last time had emerged.

Dougan removed the key from his bag. It was a thick silver disk the size of a dinner plate. The underground room had a spacious circular depression in the center. Water flowed into the depression but, instead of pooling there, continued to drain deeper. With Warren helping Neil, they all stepped down into the circular recess.

“This room was a kiva,” Neil explained. “A site for sacred ceremonies.”

Dougan pressed a small protuberance on the disk, and several oddly shaped metal teeth clicked out of the sides like blades from a pocket knife. When he released the button, the jagged teeth retracted. Kneeling in the center of the circular depression, he set the disk into a round indentation where it fit snugly. Then he pressed the center of the disk and twisted it.

With a jolting clack and a subterranean rumbling, the floor of the circular depression began to rotate. Dougan had taken his hand off of the key, but still the floor turned, and as it turned, it sank, as if they stood on the head of a gigantic screw. Ever rotating, they gradually descended into a vast chamber, where the irregular walls had the appearance of a natural cavern. Looking up, Kendra watched the round hole in the ceiling grow distant. The sounds of the storm faded. Announced by a final echoing thud, the turning floor came to a halt.



Obstacles

Dougan squatted beside Neil. “How’s your leg?”

Brow crinkled, Neil probed his knee. “I think I tore a tendon. I won’t be walking normally anytime soon.”

“Who injured you?” Kendra asked.

“I did,” Neil said ruefully. “This was an old man’s injury, earned by running too far too fast over ground that was too firm.”

“Call it a hero’s injury,” Warren said. “You should have seen him bowl over some of the creatures who had me pinned.”

“You can use my spear as a crutch,” Gavin offered.

“We all stand a better chance of surviving if the spear stays in your hands,” Neil said.

Gavin handed Neil the spear. “When trouble arrives, pass it back to me.”

“If it would be better for the mission, I could stay behind with Neil,” Kendra offered.

Warren shook his head. “If we could have left you safe up top, fine. In here, our best hope for survival is to stick together.”

“Tammy mentioned a hulking beast covered by so many knives that they looked like feathers,” Dougan said. He shone his flashlight around the vast chamber, showing the mouths of three different caves. “The beast

should be down that passageway, the widest one. She said it prowled along behind to prey on stragglers.”

“Speaking of Tammy,” Kendra said, “can we do this without her? Wasn’t her job to get us past the traps?”

Dougan stood and stretched. “Losing her was a tragedy, and a serious blow to the mission, but she shared enough information that we won’t be wandering blind, at least not until after the dragon.” He swiveled his flashlight to illuminate the narrowest exit from the chamber. “For example, that tunnel gets gradually steeper until it falls away to unfathomable depths. We want the medium-sized cave.”

“W-w-w-we should get moving,” Gavin suggested.

Warren stepped off the circular platform that had lowered them into the room, tapping with the broken end of his spear to test the ground. The others followed. Dougan tried to assist Neil, but the Navajo man quietly refused any aid, preferring to limp forward leaning heavily on the spear. Though Neil uttered no complaint, the set of his jaw and the tightness around his eyes made the pain he was suffering evident.

Warren held a flashlight, as did Dougan. Gavin, bringing up the rear, retained Kendra’s light. Gavin shone his light on a glistening stone formation against one wall shaped like a melting pipe organ. The mouth of the medium-sized passage was guarded by tall stalagmites, tapered stone projections the color of caramel reaching for the stalactites above.

After weaving through the stalagmites, they descended into the steep, winding passageway. Tiny, soda-straw stalactites hung in fragile clusters. The contorted walls were a burnt yellow. Some portions of the descent were so steep that Neil sat down and scooted forward. Kendra crouched, grabbing knobs of stone with her free hand, clutching the staff with the rattles in the other, trying to keep it quiet.

From up ahead, Kendra heard the sound of water flowing. The steady rushing grew louder until they found their way blocked by a chasm with a swift, deep stream at the bottom. The only way to get across was by hopping along the tops of a staggered collection of rough stone columns, none of them quite the same height.

Warren shone his flashlight on the three broadest, most inviting columns. “Tammy warned that these three are traps, rigged to collapse if

you step on them. As you can see, there are enough other columns to take alternate routes around the three biggest.”

Warren uncoiled a length of rope, handed one end to Dougan, and set off across the columns, bounding from one to the next without any significant pauses or missteps. Despite his confidence, Kendra felt tense inside until he stood safely on the far side of the chasm.

“Fasten the rope to Kendra’s harness,” Warren called.

Dougan knelt and secured the rope to her metal buckles and carabiners. “You saw how he did it?”

Kendra nodded.

“Don’t think about the drop,” Gavin suggested, returning her flashlight. “I’ll hold your rain stick.” She handed him the coyote man’s staff.

Kendra moved to the edge of the chasm. The flat top of the first column was a short step away. She tried to imagine she was stepping onto a rock in a shallow stream, and strode forward. The next column was more rounded, and she would have to jump in order to reach it, but there was easily room for both feet on it. If it weren’t for the gloomy void beneath, the leap would not have been intimidating, but she could not make herself move.

“Place a hand on the rope,” Warren called to her. “Remember, if you fall, I’m here to pull you up.”

Kendra compressed her lips. If she fell, she would swing to the far side of the chasm and smash into the wall, probably striking columns along the way. But holding the rope did provide an illusion of security. Admonishing herself to think like Seth, which to her meant not to think at all, she leaped to the next column, wobbled, and righted herself.

Jump after jump, step after step, she made her way around two of the three biggest columns. Near the far side of the chasm, to get around the final inviting, traitorous column, she would have to use columns so small that each would support only one foot at a time.

“Do these all in a row, Kendra,” Warren advised. “Five quick steps, just one brief game of hopscotch. You’re almost to me. If you fall, no big deal.”

Kendra planned her steps. Warren was right, if she fell now, the swing to the far wall of the chasm was no longer as threatening. Mustering her courage one last time, she leaped, leaped, leaped, leaped, leaped, and stumbled off-balance into Warren’s outstretched arms.

Dougan, Neil, and Gavin cheered from the far side of the chasm. Warren untied Kendra, fastened the climbing rope to his large flashlight, and flung it across the gulf to Dougan, who caught it.

“Neil doesn’t want to try crossing the columns on one foot,” Dougan called. “He thinks a deliberate swing across the chasm is best, which means I had better cross next to help you anchor him.”

“All right,” Warren replied.

“I think I can carry him,” Gavin interjected. Nobody responded. “It wouldn’t be too different from one of the training exercises my dad used to make me do. I’m stronger than I look.”

“Either way, I had better come across to help belay you,” Dougan said, tying the rope to himself.

“How did Javier get back across with his injured legs?” Kendra wondered.

“Tammy carried him,” Warren said. “Javier had a potion that reduced his weight.”

“For that matter, how did they get out at all?” Kendra continued. “I thought these vaults were designed to keep people from going back unless they claimed the treasure.”

Warren nodded, watching Dougan as he started across. “That was my understanding as well. Tammy and Javier felt like the dragon meant certain death, so they risked backtracking, and the gamble paid off.”

Although his movements were not graceful, Dougan traversed the chasm without mishap. Warren threw the flashlight with the rope attached to Gavin, who caught it with one hand and began affixing the rope to Neil.

“Are you sure Neil won’t be too heavy?” Dougan shouted.

Gavin stooped and hoisted Neil over one shoulder. Without responding, he stepped onto the first column, and then hopped to the second. Besides Neil on his shoulder, Gavin held the staff, which rattled every time he jumped. Kendra felt her insides clench with each small leap, and then lurch violently when he swayed awkwardly while perched on a small, rounded knob. Gavin hesitated where Kendra had last paused, studying the five consecutive jumps that would complete the crossing. Shifting Neil slightly, Gavin sprang from column to column, tumbling to his knees when he reached the far ledge.

“Well done!” Dougan enthused, slapping Gavin on the back. “I may never again underestimate the strength of youth.”

“It w-w-w-was harder than I expected,” Gavin panted. “At least we made it.”

Warren helped Neil off Gavin’s shoulder. He coiled up the rope, then led the way deeper into the cave, which continued to descend, although not as steeply as previously. Gavin used his flashlight beam to point out sparkling patches of calcite on the moist cave walls. He also spotlighted colorful ripples that looked like bacon. Kendra could practically taste stone with each breath she drew. The air was uncomfortably cool. She wished her clothes would dry.

The passage grew narrower until they all had to turn sideways to proceed. Then suddenly it widened into a spacious cavern. Warren halted and motioned for the others to do likewise.

“Chokepods?” Dougan asked.

“You won’t believe how many,” Warren said. “Come forward slowly. Don’t fully emerge from the cover of the passageway.”

The others crept forward until they all had a view of the congested cavern. Thousands of bulbs floated in the air. Mottled with shades of cinnamon, brown, and black, they were mostly spherical, though the tops looked a bit pinched. Their texture was fibrous, like cornhusks. The smallest were the size of softballs, the largest more like beach balls. All remained in constant motion, drifting lazily until they floated close together, in which case they gently repelled one another.

“What are they?” Kendra asked.

“If you touch them, they burst, releasing a highly toxic gas,” Dougan explained. “The gas can get into your system through respiration or even just contact with your skin. You’ll die almost instantly, and the toxin will gradually liquefy you. Eventually your remains will vaporize into fumes that can be absorbed by other chokepods.”

“If one of us touches even a small chokepod, everyone in the cavern will perish, and it will be unsafe to enter for hours,” Warren said.

Kendra tried to imagine weaving across the room. The chokepods floated from a foot or two above the floor to up near the ceiling, never quite brushing up against the walls. There was space between them, but not

much, and the constant drifting meant that gaps big enough to accommodate a person were constantly opening and closing.

“Where are we trying to go?” Kendra asked.

“There are several false passageways around the perimeter of the room,” Dougan said. “But the true way forward is through a hole in the center.”

Kendra saw a raised area in the center of the cavern. Surrounded by rocks, the hole was not visible. It was a good hiding place for the passage, especially since the chokepods were most densely gathered in the middle of the room.

“Tammy explained that the key is to stay low,” Warren related. “The chokepods never strike the ground, nor the ceiling, nor the walls, nor the stalagmites, nor the stalactites, nor each other. She said the chokepods rarely dip low enough to touch a person lying flat on the floor of the cavern. So we’ll squirm forward, staying near stalagmites wherever possible.”

“Can you manage this, Neil?” Dougan asked.

Neil nodded stoically.

“I’ll try first,” Warren said. “You all back away into the corridor. I’ll cry out a warning if I brush up against a chokepod and pollute the cavern. If I do, fall back to the chasm and wait. Otherwise, I’ll call out once I’m safely in the hole.”

The others retreated deeper into the narrow passageway, fending off the darkness with two flashlights. “You’ll go next, Kendra,” Dougan informed her.

“Shouldn’t Gavin go next?” Kendra suggested. “If all else fails, he and Warren could go on ahead and retrieve the artifact. Then you, Dougan, so you can help them, then me and Neil.”

“Makes sense,” Neil agreed.

“Except I’m the biggest, and therefore most likely to touch a chokepod even lying prone,” Dougan said. “Gavin next, then Kendra, then me, then Neil.”

They waited in silence. From behind, Kendra heard a distant roar, faint as the last rebound of an echo. “Did you hear that?” Kendra whispered to Gavin.

“Yeah,” he whispered back, squeezing her hand consolingly.

Even in a dark cave surrounded by the likelihood of death, Kendra could not help wondering if maybe there were romantic overtones to the gesture. She left her hand in his, enjoying the contact, thinking of the contrast between his stuttering speech and the confidence with which he had protected her on the mesa.

“I’m clear,” Warren finally hollered.

“Guess I’m up,” Gavin said. “I’ll take the staff, Kendra. And the spear, Neil—it might trip you up in there. S-see you guys on the other side.” Handing Kendra her flashlight, he raised his voice. “Warren, can you light the way for me?”

“Sure,” Warren replied.

He slipped out of sight down the passageway. It seemed much less time had elapsed than Warren had taken before Gavin called out, “Kendra’s turn!”

Mouth dry, palms wet, Kendra crept forward. Where the passageway ended, she stared into the cavern, watching chokepods dreamily rise and fall and drift laterally in every possible combination. She could see Warren’s head in the center of the room. He held a flashlight.

“Kendra,” Warren said, “I’ll be your spotter. Just squirm on your belly and follow the beam of my flashlight. Let me tell you how to move. I have the advantage of being able to see your whole body all at once, along with all of the chokepods near you. It worked well with Gavin.”

“But if I pop a pod, you’ll die with me.”

“If you burst a chokepod, and the gas doesn’t get me, your grandfather will. Come on.”

Kendra prostrated herself and wormed forward. The floor of the cavern was neither smooth nor particularly jagged. She slithered along slowly, using her knees and elbows and wiggling her waist, grateful to have Warren’s flashlight beam to follow. She kept her eyes down, hardly aware of the bulbs bobbing above her like grotesque balloons.

She was more than halfway to the center of the cavern when she heard a sharp intake of breath from Warren. “Lie flat, Kendra, flat as you can!” She laid her cheek against the stone, exhaling the air from her lungs, willing herself to sink into the rock. “On my command, roll onto your back to your left. Think about which way left is for you; don’t roll right. Ready, almost, almost, now!”

Kendra rolled to her left onto her back, keeping her body as close to the ground as possible. Although she wanted to close her eyes, she could not help looking. Chokepods crowded all around her. She watched a huge pod dip low beside her, inches from the cavern floor, precisely where she had been, before bobbing up just high enough to clear her waist.

“Keep still,” Warren ordered, voice taut.

Although the huge chokepod did not touch any of the others, its passage stirred the surrounding pods in new directions. A pair of chokepods the size of basketballs nearly collided directly above Kendra’s nose, so close to her face that she expected both of them to brush against her skin and rupture. Instead, they drifted apart, missing her by a fraction of an inch.

Trembling, Kendra slowly inhaled, watching the cluster of chokepods above her leisurely disperse. A tear leaked from the corner of one eye.

“Well done, Kendra,” Warren said, sounding relieved. “Roll to your left again and keep following the beam of my flashlight.”

“Now?” Kendra asked.

“Sure.”

She rolled over and inched forward, trying to calm her breathing.

“Scramble forward quickly,” Warren instructed. “You’ve reached a clear area.”

Her elbows ached as she propelled herself rapidly across the cavern floor. The flashlight beam guided her right, then left.

“Slow down,” Warren said. “Wait, stop, back up a little.”

Kendra glanced up and saw a chokepod the size of a volleyball falling toward her head at a diagonal. It was definitely on a collision course!

“Don’t roll!” Warren warned. “They’re on both sides! Blow at it!”

Puckering her lips, Kendra emptied her lungs at the oncoming chokepod. The stream of her breath sent the dappled bulb veering off course.

“Lie flat!” Warren commanded.

This time she did close her eyes, waiting in the darkness for a chokepod to kiss her skin and burst.

“Okay,” Warren said. “Almost there, Kendra. Squirm forward.”

She opened her eyes and followed the beam to the rocky barrier at the edge of the hole. Warren was so close! He had her wait, and then scuttle

over the rocks when the air was momentarily clear. Then he was helping her take hold of iron rungs bolted into the stone wall of the hole. Surprised to be alive, quivering in shock, she descended the rungs to where Gavin stood waiting.

“Sounded like you had some close calls,” Gavin said.

“I hated it,” Kendra admitted. “I thought I was a goner. I had to blow one away.”

“I b-b-blew three,” Gavin said. “I got cocky and tried to hurry. Almost cost me. Maybe you should sit down.”

Kendra plopped down with her back to the wall and drew her knees up to her chest. She still could not believe she had survived. A couple of times the chokepods had come unbearably close. She bowed her head, striving to steady herself. The adventure was not over yet.

Before she knew it, Dougan had descended the rungs and stood beside Gavin. “Could have gone my whole life without that experience.” He sounded shaken. “I’ve been in some tight spots, but death has never felt so near.”

Kendra felt relieved that she was not the only person who had found the experience of scooting across the cavern floor traumatizing.

“Isn’t the dragon our next major problem?” Gavin asked.

“According to Tammy,” Dougan affirmed. “She’s been right this far.”

That was when they heard an explosion, followed by Neil’s strangled voice crying, “Run!”

An instant later, Warren slapped to the ground at the base of the ladder. “Go, go, go,” he urged, yanking Kendra to her feet. They charged recklessly down the uneven passageway, rounding several corners before they slowed.

“Are you all right?” Dougan asked Warren, placing an arm around his shoulders.

“I think so,” Warren said. “I saw it coming, too many chokepods converging on Neil. I warned him, then started down just in case, leaving the flashlight propped up on the rocks by the top of the hole. When I heard the chokepod burst, I dropped, and somehow landed without spraining an ankle. I think we’re clear.” Turning, he punched the wall of the cave hard enough to make his knuckles bleed.

“Y-y-y-y-you did well,” Gavin told Warren. “If not for you, I wouldn’t have made it through the cavern.”

“Me neither,” Kendra said.

“We owe you,” Dougan agreed.

Warren nodded, shrugging gently away from Dougan. “I owed Neil. He saved my skin. Dangerous place. Bad luck. We should keep moving.”

The others followed Warren as the cave began sloping up for the first time. Kendra tried not to think of Neil lying inert in the cavernous room full of bizarre, floating bulbs. She understood what Warren meant about owing him. If not for Neil, she would be dead as well. And now Neil had lost his life.

Gavin shouldered past Kendra and Dougan, grabbing Warren. “Wait,” he said in an urgent whisper.

“What is it?” Warren asked.

“I smell dragon,” Gavin responded. “Time for me to earn my keep. If I can secure us safe passage, I’ll whistle. When you enter the room, don’t look at the dragon, especially not into her eyes.”

“Her eyes?” Dougan asked.

“Smells female,” Gavin said. “No matter what happens, don’t even consider attacking her. If things go wrong, run.”

Warren moved aside. Gavin walked past him and around a corner. Warren, Dougan, and Kendra waited silently. They did not wait long.

An earsplitting screech rent the air, prompting all three of them to clamp their hands over their ears. A succession of roars and shrieks followed, seemingly too powerful to proceed from any animal. The only creature Kendra had ever heard make sounds at that volume was Bahumat, which was not a cheery thought.

The deafening bellows persisted, making the stone vibrate underfoot. To Kendra, the tumult sounded like a hundred dragons rather than one. Finally the clamor subsided, the silence now seeming much quieter than it had before. They uncovered their ears. A moment later, they heard a high, shrill whistle.

“That’s the signal,” Dougan said. “Me first. Warren, hang back with Kendra.”

Dougan took the lead, while Warren and Kendra trailed at a distance. Soon they saw light up ahead. Dougan switched off his flashlight. They reached the opening of a chamber so vast that Kendra had trouble envisioning how it could fit inside the mesa. The tremendous room reminded her of when Hal had described caverns large enough to contain an entire football stadium. She had assumed he was exaggerating. Apparently not.

The colossal chamber was lit by glowing white stones set in the walls, making Kendra recall the stones inside the inverted tower. The high roof was so far away, Kendra doubted whether even Hugo could throw a rock high enough to reach it. She and Warren watched Dougan, who proceeded farther into the room, surveyed the scene, then waved them forward.

The room was wider and longer than it was tall. Some stalagmites rose over forty feet into the air. Although she knew she was not supposed to look, Kendra could not help shifting her gaze to Gavin, who stood fifty yards away, his back to her, arms and feet spread wide, facing a dragon perched above him on an oblong boulder. They appeared to be locked in an intense staring contest, both holding perfectly still.

The dragon gleamed like a new penny, overlapping copper scales encasing her in metallic armor. A tall fin ran from the top of her fierce head to the base of her neck. Not including the whiplike tail and the long, arched neck, the body of the dragon was the size of an elephant. A pair of shiny wings were folded at her sides.

The eyes of the dragon shifted to Kendra. They were bright, like molten gold. The dragon's mouth cracked open in a fang-filled imitation of a smile. "You dare to meet my gaze, little one?" the dragon asked, her silky words ringing like struck metal.

Kendra did not know what to do. She felt foolish for disobeying her instructions. She had been concerned about Gavin, and then the dragon had looked so fascinating. The heat of the stare made her feel cold. Her limbs went numb. What was it Warren had said about dragon tamers? Most people froze when dragons spoke to them. Dragon tamers spoke back.

"You are very beautiful," Kendra said in the loudest voice she could manage. "My eyes could not resist!"

"This one is almost eloquent," the dragon mused, keeping her eyes locked on Kendra. "Come closer, my pet."

“Kendra, look away!” Gavin demanded. “Chalize, do not forget our arrangement.”

Kendra tried to turn her head, but the muscles in her neck would not respond. She tried to close her eyes, but her eyelids refused to operate. Although she felt immobilized by fear, her mind remained clear.

“Your companions were not to gaze upon me,” Chalize sang, bright eyes still skewering Kendra. The dragon moved for the first time, crouching lower, as if coiling to spring.

“Do not forget yourself, worm!” Gavin yelled.

The dragon looked back at him, eyes narrowed. “Worm, is it?”

Kendra dropped her gaze to the floor. Warren appeared at one elbow, Dougan at the other, hurrying her along. She shuffled forward, listening to the conversation without raising her eyes.

“She spoke to you politely, Chalize,” Gavin said. “Your kind are not meant to devour such without cause.”

“She broke your promise and laid eyes on me. What further cause should I require?” The words were as harsh as swords clashing.

Gavin began speaking an unintelligible language, as distinct from a human tongue as the squeals of dolphins or the moans of whales. The dragon replied in similar fashion. The volume of the conversation was louder than when they had used English.

Kendra felt an impulse to look back. Was the dragon still influencing her, or was she simply insane? Resisting the urge, she kept her eyes averted from Gavin and Chalize.

Presently Kendra, Warren, and Dougan reached the base of a long, wide stairway. As they climbed, the argument ended. Kendra could imagine Gavin staring down the dragon again. How had he gotten away with insulting her? How was he able to converse in her own language, a language that evidently not even the fairies knew, since Kendra had not understood any part of the exchange? There was certainly more to Gavin than met the eye.

Legs burning, they arrived at the top of the stairwell and beheld a deeply recessed alcove with an iron door. Advancing to the door, they found it locked, with no key in sight. They waited, none of them daring to look back.

Finally they heard rapid footfalls on the stairs. Gavin approached from behind, plunged a golden key into the lock, and opened the door. "Hurry," he said.

They rushed through the door into a corridor walled with stone blocks. Gavin paused to close the door behind them and then hurried to catch up. The floor was tiled. Glowing stones shone from sockets in the walls.

"You spoke like a dragon," Dougan said in wonder.

"Starting to see why Dad kept me a secret?" Gavin asked.

Dougan remained amazed. "I understood you were a dragon tamer, a natural, but this . . ."

"If you care for me at all, please never share what you heard."

"I'm sorry I looked at the dragon," Kendra said.

"D-d-d-don't mention it," Gavin said. "How did you manage to reply?"

"I don't know," Kendra said. "My body couldn't move, but my mind stayed clear. I remembered that dragon tamers spoke to dragons, so after I got caught in her stare, I gave it a try. Every other part of me was frozen, but my mouth still worked."

"Usually the mind is paralyzed along with the body," Gavin said. "You have serious potential as a dragon tamer."

"How were you able to look in her eyes?" Warren asked. "I've always understood that dragon tamers avoid eye contact."

"Y-you were peeking as well?" Gavin accused.

"Just enough to see you."

"I challenged Chalize to try to break my will without touching me," Gavin said. "Our arrangement was that if she failed, she would let us pass in and out freely."

"What made you think you could succeed!" Dougan exclaimed.

"I've always been immune to the charms of dragons," Gavin said. "Through some inborn quirk, their stares do not mesmerize me. She could have decapitated me with a flick of her tail, but she is young and has lived in solitude, so she relished the challenge. Surely, to her, it seemed a contest she could not possibly lose."

"From what I half-glimpsed, she did look rather small," Warren said.

"V-v-v-v-very mysterious," Gavin said. "Chalize is a youngling, with most of her growth ahead of her. She can't be much more than a hundred

years old. Yet this vault has been here at least ten times that long. The cavern where she dwells was raked with claw marks and gouges from a much larger, older dragon.”

“I noticed,” Warren said. “So where was the parent?”

“I inquired how she came here,” Gavin said. “She refused to respond. Something about the whole situation seems shady. At least she surrendered her key as promised.”

“Her youth explains why she attacked the others so quickly,” Dougan said.

“Right,” Gavin agreed. “Normally dragons prefer to toy with their food. The young ones are more impulsive.”

“Are all dragons as metallic as she is?” Kendra asked. “She almost looked like a robot.”

“Each dragon is unique,” Gavin said. “I have seen others with metal scales, but Chalize was the most metallic I’ve seen. Her entire body is sheathed in a copper alloy. You can even hear it in her voice.”

Dougan laid an arm across Gavin’s shoulders. “I suppose it goes without saying, but well done back there. You’re a marvel.”

“Th-th-thanks,” Gavin said, lowering his eyes shyly.

As they proceeded down the corridor, Warren led the way, probing the ground with his broken spear. He warned them not to touch the walls, and to keep an eye out for tripwires. Now that they had passed beyond the limits of where Tammy had scouted, any danger was possible.

The hall ended at a bronze door. Behind it they found a spiral staircase leading downward. Testing every step before trusting their weight to it, they wound ever deeper into the earth. After hundreds of uninterrupted steps, the stairs ended at another bronze door.

“This could be the abode of the guardian,” Warren whispered. “Kendra, hang back.”

Warren led the way through the unlocked door, followed by Dougan and Gavin. Kendra peered in after them. The lofty room made Kendra think of the inside of a cathedral without pews or windows. Statues stood in elevated niches; small rooms housing various ornaments branched out from the main chamber; fading murals decorated the walls and ceiling; and a tremendous, ornate altar dominated the far end of the room.

Warren, Dougan, and Gavin crossed the room cautiously, all facing in different directions, as Kendra watched from the door. They reached the altar and looked around, gradually relaxing. They started searching all of the side rooms, handling various treasures, but found no guardian to oppose them.

Weary of waiting, and doubting the presence of danger, Kendra entered the room. Warren was giving the altar a closer examination, hesitantly touching jewels. “Nothing?” Kendra asked.

Warren looked up. “Possibly we have not yet awakened or activated the guardian. But if you ask me, I think somebody made off with the artifact a long time ago. I see nothing suspicious. This room should have held our most fearsome challenge, unless the guardian has already fallen.”

“It might explain why Tammy and Javier were able to exit the caves without finding the artifact,” Kendra observed.

“Right, and why a new dragon was placed here a century ago,” Warren agreed.

Kendra came around to the far side of the altar and froze, reading what had been inscribed there in silver letters. “Did you read this?” Kendra asked softly.

“It isn’t a language I’m familiar with,” Warren said.

“Must be a fairy language,” Kendra whispered. “It looks like English to me.”

“What does it say?”

Peering around to make sure Dougan and Gavin were out of earshot, she quietly read the words aloud:

Courtesy of the world’s greatest adventurer, this artifact has a new home at Fablehaven.



Secret Admirer

Seth lay under the covers in his bed, fully dressed except for his shoes, fingers laced behind his head, staring up at the slanted ceiling of the dark attic room. He was contemplating the difference between courage and stupidity, a distinction Grandpa Sorenson had repeatedly tried to emphasize. He considered himself armed with useful definitions. Stupidity was when you took risks for no good reason. Courage was when you took a calculated risk in order to accomplish something important.

Had he been stupid in the past? Sure! Peeking out of the window on Midsummer Eve when he had been warned not to look had been stupid. The only benefit had been to satisfy his curiosity, and he had nearly gotten his family killed. This summer he had taken some risks for flimsy reasons as well. Of course, when the risk seemed small, sometimes he didn't mind acting a little stupid.

But he had also acted courageously. He had overdosed on courage potion to confront the revenant in hopes of saving his family. That risk had paid off.

Was sneaking out of the house to follow the shadowy manifestations of Coulter and Tanu into the woods going to be dangerous? Absolutely. The question was whether the risk was justified.

Earlier that afternoon, Tanu had completed his transformation into a shadowman just outside the window. He had waited in the shade on the

deck until sundown, when he had ventured off into the woods. A few hours later, with evening deepening, the silent shadows of Tanu and Coulter had returned. Visible only to Seth, they had stood halfway across the yard from the house, allowing Grandpa to address them from the deck. Tanu had indicated that all was well with two thumbs up, and they had gestured for Seth to follow them, inviting Grandpa to come along as well. Through pantomime, Coulter had expressed that he would scout ahead as they traveled in order to prevent encounters with dangerous creatures.

But Grandpa had declined the invitation. He had stated that if Tanu and Coulter could devise a way for him to follow them without Seth, he would consent to accompany them. As he told them this, Seth stood behind him making subtle gestures, stealthily pointing at Grandpa and shaking his head, then pointing at himself, then pointing at them, then winking. None but Seth could see Tanu salute that he had received the message.

The house had been still for some time. If he was going to follow through on the message he had mimed to Tanu and Coulter, the moment had arrived. But he hesitated. Was he actually going to disregard a direct order from Grandpa and entrust his life to the shadowy versions of Tanu and Coulter? If Tanu and Coulter had his best interests in mind, would they be willing to let him sneak away with them against Grandpa's wishes? Hopefully they were certain he would be safe and confident that Grandpa would thank them all later.

What were the possibilities? They might lead him into a trap. He might die or be transformed into a shadow himself. Then again, he might solve the mystery of the plague, restore Tanu and Coulter, and save Fablehaven.

Seth scooted out from under his covers, pulled on his shoes, and started tying the laces. The bottom line was that Grandpa would have been willing to risk his life on the gamble that the shadows of Tanu and Coulter meant to offer meaningful assistance. He would have followed them if he could have done so alone. He simply was not willing to risk Seth's life. To Seth, this proved that the risk was worth taking. If Grandpa loved him too much to let him take a worthwhile risk, then he would bypass Grandpa.

Shoes secure, Seth slid his emergency kit out from under the bed. Then he tiptoed down the attic stairs, flinching at every creak. At the bottom of the steps the house remained dark and quiet. Seth hurried along the hall and down the stairs to the entry hall. He stole into Grandpa's study, tugged a

chain to turn on a desk lamp, and rummaged through Tanu's bag of potions. After examining several bottles, Seth found the one he wanted, grabbed it, and closed the bag.

He switched off the light and crept to the back door. Unlocking it, he slipped outside, where moonlight bathed the yard in silver highlights. "Tanu?" Seth hissed in a forced whisper. "Coulter?"

A pair of humanoid shadows emerged from behind a hedge, one taller and bulkier than the other. Seth climbed over the deck railing and dropped to the lawn. Immediately, two additional figures streaked toward him, one much bigger than Tanu, the other a little taller than Coulter.

Seth uncapped the potion he had swiped and guzzled the contents. By the time Mendigo and Hugo reached him, an effervescent tingling raced through his limbs, and he hovered in the air, a vaporous rendition of himself. Mendigo and Hugo tried in vain to lay hands on him.

Of course Grandpa hadn't trusted him. Of course Mendigo and Hugo had been stationed with orders to prevent him from leaving the yard. Was it Seth's fault that Grandpa had neglected to hide Tanu's potions?

Coulter and Tanu motioned for Seth to follow. Willing himself forward, Seth drifted behind them as quickly as he could. Mendigo stayed with him, ceaselessly trying to seize him, causing bubbly tingles wherever his wooden hands grabbed. His progress was frustratingly slow. Hugo went to the house and started thumping on the wall. Seth tried to ignore the lights turning on inside.

He was most of the way to the woods when Dale called out after him. "Seth, you mind your grandfather and come back right away." Refusing to even look back, Seth shook his head.

When Seth reached the edge of the woods, Grandpa spoke from the deck. "Wait, Seth, come back! Tanu! Coulter! Hold on, listen, if you're going to do this, at least let me join you." The shadowy figures stopped. Shaking his head emphatically, Seth crossed and uncrossed his arms. This was a trick. As soon as he became solid, Grandpa would drag him home. He waved a hand, goading them to continue.

"Seth," Grandpa demanded, "don't wave them onward. Tanu, Coulter, if you really are in possession of yourselves, wait for me."

The shadowy figures shrugged at Seth and stood their ground. He waved more frantically for them to proceed. Did they know his grandfather

at all?

“Mendigo,” Grandpa called. “Stand down. You will accompany Seth and me. Hugo, fetch the cart. I take it the cart would be the quickest means to reach our destination?”

Tanu nodded. Seth turned and nodded at Grandpa.

“We’ll have to wait for you to solidify,” Grandpa said. “Let me grab a flashlight and put on more appropriate clothing.”

He went back inside. Seth waved for Tanu and Coulter to lead on, but they shook their heads.

“I saw that,” Dale called from the deck. “Don’t keep egging them on. Your Grandpa is as good as his word. He means to come with you, and if you ask me, you’ll fare better with him than without him.”

Seth relaxed, hovering in the darkness near the shadows of his friends. If Grandpa was tricking him, he supposed he could always devise a fresh strategy for running away.

Grandpa returned dressed for travel. He instructed Dale to wait with Grandma, and to flee Fablehaven if they failed to return or returned as shadows. Seth glided over to where Hugo stood ready to pull the wooden cart like a giant rickshaw. Tanu and Coulter climbed up into the wagon, as did Grandpa and Mendigo. Seth floated alongside, waiting to transform.

At last the tedious wait ended in a fizzy rush, and Seth boosted himself up into the cart with the others. The shadowmen sat up front. Grandpa and Seth hunkered down in the rear.

“I do this against my better judgment,” Grandpa said.

“We need to take the risk,” Seth maintained in his best grown-up voice. “I’m not going to abandon Tanu and Coulter when I might be able to help them.”

“Let’s go, Hugo,” Grandpa commanded.

The cart lurched forward and Hugo bounded down the path, setting a brisk pace. The warm night air washed over Seth as the cart advanced through the darkness. When the trail forked, Tanu indicated which direction to take, Seth relayed the gesture, and Grandpa issued a directive to Hugo.

With Hugo lolloping tirelessly in front of the cart, they traveled down the road toward where the Forgotten Chapel once stood, then took several other paths, until they ended up on a rugged, overgrown track that Seth had

never traveled. The cart bounced and jolted over the uneven lane, until Tanu and Coulter waved them to a halt.

Grandpa switched on his flashlight, revealing a gradual, grassy slope that led to a steep hill with a cave in the side. “Tell me they aren’t pointing at the cave,” Grandpa said.

“Yes,” Seth replied. “They already jumped down from the cart.”

“We may as well turn around right now,” Grandpa said. “That is the lair of Graulas, one of the major demons of Fablehaven. To enter his lair would place us in his power. It would be suicide.”

Coulter gestured at the cave, then tapped a shadowy finger against his temple.

“Graulas knows something important,” Seth relayed.

Tanu and Coulter both nodded and motioned for them to follow.

Grandpa leaned close to Seth, speaking for his ears only. “Graulas is arguably the most powerful demon at Fablehaven, although he has hibernated in recent years. He would be the last being to share information with us willingly.”

Tanu pointed at the cave, gave a thumbs-up, opened and closed his free hand like a mouth talking, and pointed to Seth.

“Graulas wants to speak with me?” Seth asked. “Grandpa, they’re both giving me a thumbs-up. This is where they meant to take me. You wait here, and I’ll go see.”

Grandpa gripped Seth’s arm. “I came along to see what they had in mind. If the venture held promise, I would continue. But this is folly. Mendigo and Hugo won’t be able to set foot on his territory. The treaty will offer us no protection. We’re turning back.”

“Okay,” Seth said, slouching against the back of the cart.

Grandpa relaxed his hold on Seth’s arm. “Tanu, Coulter, this is too much to ask. We are going to return.”

Tearing free from Grandpa’s grasp with a sudden lunge, Seth sprang off the cart and started running up the slope toward the mouth of the cave. If Mendigo and Hugo couldn’t follow, then Grandpa couldn’t stop him.

“Mendigo, bring Seth back here!” Grandpa barked.

The wooden puppet vaulted from the cart, rapidly gained on Seth, then came to an abrupt standstill about fifteen paces from the road. Seth

continued up the slope, but the puppet could proceed no farther.

Grandpa stood up, fists on his hips. “Seth Andrew Sorenson, you return to this cart this instant!”

Seth glanced back but did not slow. The shadowy Coulter and Tanu jogged along at either side of him. The mouth of the cave drew near.

“Seth, wait,” Grandpa shouted anxiously from down the slope. “I’m coming with you.” Seth did not like the resigned tone in his voice.

Seth paused, watching Grandpa trudge through the tall grass, flashlight in hand. “You can come, but don’t get close enough to touch me.”

Grandpa glared, the muscles in his jaw tightening. “The only thing more alarming than what is in that cave will be your punishment if we somehow survive.”

“If we survive, I’ll have made a good choice.” Seth waited until Grandpa was about ten paces away, then started toward the cave again.

“You realize we are going to our deaths?” Grandpa said grimly.

“Who better to tell us about an evil plague than a demon?” Seth countered.

A tall wooden post stood outside the cave. Rusted iron shackles dangled from the top. Evidently victims had once been chained there. The thought made Seth shiver. The shadows of Tanu and Coulter did not proceed beyond the post. Seth waved for them to follow. They shook their heads and motioned him forward.

The mouth of the cave was large enough to accommodate a school bus. As Seth tromped inside, he realized that worrying about Grandpa stopping him from saving Fablehaven had partly distracted him from properly thinking through whether he should be stopping himself. He hoped that Tanu and Coulter were not enslaved to the will of this demon.

The smooth dirt walls and floor gave Seth the impression that the cave had not formed naturally—it was an excavation. As he continued forward, the cave curved twice and then widened into a single, stuffy room with a domed ceiling through which protruded a few twisted roots.

Rotten, broken furniture mingled with disorderly piles of pale bones. A huge, sagging table bore numerous moldy books and the waxy puddles of melted candles. Ruptured barrels were heaped haphazardly against one

wall, leaking rancid contents. Amid a jumble of crushed crates, Seth noticed the glint of jewels.

Against the far, curving wall of the room, cobwebs veiled a huge, hunched shape. The lumpy figure sat on the floor, back to the dirt wall, slumped to one side. Seth glanced over his shoulder at Grandpa. He stood motionless except for the quivering hand clutching the flashlight.

“Shine the light on the thing in the corner,” Seth said. The beam was currently aimed at the cluttered table.

Grandpa offered no response. He did not move.

And then a voice spoke, deeper than any voice Seth had ever imagined, slow and labored, as if on the brink of death. “You . . . do . . . not . . . fear . . . me?”

Seth squinted at the web-shrouded shape in the corner. “Of course I do,” he said, stepping closer. “But my friends said you wanted to speak with me.”

The figure stirred, making the cobwebs ripple and dust plume into the air. “You . . . do not . . . feel . . . fear . . . as you did . . . in . . . the grove?” The speaker sounded sad and tired.

“With the revenant? How do you know about that? I don’t feel fear like I did there. The fear there was uncontrollable.”

The figure shifted again. One of the largest sheets of cobweb tore, billowing lazily. The rumbling voice gained a little strength. “Your grandsire . . . is in the grip of such fear now. Take . . . his light . . . and come closer.”

Seth walked over to Grandpa, who had yet to move. Seth poked him gently in the ribs, but got only a slight twitch as a reaction. Why was Grandpa so incapacitated? Was Graulas directing magic specifically at him? A devious part of Seth’s mind wished that Grandpa would remain like this, so he wouldn’t get in trouble if they made it out alive. Seth yanked the flashlight from his grasp.

“Will Grandpa be all right?” Seth asked.

“He will.”

“You’re Graulas?”

“I am. Come closer.”

Picking his way through the decaying debris, Seth drew nearer to the demon. With one thick, gnarled hand, the demon was peeling away cobwebs. Dust fumed up from his clothes. Gagging, Seth covered his nose and mouth against the putrid stench. Although the demon was sitting on the floor and hunched to one side, Seth came no higher than his bloated shoulder.

Seth took an involuntary step back when the flashlight illuminated the demon's face. His skin was like the head of a turkey, red and folded and droopy, as if horribly infected. He was bald, and he had no visible ears. A pair of curled ram horns projected from the sides of his broad skull, and a milky film clouded his cold, black eyes.

"Would you believe . . . I was once . . . one of the six . . . most feared . . . and respected . . . demons . . . in the world?" he asked, his breathing labored. His entire body rocked with the effort of each wheezing inhalation.

"Sure," Seth said.

The demon shook his saggy head, folds of red flesh swaying. "Do not patronize me."

"I'm not. I believe you."

Graulas coughed. Webs flapped and dust swirled. "Nothing . . . has caught my interest . . . in hundreds of years," he growled wearily. He closed his eyes. His breathing slowed, and his voice became steadier. "I came to this pitiful zoo to die, Seth, but dying comes slowly for my kind, so very slowly. Hunger cannot conquer me. Disease is no match. I slumber, but I do not rest."

"Why did you come here to die?" Seth asked.

"To embrace my fate. I have known true greatness, Seth. To fall from greatness, from the dizzy heights to the deepest depths, knowing one might have prevented it, certain one will never reclaim what one has lost, cripples the will. Life holds no more meaning than one chooses to impose, and I quit pretending long ago."

"I'm sorry," Seth said. "You have a big spider on your arm."

"No matter," the demon wheezed. "I did not summon you here to pity my condition. As dormant as I have become, I cannot submerge all of my gifts. Without conscious effort, without tools or spells, this preserve is open to my scrutiny, all save a few select locations. I dread the futile monotony of all that is out there and endeavor to ignore it, to turn inward, and even so

I cannot help perceiving much that transpires. Nothing has intrigued me . . . until you.” Graulas opened his filmy eyes.

“Me?”

“Your courage in the grove surprised me. Surprise is a reaction I had all but forgotten. I have seen enough that I always know what to expect. I assess the odds of various outcomes, and my predictions are never thwarted. Before you were finished confronting the revenant, the potion failed. I saw the artificial bravado leave you. Your demise was certain. Yet, despite my certainty, you removed the nail. Had you been full-grown, a seasoned hero of legendary renown, well-trained, armed with charms and talismans, I would have been deeply impressed. But for a mere boy to perform such a feat? I was truly surprised.”

Seth was unsure what to say. He watched the demon and waited.

Graulas leaned forward. “You wonder why I brought you here.”

“To find out what I taste like?”

The demon regarded him morosely. “I brought you here to thank you for my first surprise in centuries.”

“You’re welcome.”

The demon shook his head slightly. Or had only his eyes moved? “I intend to thank you by bestowing what you currently need. Knowledge. It will probably not save you, but who can say? Perhaps you will amaze me again. Based on your performance in the grove, it might be poor judgment to consider you incapable of anything. Sit down.”

Seth squatted on a corroded, overturned bookcase.

“The revenant was nothing without the nail,” Graulas rasped. “A feeble being fortified by a talisman of tremendous dark power. Your friends should have striven more earnestly to recover it.”

“Tanu searched for it for hours,” Seth said. “He finally decided it must have been destroyed when I pulled it out.”

“A talisman of such potency is not easily unmade. By the time your friend started looking, he was too late.”

“What happened to it?”

“First consider what happened to you. Why do you suppose that only you can discern the shades of your friends?”

“Did the nail do that to me?”

Graulas leaned back and closed his eyes, a pained expression flashing across his revolting features, as if he was coping with a sudden surge of agony. After a moment, he spoke, dark eyes still squeezed shut. “The talisman left its mark on you. Be glad you did not touch the nail with your flesh, or it would have taken possession of you. You have been enabled to see certain dark properties that are invisible to most eyes. And you have acquired an immunity to magical fear.”

“Really?”

“My presence inspires a paralyzing horror in humans, similar to the aura that surrounded the revenant. Exuding terror is part of my nature. Look to your grandsire if you harbor any doubt.”

Seth stood up, shaking his arms and flexing his fingers. “I really don’t feel scared. I mean, I’m worried that you might be tricking me, and that you might kill me and Grandpa, but I don’t feel petrified like with the revenant.”

“This sight you have been endowed with might help you locate the source of the magic transforming the creatures of Fablehaven,” Graulas said. “Your darkened friends remain reliable. For such fragile creatures, humans sometimes have surprising strengths. One is self-possession. The same magic that has altered the creatures of Fablehaven has failed to overthrow the minds of Coulter and Tanugatoa.”

“Good to know,” Seth said.

Graulas paused, eyes still shut, his breathing loud. “Would you care for my insights on how the current trouble at Fablehaven originated?”

“Did it have something to do with the prisoner the Sphinx released?”

Graulas opened his eyes. “Very good. Do you happen to know the identity of the captive?”

“So the Sphinx really is a traitor?” Seth exclaimed. “No, none of us know who the prisoner was. Do you?”

Graulas licked his lips, his tongue a bruised color and marked by sores. “His presence was unmistakable, although most would not have been able to sense his true identity. He was Navarog, the demon prince, lord of the dragons.”

“The prisoner was a dragon?”

“The foremost of all dark dragons.”

“He looked human-sized.”

“He was in disguise, naturally. Many dragons can assume a human form when it suits them. Navarog did not revert to his true shape while on this property. His business at Fablehaven was of a stealthier nature.”

Seth sat back down on the corroded bookcase. “You say ‘was.’ Did he leave?”

“He left Fablehaven on the same day the Sphinx set him free,” Graulas said. “He was never formally admitted to the preserve, and so the walls could not hold him. But he did not depart until after performing some mischief. First he went to the grove and retrieved the nail. The dark talisman had already burrowed deep into the ground, which is why Tanugatoa missed it, but it surfaced when summoned. Then Navarog took the nail to Kurisock.”

“The other demon?”

“There are a few places my senses cannot penetrate at Fablehaven. One is the house and yard where you live with your grandparents. Another is the mansion that was once the residence of the caretaker. And a third is the tiny domain ruled by Kurisock. I cannot say precisely what Navarog did with the nail, but he had it when he entered Kurisock’s domain, and when he left, the talisman was no longer in his possession. After delivering the nail, Navarog fled the preserve.”

“Where’d he go from here?” Seth asked.

“Ever since I tied myself to this preserve, my sight does not carry beyond the boundaries,” Graulas explained. “I have no guess where a dragon as mighty as Navarog might have gone.”

“So to save Fablehaven, I have to stop Kurisock,” Seth said.

“It would be intriguing to watch how you fared against him,” Graulas mused with a glint in his eye. Something about the stare convinced Seth that the demon was somehow toying with him. “Do not ask me why Navarog went to Kurisock. If Kurisock has accomplished great deeds, I have not heard of them. He has wrought devastation on occasion, but lacks the faculties of a master strategist. There was a time when Navarog would have brought the talisman straight to me.”

“Do you just want to use me to trip up a rival?”

“Rival?” Graulus rumbled, almost chuckling. “I long ago ceased measuring myself against others.”

“How do I stop Kurisock?”

“Kurisock is more shadow than substance. To interact with the material world, he binds himself to a host. In return for a borrowed physical form, he imbues the host with power. Depending on whom Kurisock symbiotically unites with, the results can be impressive.”

“Then he’s not working alone.”

“In my long years, I have never seen darkness transform beings as infectiously as is happening on this preserve. I do not know how it is being accomplished. By binding oath, Kurisock cannot go beyond the limits of his domain here at Fablehaven. He must have partnered with a powerful entity, and the nail must be amplifying his abilities.”

“Would the nail do different things for Kurisock than it did for the revenant?”

“Undoubtedly,” Graulas agreed. “The nail is a reservoir of dark power. Without it the revenant would not have been very intimidating. With it he was among the most dangerous and powerful creatures at Fablehaven. Kurisock was formidable without the nail. With the talisman, his abilities may have become sufficiently augmented to explain this virulent darkness.”

“You’re a demon, right?” Seth said dubiously. “No offense, but shouldn’t you be happy about this plague?”

Graulas coughed, moribund body heaving. “The pendulum swings back and forth between light and darkness. I lost interest long ago. What rekindled my interest was you, Seth. I am curious to see how you fare against this threat.”

“I’ll do my best. What else can you tell me?”

“You must figure out the rest with the help of your friends,” Graulas said. “You do not have much time. The infectious darkness is spreading inexorably. There are only two safe refuges on the preserve, and even they cannot hold out indefinitely. I cannot see the shrine of the Fairy Queen. It repels darkness. Many of the creatures of light have sought sanctuary around her pond. And the centaurs, among others, have withdrawn to protected ground in a far corner of the preserve, within a ring of stones that will not admit darkness. Those will be the last places to fall.”

“And the house,” Seth added.

“If you say so,” Graulas said. “Now I must rest. Take your grandfather and go. This is another triumph you can add to your list: Few mortals have entered my presence and lived to tell the tale.”

“One more thing,” Seth asked. “How did Coulter and Tanu know I could trust you?”

“Coulter was exploring, searching for the cause of the plague. He came to me. In his current state, though I can see and hear him clearly, I cannot harm him. I told him that I had information to share with you, and convinced him that I was a sincere admirer. Later I persuaded Tanugatoa as well. Fortunately for you, I was telling the truth. Go and rescue this wretched, ridiculous zoo, if you dare.”

Graulias closed his eyes. His mushy, crinkled face drooped, and then slumped forward, as if he had lapsed into unconsciousness.

Letting the flashlight dangle from a cord around his wrist, Seth returned to Grandpa and grabbed him under his arms. The contact seemed to stir Grandpa out of his trance, and Seth helped him walk out of the cave. Coulter and Tanu were waiting outside. Once they were back in the moonlight, Grandpa flinched wildly, flailing his arms, and Seth released him.

“We’re outside!” Grandpa gasped.

“Graulias let us go,” Seth said. “Did you catch any of what he told us?”

“Bits and pieces,” Grandpa said, brow knitted. “It was hard to focus. How did you withstand the fear? The cold?”

“Actually, it was kind of stuffy in there,” Seth said. “I guess I’m immune to magical fear. Something to do with surviving the revenant. We need to have a long talk.”

Grandpa bent over and brushed off his pants. “You realize we can’t trust what Graulias told you.”

“I know. But we need to consider it. I’m pretty sure he told me the truth. If he meant us harm, all he needed to do was sit back and watch us fail. At least this gives us some leads to pursue.”

Grandpa nodded, walking toward Hugo and the cart. “First things first. Let’s hurry home.”



Homecoming

The rising sun bathed the top of Painted Mesa in golden light, the pueblo ruins casting long shadows beyond the brink of the nearest precipice. A scrawny lizard skittered along the top of a crumbling wall, its progress interrupted by unpredictable pauses. The thirsty ground and arid air had already sapped away the rainfall. A warm breeze and a few fluffy clouds suggested that the storm might have been nothing more than a dream.

Kendra, Dougan, Gavin, and Warren tramped across reddish stone away from the ruins. When they reached the edge of the mesa, Kendra peered down at a bird of prey wheeling in a wide circle, brown wings tilting in the breeze. The air was shockingly clear. The desert panorama—expanses of dirt and stone gouged by gorges and overseen by craggy buttes—looked so crisp that Kendra felt as though she had put on a pair of much-needed prescription glasses.

Getting out of the cave had proven nearly as arduous as getting in. After extensive searching and experimentation, they had concluded that the artifact was not hidden or disguised—it really was gone. Warren had cautioned Kendra not to share her translation of the inscription on the altar with Dougan or Gavin. In the end, they each claimed several treasures from the chamber and departed.

Upon returning to Chalize's lair, Kendra had managed to keep her eyes off the metallic dragon, and Gavin had presented the coppery beast with a selection of the loveliest treasures they had pilfered. Later, Warren successfully tested the air in the cavern with the chokepods. Crossing the cavern was dodgy, but they all made it. Kendra had avoided looking at Neil, who Warren had reported was already mostly liquefied.

At the chasm, Kendra had fallen, but the swing to the wall had not been far, and Warren had pulled her up. The others traversed the gap without incident. When they reached the platform where they had started, Dougan inserted the key, and they spiraled up into the kiva.

Uncertain what enemies they might find waiting, venturing out onto the mesa was tense. But, with Gavin leading the way, they were relieved to find no trace of the creatures who had attacked them the night before.

Now, traipsing along the rim of the mesa, Kendra clung to the rain staff stolen from the coyote man. Jewels rattled in her pockets. Gavin had retained a heavy golden crown set with sapphires, which he now wore on his head. Dougan bore a chalice wrought of crystal and platinum. Warren wore several new rings and clung to a sheathed sword with a pearly hilt.

About halfway around the perimeter of the mesa, they found a pathway that descended the plateau in a steep series of switchbacks. They encountered no trouble on the way down. As the day grew hotter and the balmy breeze faltered, the mesa remained tranquil.

Once they reached the base of the mesa, Kendra was unsurprised when they looked back to see that the zigzagging path they had descended was gone. They hiked around the mesa toward the vehicles, until Gavin spotted Tammy's corpse lying between a pair of tall, bullet-shaped boulders. While Dougan and Gavin moved in for a closer inspection, Warren escorted Kendra along a route that kept the body out of view.

The Jeep and the truck were parked not too far beyond where Gavin had found Tammy. Warren and Kendra waited by the vehicles until Dougan and Gavin showed up carrying a bundled load between them. Warren jogged over to help. Together they carefully placed Tammy's remains in the bed of the truck.

"We don't have keys to the Jeep," Dougan said. "Those were lost with Neil."

"I'll ride in back," Gavin offered.

“Before we return to the hacienda, I have a proposal,” Dougan said. “In case we still have a traitor in our midst, someone who works at the preserve, for example, I say we pretend the mission was a success.” Dougan held up the platinum and crystal chalice. “I recommend we secure this item in our strongbox as if it were the artifact, on the chance that the decoy helps flush out an enemy.” He wrapped it tightly in his poncho.

“Great idea,” Warren approved.

“Plus, it can’t hurt to send the message that the artifact was recovered,” Kendra said. “The misinformation might prevent the Society from hunting for it elsewhere.”

“If they weren’t the ones who already snatched it,” Gavin murmured.

“A possible scenario,” Dougan acknowledged. “But until we learn more about the missing artifact, our best hope to mislead the Society is to claim victory.”

Kendra sat between Dougan and Warren on the ride back to the hacienda. She felt a little guilty about not telling Dougan and Gavin that the artifact was probably not in the hands of the Society of the Evening Star, that it had been relocated to Fablehaven. They had paid a high price to reach the final chamber of the vault, and Kendra loathed leaving them with the feeling that the mission had been a total failure. But if the Sphinx was a traitor, she and Warren could not risk allowing vital information to reach him through Dougan and Gavin.

Kendra tried not to think about Tammy lying in the bed of the truck. She felt bad for Gavin riding back there with the corpse. She refused to think of Neil, brave and quiet, whose reward for a heroic rescue was to be slowly devoured by strange cave balloons.

Kendra had spoken little all morning, and did not deviate from her pattern during the drive. She felt stretched. Her eyes itched. Danger had kept her on edge all night. Now that the peril had passed, her fatigue became harder to ignore.

Rosa, Hal, and Mara came out of the hacienda as the truck pulled to a stop. Hal sauntered forward, glancing in the bed of the truck as the others got out.

“Tammy?” Hal asked, his attention on the bundled corpse.

Dougan nodded.

“No Jeep,” Hal remarked. “I take it Neil ran into trouble.”

“Chokepods,” Dougan reported.

Hal nodded, averting his eyes. Biting her knuckles, Rosa choked back sobs. She leaned against Mara, who kept a stoic expression, her dark eyes hard. Witnessing their grief made Kendra teary.

“He went inside the vault,” Hal said, a statement with an implied question.

“We ran into serious trouble on the mesa,” Warren explained. “Neil was a real hero. None of us would have made it to the cave without him. Weathering the night outside the vault would have meant certain doom, so he and Kendra entered with us.”

“I reckon you saw he was a skinwalker,” Hal said.

“He became a chestnut stallion and ferried us to safety,” Gavin said.

“Did you find what you were after?” Hal asked.

Dougan hefted the chalice, which was still wrapped in his poncho. “We’ll leave you in peace as soon as we can schedule a flight.”

“We’ll radio Stu,” Hal offered. “He can hop on the Internet and book your flights. You must have endured quite a night.” He laid a hand on the side of the truck. “Go on inside; I’ll take care of the young lady.”

Kendra followed Warren into the hacienda, avoiding eye contact with Rosa and Mara. What must they think of them? Strangers who came to their preserve, dragged one of their friends onto a dangerous mesa to recover some artifact, and returned bearing news of his death, without so much as a body to bury.

“You okay?” Warren asked.

Kendra could not imagine that he actually wanted the truth. She nodded instead.

“You did great,” Warren said. “That was a nightmare. Get some rest, all right? Let me know if you need anything.”

“Thanks,” Kendra said, entering her room and closing the door. After pulling off her boots and socks, she dove onto her bed, buried her face in the pillow, and cried. Her tears and muffled sobs helped purge the fear and sorrow of the previous night. Soon exhaustion overcame her, and Kendra sank into a dreamless sleep.

* * *

Rosy light glowed through her window when Kendra awoke. She wiped crust from her eyelids and smacked her lips. Her mouth tasted dry and stale. Sitting up, she felt woozy and had a slight headache. Irregular sleep patterns had never agreed with her.

Someone had left a glass of water on her nightstand. Kendra sipped from the glass, grateful to wash away the unpleasant taste in her mouth. She padded across the floor, went out into the hall, and walked to the kitchen. Mara looked up. She had been wiping the table.

“You must be hungry,” Mara said in her husky voice.

“Sort of,” Kendra replied. “I’m so sorry about Neil.”

“He knew the risks,” she said evenly. “Would you prefer something light? Soup and toast?”

“Don’t fuss over me. I’ll grab a bite later. Have you seen Warren?”

“He’s in the courtyard.”

Kendra hurried down a corridor, the tiles cool against her bare feet, and stepped out into the courtyard. Although the sun was setting, the pebbles of the gravel pathway remained warm, crunching underfoot and prickling her soles. Several fairies buzzed in the air. Warren stood on a tiled path beside a flowering cactus, hands clasped behind his back. He turned and smiled at Kendra. “You woke up.”

“I’ll probably be awake all night.”

“Maybe not. I bet you’re more fatigued than you realize. We have a flight booked tomorrow at eleven in the morning.”

“Great.”

He walked toward her. “I’ve been thinking. Without divulging all we know, I want to warn Dougan about the Sphinx, just tell him enough to get him paying attention.”

“Okay.”

“We don’t want to notify the Sphinx that we’re onto him, but I think we can also err by keeping our suspicions too private. I was waiting for you. I want you there to corroborate the story. Don’t tell him more than I do. Does that sound foolish?”

Kendra thought about it for a moment. “Telling anyone is a risk, but I think we need somebody like Dougan keeping an eye on him.”

“I agree. As a Lieutenant of the Knights of the Dawn, Dougan is very well connected, and I can think of no other high-ranking Knight who strikes me as more trustworthy.” He led her back inside the house. They walked to a closed door and knocked.

“Come in,” Dougan invited.

They entered a tidy bedroom not unlike Kendra’s. Dougan sat at a desk writing in a notebook.

“We need to talk,” Warren said.

“Sure.” Dougan gestured at his bed. He was sitting on the only chair. Kendra and Warren sat down on the mattress.

“These are uncertain times,” Warren began. “I need to run something by you. Kendra is here to verify my words. You recall when I grilled you about the identity of the Captain.”

“Right,” Dougan said, his tone hinting not to ask again.

“We ended up discussing the Sphinx. Whatever his relation to the Knights of the Dawn, at the very least, he has long been one of our more trusted collaborators. As a Lieutenant, you’re close to the Captain, so there is something I want you to know. You’re aware that Fablehaven is one of the five secret preserves.”

“Yes.”

“Are you aware that the Sphinx removed the artifact hidden at Fablehaven earlier this summer?”

Dougan stared at him silently, lips slightly puckered. He shook his head almost imperceptibly.

“Then I doubt you heard he also took with him a prisoner who had been confined in the most secure cell on the property? A detainee who had been there ever since the preserve was founded? An anonymous captive with an infamous reputation.”

Dougan cleared his throat. “I was unaware.”

“There were some shifty circumstances surrounding the whole event,” Warren said. “Nothing to prove the Sphinx is a traitor. But given the high stakes, together with the nature of our current mission, I want to be sure the Sphinx is not the only person aware that the Fablehaven artifact was removed, if you take my meaning.”

Dougan nodded. “You saw the artifact?” he asked Kendra.

“I saw it in use,” she said. “I recharged it myself. The Sphinx came to Fablehaven and took it personally.”

“If what you told us before was true, and the Sphinx is not leading the Knights, you’ll want to make sure the Captain knows about this,” Warren said. “If you misled us, and the Sphinx is the Captain, make sure at least one of the other Lieutenants knows the details we’re sharing. No one person should have control over multiple artifacts.”

“I understand the implications,” Dougan said, voice steady.

“Implications are all we have,” Warren said. “This is merely precautionary. We have no desire to wrongly accuse an innocent ally. Still, in case the Sphinx really is working for the other side, please don’t let our concerns get back to him. If he is a traitor, he has covered the secret well, and will stop at nothing to keep it from leaking.”

“One way to protect yourselves against him would be to accuse him openly,” Dougan said.

“Which we hesitate to do . . .” Warren began.

“Because if he is on our side, we desperately need him,” Dougan finished. “Spreading false accusations about his disloyalty would provoke widespread distrust and dissension.”

“And if as our true ally he is successfully concealing the artifacts, hopefully taking measures so no one person knows where multiple items are housed, we don’t want to frustrate his efforts. Dougan, we hope our suspicion is wrong. But I can’t ignore the smallest chance we may be right. The results would be devastating.”

“Catastrophic,” Dougan agreed. “Now I understand why you were asking about the Captain. I’ll keep a lid on this, and I’ll keep an eye open.”

“That’s all we ask,” Warren said. “I felt we could rely on you. Sorry to trouble you with this.”

“Don’t apologize,” Dougan said. “This is how the Knights police themselves. Nobody is above suspicion. Sharing your concerns with me was the correct choice. Anything else?” He studied both Warren and Kendra.

“Not that I can think of,” Kendra said.

“For the record,” Warren mentioned, “we know four of the five hidden preserves. This one, Fablehaven, Brazil, and Australia. We can’t come up

with the fifth.”

“Honestly, neither can we,” Dougan said soberly. “Which is why we’re aggressively soliciting knowledge about the hidden preserves. For so long our policy was to leave those mysteries alone. Although the secret preserves were seldom discussed openly, most of us assumed that if we pooled our knowledge, all five would be known to the Knights collectively. Word is that you have been conducting some private research on the matter.”

Standing up, Warren chuckled softly. “Apparently not as private as I supposed. The four preserves I named are all I’ve come up with, and I knew about them before I really started digging.”

“I’ll delve into this matter of the Sphinx, and I’ll alert you of any significant findings. Let me know if you uncover any new information.”

“Count on it,” Warren said, leading Kendra out of the room.

* * *

Kendra awoke the following morning just after dawn. Beside her on the bed lay a Louis L’Amour hardcover borrowed from a bookshelf in the living room. She had ended up needing the companionship of the novel much less than she had expected. Before midnight, when she was only a third of the way through the western, her eyes had grown weary and she had rested her head on her pillow. That was the last thing she remembered.

Kendra placed the novel on her nightstand and switched off her reading light. She felt too perfectly rested to attempt any further sleep, so she put on her clothes. Would the others be up yet?

The hallway outside her room was quiet. She walked to the kitchen and found nobody. She had never been the first to awaken at the hacienda, and could not imagine that everyone had slept past dawn.

She opened the front door and found Gavin walking across the driveway. “Good morning,” Kendra called.

“If you say so,” he replied.

“What happened?”

“Javier is gone, along with the strongbox.”

“What?”

“Check out the Jeep.”

Kendra looked beyond Gavin at the Jeep parked in the driveway. Hal and Mara had used spare keys to retrieve the vehicle the previous evening. All four tires were flat. “He slashed the tires?”

“And they couldn’t find the pickup,” Gavin said. “They’re all out searching for clues on motorcycles and horseback.”

“So Javier was a spy?”

“L-1-1-looks that way. At least the artifact he took was a decoy. Still, Dougan acted really worried. Even though Javier had a questionable past back when he was selling his services to the highest bidder, he had proven himself extremely reliable in recent years. Dougan said if Javier was secretly working for the Society, anyone could be.”

“What now?” Kendra wondered.

“We’ll still leave as planned. I was coming to grab some breakfast.”

“Why didn’t anyone wake me up?” Kendra asked.

“Nobody specifically woke me up either,” Gavin said. “They wanted to let us rest after yesterday. The revving motorcycles got me out of bed. M-m-my window looks out the front. Hungry?”

He walked into the hacienda and strode to the kitchen, taking milk from the fridge and cereal from the pantry. “I’ll have a bowl,” Kendra said. “Want some orange juice? Toast?”

“Please.”

While Kendra poured the juice and put bread into the toaster, Gavin set the table, placing the milk between the bowls of cereal and locating boysenberry preserves. Kendra buttered the toast and set it on the table, splashed milk onto her cereal, and started eating.

They were rinsing their bowls in the sink when Dougan entered the hacienda with swift strides. Warren followed at his heels.

“Any luck?” Gavin asked.

“We found the truck abandoned near the entrance to the preserve,” Dougan reported bitterly. “He mutilated the tires. He must have had an accomplice waiting on the far side of the fence.”

“Will we still make it to the airport?” Kendra asked.

“Hal has spare tires.” Dougan poured himself a glass of water. “We should still get away on schedule.” He took a long drink. “After all that’s happened, it almost seems appropriate that we should end our stay here on

another sour note. I won't be surprised if the Knights of the Dawn are never permitted on the premises again."

"We seem to be the opposite of jackalope feet," Warren agreed. "On the bright side, at least we're not about to confess to our evil employer that we ruined our legs and blew our cover in order to steal a phony artifact. I think old Javier might end up having the worst day of all of us." He clapped his hands together and rubbed them. "Time for some culinary therapy. What's for breakfast?"

* * *

On the floor beside his bed, Seth hunched over a musty journal, scanning page after page for words like *Graulass* and *Kurisock*. He glanced at the clock. Almost midnight. Kendra could show up at any minute. He did not want her to discover that he had started reading Patton's journals. She would never let him live that down.

His eyes found the word *Kurisock*, and he slowed down to study the passage:

Today I revisited the territory allotted to Kurisock. I still suspect that the demon played a central role in the tragedy that destroyed my uncle, the details of which I do not intend to relate in a volume as unguarded as this journal. In truth, if my grief over the calamity does not diminish, I may never impart the particulars.

Let it suffice to convey that I traversed the frontier into Kurisock's realm and spied on his smoldering pit, a malodorous venture that yielded no revelations. I dare not venture deeper into his territory, lest stripped of all protection I render myself defenseless and trade my life for naught. I reluctantly concede that investigating Kurisock in this manner is a fruitless enterprise, and intend at last to acquiesce to the advice that I refrain from further encroachments into his domain.

I hesitate to abandon my aunt to her fate, but the woman I knew no longer exists. I fear that her horrific condition may be irreversible.

Seth had found references to Kurisock and his tar pit before, although no passage revealed nearly as much about the nature of the demon as Graulas had shared. Seth had also encountered multiple mentions of a tragedy involving Patton's uncle. But this was the first entry where Patton had let slip that Kurisock might have been involved in his uncle's downfall.

And until now, Seth had never read anything about a strange condition afflicting Patton's aunt.

Footsteps thumped up the attic stairs. Seth started, fumbling with the journal before sliding it under his bed. He tried to assume a casual pose as the door opened and Dale poked his head in. "They're back."

Seth got to his feet, grateful that the person on the stairs had been Dale and not Kendra. His sister had an uncanny ability to guess when he had been up to something, and he did not want her to know that he had broken down and turned into a bookworm while she was off having adventures.

Seth followed Dale down to the main level, reaching the entry hall just as Grandma came through the front door with her arm around Kendra. Warren and Grandpa entered carrying luggage and closed the door.

Seth crossed to Kendra and reluctantly accepted her hug. Stepping back, he scowled at his sister. "If you guys fought another three-headed flying panther, you're going to have to buy me antidepressants."

"Nope," Kendra said. "Just a dragon."

"A dragon!" Seth gasped enviously. "I missed out on a dragon fight?"

"Not a fight," Warren clarified. "We had to sneak past it."

"Where'd you guys go that you had to sneak past dragons?" Seth moaned, afraid of the answer, but unable to resist asking.

"Another secret preserve," Kendra said vaguely, glancing at Grandma.

"You can tell him," Grandma said. "We're all going to have to share information tonight. Much has happened here, and I'm sure you have stories to tell. We need to piece it all together in order to move forward."

"We were at a preserve called Lost Mesa in Arizona," Kendra said. "We went after another artifact. I got to help feed zombies."

Seth paled. "You fed zombies," he whispered in awe. He hit the side of his leg with his fist. "Why do you torture me like this! You probably didn't even like it!"

"I didn't," Kendra admitted.

Seth covered his eyes with his hands. "It's like the awesomest stuff happens to you just because you're too girly to enjoy it!"

"You did converse with an ancient and powerful demon," Grandpa reminded him.

“I know, which was so cool, but she won’t even care,” Seth complained. “She’ll just be glad it wasn’t her. The only thing that would make her jealous would be if I led a parade riding a unicorn while ballerinas sang love songs.”

“Don’t try to pin your secret dreams on me,” Kendra said with a smirk.

Seth felt his cheeks grow a little warm. “Don’t try to pretend you’d rather see a dragon than a unicorn.”

“Maybe you’re right,” she admitted. “Especially if the unicorn wouldn’t try to hypnotize and eat me. But the dragon was pretty amazing. She shone all coppery.”

“She?” Seth said. “It was a girl dragon? Well, that makes me feel a little better.”

“I know the hour is late,” Grandpa interrupted, “but I don’t feel we can wait until tomorrow to exchange information and begin devising a plan. Shall we adjourn to the living room?”

Leaving the luggage in the hall, Grandpa, Grandma, Kendra, Seth, Warren, and Dale found seats in the living room. To the astonishment of everyone except Kendra, Warren shared the information that the artifact at Lost Mesa had been taken to Fablehaven by Patton Burgess, along with the details about Javier stealing the decoy artifact. Grandpa related to Warren and Kendra how Coulter and Tanu had become shadows along with all the specifics of what Seth had learned from Graulas.

“I can’t believe that old demon let the two of you go,” Warren said. “You really think you can trust him?”

“I’m sure we can’t trust him,” Grandpa said. “But after some thought and research, I now believe he may have been telling the truth—perhaps out of boredom, or as part of a convoluted Society scheme, or even to exact some kind of personal revenge against a rival.”

“Maybe he really was impressed by my heroics,” Seth added, mildly offended.

“I suspect he was, or he would not have taken notice of you in the first place. Yet I’m skeptical that admiration alone prompted him to volunteer such crucial information.”

“I’m skeptical whether he was telling the truth at all,” Grandma said. “Graulas is a conniver. We have no way to corroborate any of the assertions he presented about Kurisock.”

“At the same time, nothing we have found disproves anything he told Seth,” Grandpa rebutted. “A demon like Graulas does not invite humans into his lair and allow them to leave alive. He has been inactive for centuries, and hibernating for decades. Something must have genuinely sparked his interest and roused him from his stupor.”

“The plague itself may have penetrated his hibernation,” Grandma said. “His sole motive may be to participate in the destruction of this preserve. Have we read the same journals? Graulas has never hidden his disdain for Fablehaven. He views this preserve as his disgraceful tomb.”

“I can’t make complete sense of his actions either, but there are many plausible aspects of his explanation,” Grandpa maintained. “It harmonizes with what Vanessa told us about the Sphinx. It agrees with the fact that we never found the corrupt nail Seth extracted from the revenant. It names a viable source of the plague. This afternoon, Hugo and I investigated the pond where Lena now dwells, and the magic guarding that sanctuary is indeed holding off the darkness. As Graulas claimed, many of the remaining creatures of light have gathered there.”

“You don’t think desperation might be tainting your opinion?” Grandma asked.

“Of course it is! In order to grasp at straws, we need straws! This is our first reasonable lead since Vanessa suggested that the prisoner of the Quiet Box might be involved. It gives us a place to focus, and it has a ring of credibility to it.”

“You spoke with Vanessa?” Kendra asked.

“Twice,” Seth said smugly, enjoying Kendra’s glare.

“What did she say?” Kendra inquired.

Grandma explained how Vanessa had implicated the prisoner as a probable source of the plague, offered her assistance in finding a cure, and hinted that she knew of other spies among the Knights of the Dawn.

“I thought she might have useful information,” Kendra said.

“What’s the next step to follow up on Kurisock?” Warren asked.

“That is the question,” Grandpa said. “If the demon can bind himself to other creatures, in effect producing a new being, we suddenly have to reconsider every entity on the preserve as a possible source of the plague. Who can say what relationship might have spawned this evil?”

Seth had something to contribute, but wanted to phrase it carefully. “When I was playing up in the attic earlier, I knocked over a journal, and it fell open to a page about Kurisock.” Everyone was watching him. He swallowed and continued. “Patton thought that Kurisock was involved in destroying his uncle.”

“One of Patton’s great secrets,” Grandma murmured. “He never fully explained how his uncle met his demise, but it was evidently connected with the fall of the old mansion, and the reason none are to trespass there. Could Kurisock have somehow reached beyond the boundaries of his realm?”

Grandpa shook his head. “He could not have personally left his domain. Like Graulas, he is bound to the parcel of land he governs, even on festival days. But he certainly could have orchestrated the mayhem from afar.”

“My question is whether we abandon Fablehaven for the present,” Grandma said. “This plague has enveloped so much in such a short time.”

“I was ready to leave if we found no new leads,” Grandpa said. “But two new reasons to stay have arisen. We have a possible source of the plague to investigate, and we have reason to suspect a second artifact may be hidden on the property.”

Grandma sighed. “There is nothing in the journals or histories—”

Grandpa held up a finger. “Patton would never have passed on such sensitive information, at least not openly.”

“But he passed it on at the scene of the crime?” Grandma asked dubiously.

“In a runic language that neither Warren, Dougan, nor Gavin even recognized,” Grandpa reminded her. “Some obscure fairy tongue that only Kendra could decipher. Ruth, if an artifact might be here, I must remain until we either recover it or disprove its presence.”

“Should we at least send the kids away?” Grandma asked.

“There remains great danger for the children beyond the walls of Fablehaven,” Grandpa said. “We may reach a point when they must flee the preserve, when all of you must, but for now, as long as the kids stay in the house, I think they’re safer here.”

“Except for me,” Seth corrected. “I can’t stay indoors. Graulas said I need to figure out how to stop Kurisock.”

Grandpa reddened. “Which is precisely why you shouldn’t be involved. Graulas was likely luring you into peril. If the nail opened your eyes to certain dark elements, who knows how else it might be able to influence you. More than any of us, you must not take any chances.”

Warren chuckled. “Then we better lock him in the Quiet Box.”

Seth grinned.

“So help me, Seth, for your own good, if you don’t behave with maturity through this crisis, I’ll take Warren up on that,” Grandma vowed.

“What about our parents?” Kendra asked. “Have you heard more from them?”

“I told them we would send you home on Thursday,” Grandpa said.

“Thursday!” Kendra exclaimed.

“Today is Friday,” Seth said. “We’re going home in less than a week?”

“Today is early Saturday morning, technically,” Dale pointed out. “Midnight has passed us by.”

“It was the only way to stall them,” Grandpa said. “Your school starts the week after next. We’ll figure out something between now and then.”

Seth tapped his temple thoughtfully. “If it means getting out of school, maybe we should lock Mom and Dad in the dungeon.”

“We’ll do what we must,” Grandpa sighed, not seeming to take the comment quite as jokingly as Seth had intended.



Brownie Sunday

Kendra sat before a plate of hot apple pancakes dusted with powdered sugar, already satisfied after her third swallow. Smiling at Grandma, she cut away another bite with the side of her fork and swirled it in syrup. Grandma beamed at her. Saturday morning pancakes were a Sorenson tradition, and apple pancakes were Kendra's favorite.

Kendra's meager appetite had nothing to do with the food. She was still trying to shake off the dream from the previous night.

Kendra had been back at the carnival, the same one from the limo dream, the same one where she had wandered lost as a child, except this time she was riding the Ferris wheel, rising high until the festive lights twinkled far below and the calliope music became faint, then plunging back into the smells and sights and sounds of the lively fairground. She was alone on her bench, but other friends and family were also riding the attraction. In alternating positions above and below her sat her parents, Seth, Grandpa, Grandma, Lena, Coulter, Tanu, Vanessa, Warren, Dale, Neil, Tammy, Javier, Mara, Hal, and Rosa.

As the ride went on, the speed of the Ferris wheel increased alarmingly, until Kendra was rocking precariously with wind washing over her as she repeatedly fell forward, fell backward, rose backward, and rose forward, the machine's gears squealing, riders screaming. The enormous wheel had shuddered and tilted, no longer rotating vertically. With the sound of

shattering wood and groaning metal, individual seats began breaking free and plummeting to the fairground below.

Kendra had not been able to make out which of her friends and family were falling. She tried to force herself to wake up, but it was hard to cling to the slippery notion that the frightening scene was imaginary. As she ascended toward the apex of her rotation, the wheel canted even more, threatening to collapse completely at any moment. She noticed Seth beneath her, clinging to a pole, legs swinging.

And then the wheel tipped over sideways, and she fell away from her seat, tumbling through the darkness with her loved ones, the colorful carnival lights growing brighter as she neared the ground. She had awakened an instant before impact.

Kendra didn't need a professional analysis to arrive at an interpretation. The tragic escapade on Painted Mesa had left her traumatized, and then to come home and learn how the plague had spread, infecting not just the creatures of Fablehaven but Coulter and Tanu as well, she felt like danger was encroaching from all sides. Bad people were after her. Too many people who were supposed to be good couldn't be trusted. It wasn't safe to go home to her parents. It wasn't safe to hide at Fablehaven. She and everyone she loved was in peril.

"Don't eat more than you want," Grandma said. Kendra realized she had been toying with her pancakes, procrastinating the next bite.

"I'm kind of tense," Kendra confessed, eating another forkful, hoping her face looked pleasant as she chewed.

"I'll have hers," Seth offered, having almost finished his stack.

"When your growth spurt ends, you're going to get fat as a blimp," Kendra predicted.

"When my growth spurt ends, I won't eat as much," he said, wolfing down the last of his pancakes. "Besides, I'm not watching my figure for Gavin."

"It isn't like that," Kendra protested, trying not to blush.

"He battled his way past the cheetah lady and tamed the dragon to save you," Seth accused. "Plus he's sixteen, so he has his driver's license."

"I'm never telling you anything ever again."

"You won't have to—you'll have Gavin."

“Don’t pester your sister,” Grandma chided. “She’s had a hard week.”

“I bet I could tame dragons,” Seth said. “Have I mentioned that I’m immune to fear?”

“About a hundred times,” Kendra muttered, sliding her plate over to him. “You know, I was wondering, Seth, it seems like a big coincidence that one of those journals fell open to a page about Kurisock. In fact, I’m having a hard time picturing a game that makes books fall open in the first place. How does that happen? If I didn’t know how useless reading was, I might suspect you were studying those journals on purpose.”

Seth kept his eyes on his plate, wordlessly shoveling food into his mouth.

“You don’t need to act shy about your new love of reading,” Kendra continued. “You know what? I could help you get a library card, then you can add some variety to all those boring old—”

“It was an emergency!” Seth blurted. “Read my lips—*emergency reading*—not some demented idea of fun. If I were starving, I would eat asparagus. If somebody held a gun to my head, I would watch a soap opera. And to save Fablehaven, I would read a book, okay, are you happy?”

“You had best be careful, Seth,” Grandma said. “The love of reading can be very contagious.”

“I just lost my appetite,” he declared, rising from the table and storming out of the room.

Kendra shared a laugh with Grandma.

Grandpa came into the kitchen, glancing over his shoulder in the direction Seth had departed. “What’s eating him?”

“Kendra accused him of voluntarily reading,” Grandma said gravely.

Grandpa raised his eyebrows. “Should I telephone the authorities?”

Grandma shook her head. “I’ll not have my grandson subjected to the humiliation of his reading habit becoming public. We have to cope with this disgrace discreetly.”

“I have an idea, Grandpa,” Kendra announced.

“Board up the windows so the paparazzi won’t catch him in the act?” Grandpa guessed.

Kendra snickered. “No, a real idea, about Fablehaven.”

Grandpa motioned for her to proceed.

“We should talk to Lena. If what happened to Patton’s uncle is a secret, and Kurisock was involved, maybe Lena could fill in some details. We need to find out all we can about the demon.”

Grandpa wore a knowing smile. “I agree so much that I’ve already planned to stop by the pond for that very reason. Not to mention that I’d love to learn whether she has heard of the artifact Patton supposedly brought here.”

“I speak their language,” Kendra said. “I could talk to her directly.”

“I wish I could accept your help,” Grandpa said. “You’re bright and capable. I expect you would be an asset in reaching Lena. But this plague is too dangerous—we could both be transformed into shadows en route. The provision under which I am allowing you and your brother to remain at Fablehaven is that you not venture outdoors until we better understand what is happening out there. You two have already jeopardized your safety too much.”

“You’re the boss,” Kendra said. “I just thought I might have better luck getting Lena to talk. We need information.”

“True,” Grandpa said. “But I must decline the offer. I will not allow you to become a shadow. Do I see extra pancakes?”

“You already had plenty,” Grandma said.

“More than three hours ago,” Grandpa replied, sitting down in the seat Seth had vacated. “Even after a late night, we old-timers rise with the sun.” He winked at Kendra.

Warren came into the room carrying a coiled rope. “More pancakes?”

“Just working on some leftovers,” Grandpa said.

“Are you heading to the pond with Grandpa?” Kendra asked.

“At first,” Warren replied. “Then Hugo and I are going on a reconnaissance mission. I’ll get as close to Kurisock as I can.”

“Don’t get so close that you return as a shadow,” Kendra admonished.

“I’ll do my best to remain intact,” he said. “If I do become a shadow, don’t worry, I won’t be resentful that my final wish for a few more apple pancakes went unfulfilled.”

“All right,” Grandpa said. “Grab a plate. I’ll share.”

* * *

That night Kendra reclined in bed scanning a journal, stealing glances at Seth, who was leafing through pages of his own at a brisk pace, pausing occasionally to study a passage. She tried to focus on her reading, but the sight of him hunched forward intently kept drawing her gaze.

“I can see you watching me,” he said without looking up. “I should start charging admission.”

“Find anything interesting?”

“Nothing useful.”

“Me neither,” Kendra said. “Nothing new.”

“I’m surprised you ever find anything, you go through the book so slowly.”

“I’m surprised you don’t miss everything, flipping through pages so fast.”

“Who knows how much time we have?” Seth said, closing the journal and rubbing his eyes. “Nobody found anything today.”

“I told Grandpa he should let me talk to Lena,” Kendra said. “She wouldn’t even make an appearance for him.”

“We could sneak down to the pond tonight,” Seth offered.

“Are you insane?”

“I’m kidding. Mostly. Besides, Hugo and Mendigo would never let us out of the yard. I was relieved to hear Grandpa saw Doren at the pond. I was sure Newel would have caught him.”

Kendra closed her book. “Grandpa got good info from some of the satyrs and dryads.”

“Just confirming what we already know,” Seth argued. “News flash—the plague is everywhere.”

“Warren made it back safe from Kurisock’s domain.”

“With no new info except that a fog giant is standing guard. He didn’t even reach the tar pit.”

Kendra reached for the bedside lamp. “Should I turn off the light?”

“Might as well. I think my eyes will melt if I try to read any more.”

She clicked off the light. “I don’t get why you were so upset about being caught reading.”

“It was just embarrassing. What if people found out?”

“They’d just think you were normal and smart. Most people worth knowing enjoy reading. Everyone in our family does it. Grandma taught college.”

“Yeah, well, I was making fun of you before, so now I look like a hypocrite.”

Kendra smiled. “No, you look like you finally wised up.” He gave no reply. Kendra stared at the ceiling, assuming the conversation had ended.

“What if we can’t fix this problem?” Seth asked as she was starting to fade off to sleep. “I know we’ve survived some scary situations in the past, but this plague feels different. Nobody has ever seen anything like it. We don’t really know what it is, let alone how to repair the damage. And it spreads so fast, turning friends into enemies. You should have seen Newel.”

“I’m worried too,” Kendra said. “All I know for sure is that Coulter was right—even when you try your best to prepare, these preserves can be deadly.”

“I’m sorry some of the people at Lost Mesa didn’t make it,” Seth said softly. “I’m glad I wasn’t there for that.”

“Me too,” Kendra said quietly.

“Good night.”

“Night.”

* * *

“Kendra, Seth, wake up, don’t be afraid.” The voice boomed through the dark room, as if emanating from the walls.

Kendra sat up bleary-eyed but alert. Seth was already propped up on one arm, blinking in the darkness.

“Kendra, Seth, this is your grandfather,” the voice said. It did sound like Grandpa, only magnified. “I’m speaking from the secret attic, where Dale, Warren, your grandmother, and I have taken refuge. The brownies have become infected, and have turned against us. Do not open your door until we come for you in the morning. Without adults in your room, you will be totally safe from harm. We expect to pass the night without incident here as well.”

Seth stared at Kendra, not quite into her eyes. She realized that he could not see her as distinctly as she could see him.

Grandpa repeated the message, using the same words, presumably in case they had not been awake the first time. Then he reiterated the message a third time, adding more at the end. "The brownies are only permitted in the house from sunset to sunrise, so we'll evacuate in the morning. We're sorry we didn't see this coming. The brownies are an insular community, virtually never in contact with other creatures at Fablehaven. Their habitations beneath the yard enjoy many of the same protections as this house. Even so, we should have known the plague would find a way. Sorry to disturb you. Try to get some sleep."

"Yeah, right," Seth said, switching on the bedside lamp.

"Just what we needed," Kendra sighed. "Evil brownies."

"I wonder what they look like."

"Don't even consider peeking!"

"I know, of course not." Seth got out of bed and jogged to the window.

"What are you doing?"

"Checking something." He pulled the curtains aside. "Tanu is out here. His shadow."

"Don't you dare open the window!" Kendra commanded, rising from her bed to join her brother.

"He's motioning for us to stay put," Seth reported.

Looking over Seth's shoulder, Kendra saw nothing on the roof. Then a fairy glided into view, glowing a deep violet shade as if illuminated by a black light.

"He's pointing at the fairies and signing to keep the window closed," Seth said. "See, there are more fairies just beyond the roof. They're tough to make out, they're so dark." He gave Tanu a thumbs-up and closed the curtain. "No evil fairies have shown themselves for a while. I bet this was a trap. The brownies were supposed to flush us out so the fairies could transform us."

"I thought Grandpa banned fairies from the yard," Kendra said, returning to her bed.

Seth started pacing. "It must not have worked for some reason. I never knew Grandpa could make announcements to the whole house."

"They have all sorts of cool stuff in the secret attic."

"Too bad they don't have a door to our side."

“It doesn’t matter. They’ll come get us in the morning. We should try to sleep. Tomorrow will probably be hectic.”

Seth put his ear against the door. “I can’t hear anything.”

“There are probably ten of them patiently waiting on the far side, ready to pounce.”

“Brownies are shrimps. All I’d need are some heavy boots, a pair of shin guards, and a weed whacker.”

The image made Kendra giggle. “You said the nipsies are much smaller than brownies, but that didn’t stop them from contaminating Newel.”

“I guess,” Seth said. He opened a wardrobe and pulled out some clothes.

“What are you doing?” Kendra asked.

“I want to get dressed in case we have to make a hasty getaway. Don’t watch.”

When Seth was done, he returned to his bed. Kendra gathered her clothes, turned off the lamp, warned Seth not to peek, and changed. She climbed into bed with her shoes on.

“How am I supposed to sleep?” Seth asked after a couple of minutes.

“Pretend nothing is happening. They’re so quiet, it could just be a regular night.”

“I’ll try.”

“Good night, Seth.”

“Don’t let the brownies bite.”

* * *

Seth slept lightly the rest of the night, often waking with a jolt, body rigid, feeling flustered and disoriented. A few times he clicked on the lamp to make sure there were no savage brownies scampering around on the floor. He even leaned down to peer under the bed, just in case.

Finally he awoke to find pink light bleeding through the curtains. He got out of bed without disturbing Kendra, crossed to the window, and waited for the increased light of the sun clearing the horizon. He noticed no fairies while he waited.

A few minutes after direct sunlight brightened the morning, Seth heard the attic stairs creaking. He shook Kendra awake, then went to the door. "Who's there?"

"Glad you're awake," Warren called. "Don't open the door."

"Why not?"

"It's been booby-trapped. Actually, on second thought, if you want, you can pull the door open swiftly, just stay behind it and off to the side. Make sure Kendra is positioned out of the way as well."

"Okay." Kendra got out of bed and stood beside the door. Seth gripped the knob, turned it slowly, then yanked the door open, staying behind it as he lunged to the side. Three arrows whistled into the room and thudded high against the far wall.

"Nicely done," Warren approved. "Take a look at the stairway."

Seth peeked through the doorway. Numerous wires crisscrossed the stairs, high and low, horizontal and diagonal. Many of the wires ran through pulleys or hooks that had been affixed to the walls. Several crossbows had been rigged in high corners of the stairwell, most pointing at the attic door, others defending it. Down in the hall, a shotgun propped on a cleverly designed rack was aimed up the stairs. Warren crouched against the wall a third of the way up the steps, having already threaded past several tripwires.

"Where did all the weapons come from?" Kendra asked from behind Seth.

"The brownies raided an arsenal in the dungeon," Warren said. "Many additional weapons were custom-made. This stairway is only the beginning. The whole house has been booby-trapped. I've never seen anything like it."

"How do we get down the stairs?" Kendra asked.

Warren shook his head slightly. "I was planning to disable the traps, but the cords are complicated. Some are rigged to trigger multiple traps at once; some are decoys. I'm having a hard time making sure which wire does what. When you pulled the door open, one of the arrows grazed my ear. I didn't see it coming."

"Maybe we could go out on the roof and get down that way," Seth suggested.

"At least a dozen dark fairies are waiting in ambush. Going outside is not an option right now."

“Didn’t Grandpa ban fairies from the yard?” Kendra asked.

Warren nodded. “Before he banned them, dark fairies must have hidden near the house. The register won’t expel creatures who have already accessed the yard. It will only prevent new ones from entering.”

“Tricky,” Seth said.

“Last night was well planned,” Warren said. “This plague is not spreading randomly. Somebody directed a deliberate, coordinated assault. Worst of all, before your grandparents awoke, the brownies got hold of the register.”

“Oh, no!” Kendra groaned. “If the brownies altered the register, that might also explain the dark fairies.”

“Good point.” Warren backed down a step and stretched. “Anything may be able to access the house soon. We have to clear out of here.”

“Is Hugo all right?” Seth asked.

“The golem has been spending the nights in a safe room inside the barn. Your Grandpa is doing everything he can to prevent Hugo from becoming infected. Hugo will come when we call. He should be fine in the barn until we do.”

“So now we have to limbo down the stairs with our lives at stake,” Kendra said.

“Why don’t I just shove the rocking horse down the stairway,” Seth suggested. “We could all just stand back and let most of the traps go off.”

Warren stared at him for a moment. “That actually might work just fine. Give me a minute to backtrack. Duck away from the door in case I accidentally set off a trap or two.”

Seth went to the unicorn rocking horse and dragged it over near the doorway. He thought the curved runners under the horse would help it sled down the stairs quite well. In fact, under other circumstances, he might have tried riding the rocking horse down the stairs for fun. Why did fabulous ideas tend to occur to him at the wrong time?

“I’m ready,” Warren called. “Stay well away from the doorway. I expect it will be bombarded by a volley of quarrels, darts, and arrows.”

Seth positioned the rocking horse at the top at the stairs and lay down behind it. “I’ll shove it with my feet, then roll out of the way.”

Kendra stood off to the side of the door. “I’ll slam the door as soon as it’s through, then dive clear.”

Seth placed the soles of his shoes on the unicorn’s rump. “One . . . two . . . three!” He gave the rocking horse a push and rolled sideways. Kendra heaved the door closed and lunged away.

A gunshot rang out, blasting a hole in the door. A crossbow quarrel zinged through the hole and stuck quivering into the opposite wall. Seth heard the rocking horse clattering down the staircase, the twang of bowstrings, and the overlapping beat of several other projectiles thudding against the door.

“That was awesome,” Seth told Kendra.

“You’re psychotic,” Kendra replied.

“Well done!” Warren called from below. “The horse tipped and missed a few of the higher cords, but the way is now fairly clear.”

Looking down the stairs, Seth saw several feathered shafts embedded in the floor around where Warren now stood. The rocking horse lay on its side leaning against the bottom step, bristling with arrows and missing its horn. “Wasn’t that awesome?” Seth asked.



Warren cocked his head, his expression mildly embarrassed. "I'm sorry, Kendra—it was pretty cool."

"All boys belong in insane asylums," Kendra said.

"Watch your step on the way down," Warren instructed. "At least two of the crossbows are still armed. And see the ax tied to that rope? It will come free and swing toward you if you touch that steep cord on the left."

Seth started down the stairs, ducking wires as he went, trying to avoid even the slack cords the rocking horse had already tripped. Kendra waited until he was standing beside Warren, and then carefully descended the staircase.

The hall at the bottom of the stairs contained a new web of wires. Although there were some crossbows, most of the traps involved curiously designed catapults meant to hurl knives and hatchets.

Seth noticed a tiny piece of brown wood hanging on the wall from a golden hook. "Is that part of Mendigo?"

Warren nodded. "I've seen a few pieces of him around. He's been staying the night inside the house. The brownies dismantled him."

Seth reached for the piece of the puppet. Warren put an arm on his elbow to stop him. "Wait. All the pieces of Mendigo are rigged to traps."

Grandma and Grandpa Sorenson appeared farther down the hall. "Thank goodness you're all right," Grandma said, placing a hand over her bosom. "Don't come this way. Our room is a nest of nasty traps. Besides, we all need to end up downstairs eventually."

"You should have seen the attic stairway," Warren said. "It was crammed with more deathtraps than any other part of the house so far. Seth pushed the rocking horse down the stairs to deliberately set off the majority."

"We heard the clamor and were concerned," Grandpa said. "How do we proceed, Warren?"

"It will be hard to spring all the traps on purpose," Warren said. "Many are protected by countertraps. Our best bet is to make our way downstairs one at a time, individually navigating the obstacles. I'll help coach each of you through."

"Me first," Grandpa said.

"Where's Dale?" Kendra asked.

“He was with me,” Warren replied. “While I helped you escape the attic, he continued along the hall, heading for the garage. He wants to make sure the vehicles are in order.”

“Everyone else out of the hall,” Grandpa said.

Grandma stepped out of sight. Seth and Kendra sat at the foot of the attic stairs.

“Be watchful, Stan,” Warren said. “Some of the tripwires are more apparent than others. Most are fairly visible, but a few are fashioned out of fishing line or thread. Like the one right in front of you, at the height of your knees.”

“I see it,” Grandpa said.

“If you accidentally brush a wire, fall flat. Most of the traps appear to be designed to strike an upright target.”

Warren proceeded to guide Stan down the hall. Seth and Kendra listened to Warren’s instructions as Grandpa descended the stairs to the entry hall. Grandpa made an increasing number of snappy comments as impatience eroded his composure.

Finally Grandpa reached the living room and Warren began directing Grandma. While Grandma was on the stairs, there was a tremendous crash in the entry hall. Warren called out that nobody had been injured. Soon he came and got Kendra, and Seth found himself waiting alone on the bottom step.

At last Warren returned for him. Seth did not find dodging over and under the cords in the hall very difficult, although a few were difficult to see. Upon reaching the top of the stairs to the entry hall, Seth chuckled. A grandfather clock, an armoire, a display case, a suit of armor, and a heavy rocking chair covered with spikes were all suspended from the roof of the entry hall. A china cabinet had apparently also been suspended there, but had fallen, accounting for the crash he had heard.

Seth picked his way carefully down the stairs, heeding Warren’s counsel on which wire to go over, which to go under, and how to position his body. The wires were more prevalent on the stairs than they had been in the hall, and a few times Seth felt like a contortionist. He was impressed that Grandma and Grandpa had been able to manage the descent.

When he reached the living room, Seth was relieved to find there were fewer traps on the ground floor than had crowded the upstairs hall and

stairways. Any pieces of furniture unaffiliated with traps had been reworked into tortured, unusable shapes. “Some of those wires were too close together,” Seth commented, wiping perspiration from his forehead.

“I thought you were immune to fear,” Kendra teased.

“Magical fear,” Seth clarified. “I still have regular emotions. I’m no more eager than the next guy to get squished by a grandfather clock.”

Simultaneously ducking a thick cord and stepping over a threadlike wire, Dale entered the living room. “The vehicles have been sabotaged,” he said. “The engine parts are all over the garage, connected to traps.”

“What about the phone?” Grandpa asked.

“The lines are down,” Dale reported.

“Don’t you have your cell?” Kendra asked.

“The brownies stole it off of my dresser,” Grandpa said. “Your grandmother and I are lucky we didn’t get contaminated. There were several brownies in the room when we awoke. If Warren and Dale hadn’t barged in and raised the alarm, I’m sure the little monsters would have transformed us into shadows in our sleep.”

“Your grandpa was impressive,” Warren said. “He used the bedspread to hold them at bay while we retreated into the attic through the door in his bathroom closet.”

Grandpa waved a dismissive hand. “What of the front gate, Dale?”

“I went as far down the driveway as I dared, holding the fairies off with flash powder, like you told me. The gate is shut and barred, with loads of creatures guarding it.”

Grandpa scowled, pounding a fist into his palm. “I can’t believe I lost the register. They’ve used it to lock us in.”

“And they could let anybody they want into Fablehaven now,” Kendra said.

“If they so choose,” Grandpa said. “I expect Vanessa had it right. The Society is finished with Fablehaven. They have no idea that a second artifact may be hidden here. Nobody will be coming in. The Sphinx simply wants this preserve to self-destruct.”

“What do we do?” Seth asked.

“We retreat to the nearest bastion of relative safety,” Grandpa said. “Hopefully at the pond we can formulate a plan.”

“We should have gotten you kids out of here when we had the chance,” Grandma lamented.

“We wouldn’t leave you even if we could,” Seth assured her. “We’ll figure out a way to stop this plague.”

Grandpa frowned pensively. “Can we get to the tents?”

“I think so,” Dale said. “They’re in the garage.”

“What else should we bring?” Grandpa asked.

“I have extra flash powder from the attic and my crossbow,” Grandma said.

“Tanu’s potions are all over his room, attached to traps,” Warren said. “I’ll try to retrieve some.”

“While you’re up there, see if you can grab a picture of Patton,” Kendra said. “We need bait for Lena.”

“Good idea,” Grandpa said.

“What about Mendigo?” Seth asked, nodding toward the corner of the room where the limberjack’s torso dangled from the ceiling, connected by a network of wires to two crossbows and two small catapults.

“Too many pieces to that puzzle,” Grandma said. “We’ll put him back together if we ever get out of this.”

“You and the kids stay put,” Grandpa told Grandma. “I’m going to get some provisions from the pantry. Ruth, give Seth some walrus butter.”

Seth slapped his forehead. “No wonder I didn’t see any dark fairies in the yard out the window this morning. How come I saw them last night, after sleeping for a while?”

“It can be hard to predict at what hour of the night the milk will stop working,” Grandma said. “The only sure way to keep it functioning is to stay awake. We keep a stash of walrus butter in the attic, so we already had our dose for the day.”

Seth dipped a finger in the butter she offered and tasted it. “I prefer the milk.”

Warren patted Seth on the arm. “When opening the fridge might mean an arrow in your throat, stick with the butter.”

“Let’s split up and gather what we need,” Grandpa said. “This house is no longer a reliable shelter. I don’t want to remain here a minute longer than necessary.”

Seth squatted on the floor beside Kendra while Warren, Dale, and Grandpa departed. Grandma leaned against the wall. Bristling with spikes and blades and barbs, none of the furniture was fit to hold them.



Refuge

Hugo tromped swiftly across the backyard, hauling the empty cart through hedges and over flower beds, finally backing it up against the deck. Warren opened the back door and leapt from the deck into the cart, scanning the air for fairies, his fists full of flash powder. After a moment he motioned for the others to follow.

Grandpa, Grandma, Kendra, Seth, and Dale piled into the cart, each lugging a tent or some sleeping bags. “Hugo, race to the pond as quickly as you’re able,” Grandpa directed.

The cart lurched forward, bucking and swaying as Hugo pounded across the yard at a furious pace. Kendra lost her footing, dropping to her knees. She dug a handful of flash powder out of the bag Grandma had entrusted to her. The others got powder ready as well, except Dale, who held a net in one hand, a compound bow in the other, and had a quiver of arrows slung over one shoulder.

They rumbled across the yard without seeing any fairies, then Hugo charged down a dirt road. Kendra knew that the entrance to the pond was not very far. She was beginning to hope they might reach their destination without encountering any resistance when a group of dark fairies swarmed into view up ahead.

“Right in front of us,” Grandpa said.

“I see them,” Dale said.

“Wait until they get close,” Warren warned. “At this speed the powder won’t hang in the air to protect us. We need direct hits.”

The fairies fanned out and swooped at the cart from all directions. Standing at the front of the cart, Grandpa hurled his powder forward, spreading it wide. Some of the incoming fairies veered away as light flashed and sparks sizzled. Kendra flung her handful of glittery silver dust. Electricity crackled, zapping fairies from the air as they came into contact with the volatile substance.

Hugo raced onward, swerving periodically to help avoid the darting fairies. Dark fairies squealed as more handfuls of powder were thrown. The fairies fired shadowy streaks at the cart. Blinding flashes flared whenever the dark energy struck the powder.

The tall hedge enclosing the pond came into view. A footpath diverged from the road and led through a gap in the hedge. Three dark satyrs guarded the entrance to the pond, their heads as goatlike as their legs.

Dale swung his net to bat away fairies. A tight formation of shadowy fairies whizzed toward them from the side, but Grandma fried them with powder.

“Hugo, ram through the satyrs!” Grandpa shouted.

Hugo lowered his head and dashed for the entrance. Two of the satyrs grabbed the third and launched him acrobatically into the air, then sprang out of the path of the oncoming golem. The airborne satyr soared over Hugo, furry arms outstretched, teeth bared. Warren yanked Grandpa out of the way just in time. The goatman landed nimbly in the bed of the cart an instant before Dale hit him with a flying tackle that sent both of them tumbling over the side.

Without an order, Hugo leaped away from the front of the cart, giving the wagon a final push to ensure it would coast through the gap in the hedge. The golem loped toward Dale, who was still rolling on the ground with the goatman. About half the arrows had spilled from the quiver on Dale’s back. The two other dark satyrs rushed at Hugo from either side. Without breaking stride, the golem made a motion like an umpire calling a runner safe, simultaneously backhanding both assailants and sending them cartwheeling through the weeds.

Dale managed to roll free from the goatman and was scrambling to his feet when Hugo seized the dark satyr by one arm, hoisted him high, and

punted the snarling fiend halfway to the main road. Cradling Dale, Hugo ran past the hedge and into the meadow surrounding the pond.

Kendra cheered along with the others as the cart coasted to a stop. Dozens of dark fairies flew to different points along the hedge, hovering above it, but none crossed over. The tainted satyrs rose and stood at the gap in the hedge snarling in frustrated fury. Hugo gently set Dale on his feet. Dale looked shaken, his clothes torn and smudged with dirt, one elbow scraped and bleeding.

“Nice work, big brother,” Warren said, vaulting down from the cart. He started examining Dale. “The brute didn’t bite you, did he?”

Dale shook his head. Warren embraced him.

Grandpa climbed down from the cart and began inspecting Hugo, studying the splotches where the fairies had discolored him with their dark energy.

“Way to go, Hugo!” Seth cheered.

“Quick thinking, Hugo,” Grandpa approved.

The golem gave a gaping, craggy smile.

“Will he be all right?” Seth asked.

“Much of the dirt and stone composing Hugo is temporary,” Grandpa said. “He sheds and gains soil all the time. As you’ve seen, he can even gradually regrow a limb. The plague would have to work in deep to affect him.”

As Grandpa spoke, Hugo brushed away the discolored soil, leaving his body unmarked.

From her elevated position in the cart, Kendra surveyed the scene. The pond looked the same as she remembered, enclosed by a whitewashed wooden boardwalk connecting twelve elaborate gazebos. The interiors of the hedges were meticulously trimmed, and the lawn of the meadow appeared freshly clipped.

But the familiarity ended there. The parklike clearing around the pond had never been nearly so crowded. Fairies fluttered everywhere, hundreds of them, in all shades and varieties. Exotic birds perched in the trees above the pond, including a few golden owls with human faces. Satyrs romped on the boardwalk and in the gazebos, hooves clacking against wooden planks as they chased merry maidens who looked no older than high school

seniors. Off to one side of the pond was a tidy encampment of short, stocky men and women in homespun clothing. On the other side several tall, graceful women stood conversing, dressed in flowing robes that reminded Kendra of foliage. In a far corner of the field, right up against the hedge, Kendra observed a pair of centaurs staring back at her.

“Seth, Stan, Kendra!” yelled a jovial voice. “Glad you dropped in!”

Kendra turned and saw Doren gamboling toward the cart, followed by an unfamiliar satyr whose wooly white legs had brown spots.

“Doren!” Seth cried, leaping from the cart. “I’m so glad you outran Newel!”

“I led him on an epic chase,” Doren bragged, beaming. “Sharp turns saved me. He got bigger, but wasn’t quite as fleet. Tenacious, though. If I hadn’t thought to come here, he would have snared me in the end.”

Kendra climbed down from the cart.

The satyr with the white legs elbowed Doren.

“This is Verl,” Doren said.

Verl took Kendra’s hand and kissed the back of it. “Enchanted,” he simpered in a smarmy voice, wearing a ridiculous half-grin. He had stubby horns and a childish face.

Doren punched Verl on the shoulder. “She’s off limits, you blockhead! Caretaker’s granddaughter.”

“I could be your caretaker,” Verl persisted, limply retaining her hand.

“Why don’t you take a swim, Verl,” Doren said, ushering him away several steps before returning. Kendra ignored Verl when he turned and winked at her, fluttering his fingers. “Don’t mind Verl,” Doren told her. “He’s a little intoxicated by all these nymphs trapped in the same space as him. They normally won’t come within shouting distance. The guy makes a career out of striking out.”

“I can’t believe how many creatures are here,” Seth said.

Kendra followed his gaze to where a group of shaggy, tawny, monkeylike creatures were leaping acrobatically along the top of a gazebo. Each seemed to have a few extra arms or legs.

“Not many safe places left,” Doren said. “Even some of the nipsies found shelter here—the only ones who didn’t go dark, not quite half a

kingdom. They're erecting a village underneath one of the gazebos. They work fast."

"Who are those tall women over there?" Kendra asked.

"Those stately ladies are the dryads. Wood nymphs. More approachable than the water nymphs, but not nearly as lively as the hamadryads, who love to flirt."

"What are hamadryads?" Seth asked.

"Dryads are beings of the forest as a whole. Hamadryads are linked to individual trees. The hamadryads are the more spirited girls you see socializing with the satyrs among the pavilions."

"Can you introduce me to a centaur?" Seth asked.

"You'd have better luck introducing yourself," Doren replied sourly. "Centaur is very self-important. They've adopted the notion that satyrs are frivolous. Apparently having a bit of fun on occasion renders us unfit for fellowship. But be my guest, go say hello, maybe you can join them in standing around glaring at everyone."

"Are those little people dwarfs?" Kendra asked.

"They're none too happy about being driven above ground. But any port in a storm. All sorts have sought shelter here. We even had a few brownies turn up, which can't bode well for you."

"We lost control of the house," Seth said. "Evil brownies snagged the register."

Doren shook his head sadly. "Some situations have a nasty way of going from bad to worse."

"Doren," Grandpa said, approaching from one side, "how are you holding up? I really am very sorry about Newel."

Grief flickered across Doren's features. "I'm getting by. He was a straw-brained, long-winded, skirt-chasing rascal, but he was my best pal. Sorry about your big islander friend."

"We need to get these tents set up," Grandpa announced. "Would you care to lend us a hand?"

Doren suddenly appeared uncomfortable. "Right, about that, I'd love to, but the thing is, it turns out I promised a few of the dwarfs I'd swing by to see how they're settling in." He started backing away. "You all mean much more to me than they do, but I can't let our special bond interfere

with an ironclad commitment, especially when the little fellows are out of their element.”

“Understandable,” Grandpa said.

“We’ll catch up more later, after you get the—um—after you get more settled.” He turned and trotted away.

Grandpa brushed his hands together as if wiping off dust. “The most surefire way to part company with a satyr is to mention work.”

“Why’d you scare him off?” Seth asked.

“Because satyrs can chatter for hours, and I need Kendra to join me on the pier.”

“Now?” Kendra asked.

“There’s no reason to delay.”

“Let me guess,” Seth said. “I’m not invited.”

“Too many spectators may impede contact,” Grandpa said. “You’re welcome to assist Warren and Dale with the tents. Kendra, let’s not forget that photograph of Patton.”

* * *

Seth walked with Kendra and Grandpa toward the cart before veering away, hustling to join a line of dwarfs trooping by. None stood much taller than his waist. “How are you men doing?” he asked.

When they looked up, he saw that despite their sparse whiskers, they were all women. One of them spat at his feet. He hopped away from the loogie.

“Sorry, I’m nearsighted,” Seth said.

The dwarfs continued on their way, paying him no further heed. Seth jogged toward the pond. Who wanted to set up tents when all these amazing creatures were corralled for his enjoyment? Besides, it would give Warren and Dale an occasion for brotherly bonding.

Seth was impressed by the quantity of satyrs. He had vaguely assumed Newel and Doren might be the only ones. But he counted at least fifty trouncing about, some older than others, some shirtless, others wearing vests, their fur ranging from black to brown to red to gold to grey to white.

The satyrs possessed boundless energy. They chased hamadryads, danced in clusters, wrestled, and played spontaneous acrobatic games. Although their boisterous antics were inviting, Seth's association with Newel and Doren had stripped away some of the satyrs' mystique. He was more curious to interact with the creatures he had never seen.

He sidled up to the gathering of dryads. There were about twenty of the slender ladies, not one of them shorter than six feet. Several had the bronze skin of Native Americans. Some were pale, others ruddy. They all had leaves and twigs twined in their long tresses.

"You've got the right idea, brother," said a voice in his ear. Startled, Seth turned and found Verl beside him, gawking at the dryads. "The hamas are girls—these are women."

"I'm not after a girlfriend," Seth assured him.

Verl smiled wolfishly and winked. "Right, none of us are, we're well-traveled gentlemen, above all that. Look, if you need backup, just give me the signal." He nudged Seth toward the regal women. "Save the redhead for me."

The two redheads Seth could see were at least a head taller than Verl. Having the love-starved satyr at his side made him suddenly self-conscious. The women were not only lovely—they were intimidating in their numbers and their uncommon height. He backed away sheepishly.

"No, Seth, no!" Verl panicked, falling back with him. "Don't waffle now. You were there! The black one on the left was giving you the eye. Do you need an icebreaker?"

"You got me flustered," Seth muttered, continuing his retreat. "I just wanted to meet a dryad."

Verl shook his head knowingly and clapped him on the back. "Don't we all?"

Seth shrugged away from him. "I need some alone time."

Verl lifted his hands. "The man needs some space. I can relate. Want me to run interference for you, keep away the hangers-on?"

Seth stared at the satyr, uncertain what he meant. "I guess."

"Consider it done," Verl said. "Tell me, how did you meet Newel and Doren?"

"I was accidentally stealing stew from an ogress. Why?"

“Why, he asks. Are you pulling my leg? Newel and Doren are only the coolest satyrs in all of Fablehaven! Those guys can land babes with a wink at fifty yards!”

Seth was beginning to grasp that Verl was the satyr equivalent of a nerd. If he wanted to get away, it would require some finesse. “Hey, Verl, I just caught the redhead staring at you.”

Verl blanched. “No.”

Seth tried to keep his face composed. “Absolutely. Now she’s whispering to her friend. Her eyes are still on you.”

Verl smoothed a hand over his hair. “What’s she doing now?”

“I almost don’t know how to describe it. She’s smoldering at you, Verl. You should go talk to her.”

“Me?” he squeaked. “No, no, not yet, I better let this simmer for a while.”

“Verl, this is your moment. The timing will never be better.”

“I hear you, Seth, but honestly, I don’t feel right about horning in on your territory. I’m no claim jumper.” He raised a fist. “Good hunting.”

Seth watched Verl scamper hastily away, then set his eyes on the centaurs. They had not moved since Seth had spotted them. Both were men from the waist up, astonishingly broad and muscular, with brooding expressions. One had the body of a silver horse; the other was chocolate brown.

After the dryads, the surly centaurs suddenly seemed much less intimidating.

Seth started toward them. They watched him approach, so he kept his eyes lowered most of the way. There was no denying it—these were the most impressive creatures within view.

As he drew near, Seth looked up. They glowered down at him. Seth folded his arms and glanced over his shoulder, trying to act jaded and casual. “These idiotic satyrs are driving me nuts.”

The centaurs regarded him without comment.

“I mean, a guy can hardly find any peace to process all the recent trouble around here. And to dissect the important issues. You know?”

“Are you making sport of us, young human?” asked the silver centaur in a melodious baritone.

Seth decided to break character. "I just wanted to meet you two."

"We don't commonly socialize," said the silver centaur.

"We're all stuck here," Seth replied. "Might as well get acquainted."

The centaurs considered him grimly. "Our names are difficult to pronounce in your language," said the brown centaur, his voice deeper and gruffer than the other's. "Mine translates as Broadhoof."

"Call me Cloudwing," the other said.

"I'm Seth. My grandfather is the caretaker."

"He needs more practice taking care of things," Broadhoof scoffed.

"He's saved Fablehaven before," Seth countered. "Give him time."

"No mortal is fit for such a task," Cloudwing asserted.

Seth batted at a fly. "I hope you're wrong. I haven't noticed many centaurs around here."

Cloudwing stretched his arms, triceps bulging. "Most of our kind assembled at a different refuge."

"The ring of stones?" Seth asked.

"You know of Grunhold?" Broadhoof sounded surprised.

"Not the name. I just heard there was another place at Fablehaven that repelled dark creatures."

"We belong there, with our kind," Broadhoof said.

"Why not make a run for it?" Seth asked.

Cloudwing stamped a hoof. "Grunhold is far from here. Considering how the darkness has spread, it would be irresponsible to attempt the journey."

"Have any of your kind been contaminated?" Seth asked.

Broadhoof scowled. "Some. Two who were scouting with us were changed and chased us here."

"Not that any portion of Fablehaven will serve as a refuge much longer," Cloudwing said. "I question whether any magic can indefinitely withstand such pervasive darkness."

"We have introduced ourselves," Broadhoof declared. "If you will excuse us, young human, we prefer conversing in our own tongue."

"Okay, good to meet you," Seth said with a small wave.

The centaurs gave no response, nor did they proceed to speak with each other. Seth walked away, disappointed not to hear what their language sounded like, certain their stern eyes were boring into his back. Doren was right. Centaurs were jerks.

* * *

Kendra gazed down at the framed sepia photograph. Even with old-fashioned hair and a heavy mustache, Patton had been a strikingly handsome man. He was not smiling, but something in his expression screamed playful cockiness. Of course, her perception might be tainted by her having read so many entries in his journals.

Grandpa walked beside her onto the little pier that projected from the base of one of the gazebos. On one side of the pier floated the boathouse Patton had constructed. The pond was basically smooth. She saw no sign of the naiads. Her gaze wandered to the island at the center of the pond, where the tiny shrine to the Fairy Queen lay hidden among the shrubs.

“I think I’ll also ask Lena if we can get the bowl back,” Kendra said.

“The bowl from the shrine?” Grandpa asked.

“I was talking to a fairy earlier this summer, Shiara, who told me the naiads claimed the bowl as a trophy.”

Grandpa frowned. “They guard the shrine. I assumed that trusting the bowl to their care would be the best way to ensure it was returned, since treading on the island is forbidden.”

“Shiara said I wouldn’t have been punished for personally returning it. Her words felt true. I was thinking, if I could get the bowl—”

“—maybe you could use it as an excuse to safely gain access to the island and approach the Fairy Queen about the plague. The odds for success aren’t terrific, but we can at least inquire about the bowl.”

“Right,” Kendra said. She strode down the pier, glancing back when Grandpa did not accompany her.

“I’ll hang back and let you call to Lena,” Grandpa said. “I had no luck last time.”

Kendra walked to the end of the quay, stopping a few feet from the edge. She knew not to get near enough to the water for the naiads to grab hold of her. “Lena, it’s Kendra! We need to talk.”

“Look who blew in with the homeless land-plodders,” said a snide female voice from below the water.

“I thought that puppet would have strangled her by now,” responded a second speaker.

Kendra scowled. Upon one of her previous visits to the pond, the naiads had released Mendigo. Still under orders from Muriel the witch, the limberjack had snatched Kendra and taken her to the hill where the Forgotten Chapel once stood.

“You might as well summon Lena,” Kendra stated. “I brought her a present she’ll want to see.”

“You may as well hobble away on your clumsy stilts,” admonished a third voice. “Lena wants nothing to do with ground-stalkers.”

Kendra raised her voice even more. “Lena, I brought a picture of your favorite land-plodder. A photograph of Patton.”

“Go dig a hole and lie in it,” hissed the first voice with a hint of desperation. “Even a dull-witted air-gulper should recognize when her company is undesired.”

“Grow old and die,” spat another naiad.

“Kendra, wait!” called a familiar voice, dreamy and musical. Lena drifted into view, her upturned face just below the surface of the water. She looked even younger than the last time Kendra had seen her. Not a trace of gray remained in her black hair.

“Lena,” Kendra said, “we need your help.”

Lena regarded Kendra with her dark, almond-shaped eyes. “You mentioned a photograph.”

“Patton looks very handsome in it.”

“What would Lena care about some dry old picture?” squealed a voice. Other naiads tittered.

“What do you need?” Lena inquired sedately.

“I have good reason to believe Patton brought a second artifact to Fablehaven. I’m talking about the serious artifacts, the ones the Society wants. Do you know anything about it?”

Lena stared at Kendra. “I remember. Patton made me pledge not to share the secret unless it was absolutely necessary. That man was so funny about his mysteries. As if any of it really mattered.”

“Lena, we absolutely need to locate the artifact. Fablehaven is on the brink of collapse.”

“Again? Do you hope to trade the photograph for information about the artifact? Kendra, the water would ruin it.”

“Not the photo itself,” Kendra said. “Just a peek. How long has it been since you’ve seen his face?”

For an instant, Lena looked wounded, but her serenity returned almost immediately. “Don’t you see that finding the artifact is irrelevant? Everything up there ends. Everything is fleeting, illusory, temporary. All you can show me is a flat image of my beloved, a lifeless memory. The real man is gone. As you will be also.”

“If it truly doesn’t matter, Lena,” Grandpa said from farther back on the pier, “why not tell us? The information means nothing to you, but here, now, for the short time we live and breathe, it matters to us.”

“The old one is yapping now,” complained an unseen naiad.

“Don’t answer him, Lena,” encouraged a second voice. “Wait him out. He’ll be dead before you know it.”

Several voices giggled.

“Have you forgotten our friendship, Lena?” Grandpa asked.

“Please tell us,” Kendra said. “For Patton.” She held up the picture.

Lena’s eyes widened. Her face broke the surface of the water and she mouthed Patton’s name.

“Don’t make us drag you under,” warned a voice.

“Touch me and so help me I’ll abandon you,” Lena murmured, entranced by the image Kendra held.

Lena’s gaze shifted to Kendra. “All right, Kendra. Perhaps this is what he would have wanted. He hid the artifact in the old manor.”

“Where in the manor?”

“It will be hard to find. Go to the northernmost room on the third floor. The safe with the artifact inside appears every Monday at noon for one minute.”

“Does the safe have a key?”

“A combination: right twice to 33, left once to 22, then right to 31.”

Kendra glanced back at Grandpa. He was jotting down the numbers. “Got that?” she asked.

“33–22–31,” he said, giving Lena a funny look.

His former housekeeper averted her eyes shyly.

“I have another question,” Kendra asked. “What did Kurisock do to Patton’s uncle?”

“I don’t know,” Lena said. “Patton never shared that story. It plainly pained him, so I never pressed. He meant to tell me, I think, in his later years. He repeatedly told me I would hear the tale one day.”

“So you know nothing about Kurisock?” Kendra asked.

“Only that he is a demon on this preserve. And he may have been somehow affiliated with the apparition who usurped the manor.”

“What apparition?” Kendra asked.

“It happened before my fall to mortality. Like I said, I never learned the details. The apparition who destroyed Marshal no doubt still resides in the manor. Patton hid the artifact there because it would be well guarded.”

“Marshal was Patton’s uncle?”

“Marshal Burgess.”

“One last thing. There is a silver bowl. The Fairy Queen gave it to me.”

Lena nodded. “Forget the bowl. You cast it into the pond, and we have claimed it.”

“I need it back,” Kendra said. There was a chorus of hearty laughter from the other naiads. “It’s the key for me to safely approach the Fairy Queen again. She may be our only hope of overcoming the plague.”

“Come over to the edge and I’ll hand it to you,” taunted an unseen naiad. Several other voices tittered.

“The bowl is their most treasured keepsake,” Lena said. “They, we, will never relinquish it. I had best go. My sisters become skittish when I spend too much time near the surface.”

Kendra felt tears well in her eyes. “Are you happy, Lena?”

“Happy enough. My sisters have striven to rehabilitate me. The glimpse of Patton was thoughtful, although it made old wounds ache. For the kindness of the gesture, I told you what you wanted. Enjoy what time you have.”

Lena sank into the pond. Kendra stared after her, but the pond was deep, and Lena was soon out of sight.

Grandpa approached behind Kendra, placing his hands on her shoulders. "Well done, Kendra. Very well done."

"The withered one grabbed the obnoxious one," observed a voice.

"Push her in!" cried another.

"Let's get away from here," Kendra said.



Preparations

The largest of the three tents Dale had brought from the house was the biggest privately owned tent Seth had ever seen. The square monstrosity had broad purple and yellow stripes and a steep, curving roof that sloped up to a high central pole with a banner at the pinnacle. The flap over the wide entrance was propped on rods to form a sizable awning. The smaller tents were also fairly roomy, but their dimensions and coloring were less eccentric.

Seth sat in the entrance of the tent where he, Warren, and Dale would be staying. Grandma and Grandpa were sharing the big one. And Kendra got her own, which Seth did not like, but sadly he could think of no reasonable arguments why the arrangements should be otherwise. He had resolved that if the weather stayed pleasant, he would go sleep in one of the gazebos.

A barefooted dryad approached Grandpa's tent. Her long, auburn hair hung past her waist, and her robes evoked memories of bright autumn leaves. She crouched to duck through the entrance. How tall did that make her? Seven feet? More?

Seth had seen several interesting characters come and go from Grandpa's tent over the past hour. But when he had sought admittance, Grandma had shooed him away, promising that he would soon be part of the conversation.

A red fairy with wings like flower petals shot through the air. Seth could not tell whether she had emerged from Grandpa's tent or had come whizzing over the top from behind. She hovered for a moment not far from Seth before streaking out of view.

Absently uprooting handfuls of grass, Seth resolved not to be excluded any longer. Clearly Grandpa and Grandma preferred to gather news and opinions in a way that would allow them to regulate the information, sharing only those facts and ideas deemed suitable for his frail brain. But hearing the unedited details from the actual creatures was half the fun, and whether his grandparents believed it or not, Seth knew he was mature enough to handle anything they could hear. Besides, was it his fault that the walls of a tent were so thin?

He rose and strolled to the back of the yellow and purple tent, sitting in the shade on the lawn with his back to the fabric wall. Straining to listen, he tried to look idle and bored. He heard only the clamor of the satyrs playing on the boardwalk.

"You won't hear anything," Warren said, coming around the side of the tent.

Seth hopped guiltily to his feet. "I just wanted to relax in the shade."

"The tent is magically soundproof—a fact you might have known if you'd helped us set it up."

"I'm sorry, I was—"

Warren held up a hand. "If our roles were reversed, I would have been anxious to meet all the creatures here too. Don't worry, I would have come and nabbed you had we really needed your help. Have you enjoyed yourself?"

"The centaurs weren't very nice," Seth said.

"It looked like they spoke to you. That alone is a feat."

"What's with them?"

"In a word, arrogance. They see themselves as the apex of all creation. All else lies beneath their notice."

"Kind of like fairies," Seth said.

"Yes and no. Fairies are vain, and find most of our affairs boring, but whatever they pretend, they care what we think of them. Centaurs neither seek nor appreciate our admiration—if anything, they take it for granted.

Unlike fairies, centaurs sincerely perceive all other creatures as inherently lower than themselves.”

“They sound like my math teacher,” Seth said.

Warren grinned.

Seth noticed some dark fairies floating just beyond the nearest portion of the hedge wall. “This plague got to the centaurs just like it affected everyone else.”

“Had it not, I doubt they would display any interest,” Warren said. “In fairness, they have some excuse for their haughtiness. Centaurs tend to be brilliant thinkers, gifted artisans, and formidable warriors. Pride itself is their greatest flaw.”

“Seth!” Grandma called from the other side of the tent. “Dale! Warren! Kendra! Come counsel with us.”

“There you go,” Warren said, sounding relieved himself. “The wait is over.”

Part of Seth wondered if Warren had wandered to the back of the tent in order to quietly verify whether it was actually as soundproof as purported. They walked around to the front of the tent, passing the towering dryad with the autumnal robes and an aged satyr with a white goatee and deep laugh lines. Kendra unzipped her tent and came outside. Dale jogged toward them from the direction of the dwarf encampment. Grandma and Grandpa waited at the entrance of the tent and welcomed them inside. Both Stan and Ruth looked tired and careworn.

The tent was so large that Seth half expected to find it furnished, but there were only a pair of rolled sleeping bags in the corner and some gear. They all sat on the floor, which was quite comfortable, thanks to the springy turf underneath. The sunlight filtering through the yellow and purple fabric gave the room an odd cast.

“I have a question,” Kendra said. “If the evil brownies stole the register, can’t they just change the rules and let dark creatures come in here?”

“Most of the boundaries and borders of Fablehaven are fixed by the treaty that established the preserve and are therefore unchangeable while the treaty stands,” Grandma explained. “The register simply allowed us to regulate access to the preserve as a whole and to dictate which creatures could cross the barriers guarding our home. The magical barriers protecting

this area are different from most of the boundaries at Fablehaven. Most boundaries are established to limit access by particular types of creature—there are certain sectors where fairies are allowed, and satyrs, and fog giants, and so forth. Some creatures are granted more area to roam than others, based on how potentially harmful they are to others. Since most of the boundaries are divided according to species, when the light creatures started turning dark, they retained access to the same areas.”

“But the border around the pond and this field functions according to affiliation with light or darkness,” Grandpa said. “Once a creature starts drawing more upon darkness than light, that creature can no longer enter here.”

“How long will this place hold off the darkness?” Seth asked.

“We wish we knew,” Grandma said. “Perhaps for a good while. Perhaps for another hour. We can be certain only that our backs are to the wall. We’re almost out of options. If we fail to take effective action, the preserve will soon fall.”

“I conferred with my most trustworthy contacts from among the creatures gathered here,” Grandpa said, his demeanor becoming more official, “in an effort to gauge the level of support we could expect from the various races. I traded words with at least one delegate from most of them, excluding the brownies and the centaurs. As a whole, the creatures here feel sufficiently cornered and intimidated by this plague that I believe we can count on considerable assistance as needed.”

“But we did not want any of them here while we discuss strategy,” Grandma said. “We withheld certain key information. If they should become contaminated, most, if not all, would utterly betray us.”

“Why do the creatures all change so completely?” Kendra asked. “Seth said that Coulter and Tanu kept helping us after they transformed.”

“You ask a difficult question,” Grandpa said. “The short answer is that as nonmagical, mortal beings, humans are affected differently by the plague. The rest requires speculation. For the most part, unapologetically, magical creatures are what they are. They tend to be less self-aware than humans, relying more on instinct. We humans are conflicted beings. Our beliefs don’t always harmonize with our instincts, and our behavior doesn’t always reflect our beliefs. We constantly struggle with right and wrong. We wage war between the person we are and the person we hope to become.

We have a lot of practice wrestling with ourselves. As a result, compared to magical creatures, we humans are much more able to suppress our natural inclinations in order to deliberately choose our identities.”

“I don’t get it,” Seth said.

“Each human being has significant potential for light *and* darkness,” Grandpa continued. “Over a lifetime, we get a lot of practice leaning toward one or the other. Having made different choices, a renowned hero could have been a wretched villain. My guess is that when Coulter and Tanu were transformed, their minds resisted the darkness in a way most magical creatures can’t imagine.”

“I still don’t see how somebody nice like Newel could instantly become so evil,” Seth said.

Grandpa held up a finger. “I don’t view most magical creatures as good or evil. What they are largely governs how they act. In order to be good, you must recognize the difference between right and wrong and strive to choose the right. To be truly evil you must do the contrary. Being good or evil is a choice.

“Instead, the creatures of Fablehaven are light or dark. Some are inherently builders, some are nurturers, some are playful. Some are inherently destroyers, some are deceivers, some crave power. Some love light, some love darkness. But change their nature, and without much resistance, their identities follow. Like a fairy becoming an imp, or an imp regaining her fairyhood.” Grandpa looked at Grandma. “Am I waxing too philosophical?”

“A little,” she said.

“Questions that start with ‘why’ are the toughest to answer,” Dale said. “You end up guessing more than knowing.”

“I think I get what you mean,” Kendra said. “A demon like Bahumat automatically hates and destroys because he sees no other option. He isn’t questioning his actions or resisting a conscience. Someone like Muriel, who deliberately chose to serve darkness, is more evil.”

“So Newel acted differently because he isn’t Newel anymore,” Seth concluded. “The plague totally overwhelmed him. He’s something else.”

“That’s the basic idea,” Grandpa said.

Warren sighed. “If a starving bear ate my family, even though he may have had no wicked intentions, even though he was just being a bear, his

nature has made him a menace, and I'm going to shoot him." He sounded exasperated by the conversation.

"The bear would have to be stopped," Grandma agreed. "Stan is just making the distinction that you wouldn't blame the bear the same way you would blame a responsible person."

"I get the distinction," Warren said. "I have a different opinion about magical creatures. I can think of many creatures who have chosen to carry out good or evil actions, regardless of their nature. I hold dark creatures more accountable for what they are and what they do than Stan does."

"As is your right," Grandpa said. "The issue is largely academic, although some who share your view would use it as an excuse to eradicate all dark creatures, a notion I find detestable. I'll agree that creatures of light can be deadly—consider the naiads, who drown the innocent for sport. The Fairy Queen herself strikes down those who tread near her shrine uninvited. And creatures of darkness can be helpful—look at Graulas, supplying key information, or the goblins who reliably patrol our dungeon."

"This fascinating debate aside," Grandma said testily, "the matter at hand is to halt the plague at any cost. We're on the brink of destruction."

Everyone nodded.

Straightening his shirt, looking somewhat chagrined, Grandpa shifted gears. "Lena didn't know much more about Kurisock, except to confirm that he was involved with the fiend who now controls the old manor. But she was able to tell us much about the second artifact." He related the details about the location of the safe, the time it would appear, and the combination.

"Any guess which artifact it is?" Warren asked.

"She didn't say," Kendra answered.

"The artifact could wield power over space or time," Grandma said. "It could enhance vision. Or it could bestow immortality. Those are supposedly the powers of the four that remain unclaimed."

"Do you think the artifact might help us reverse the plague?" Seth asked.

"We can hope," Grandpa said. "For now, recovering it is the most pressing task. On top of claiming the artifact, risking an excursion to the manor would also serve as useful reconnaissance. Anything we can

discover about Kurisock and those associated with him could help us unravel the mystery of the plague.”

Dale cleared his throat. “Not to gainsay you, Stan, but considering what we know about the old manor, the odds may not be good that any of us will return.”

“We know that a dreaded presence haunts the property there,” Grandpa admitted. “But those rumors were started by Patton, who had good reason to scare people away.”

“Because he hid the artifact there,” Kendra said.

“Furthermore,” Grandpa continued, “we know of somebody who unwittingly entered the manor and survived to tell the tale.”

All eyes turned to Seth. “I guess I did. I hadn’t drunk milk yet that day. I had just escaped from Olloch, so I couldn’t see what anything actually was. In fact, maybe that’s the only reason I got out of there at all.”

“I’ve wondered the same thing,” Grandma said.

“Roaming the preserve without consuming milk has advantages and drawbacks,” Grandpa said. “There is evidence that if you are unable to perceive magical creatures, they must exert greater effort in order to perceive you. In addition, many of the dark creatures feed on fear. If you fail to recognize them for what they are, the fear is diminished, and their motivation to inflict harm is reduced.”

“But just because you can’t see magical creatures doesn’t mean they aren’t there,” Dale interjected. “Wandering the preserve without milk is a fine way to stroll blissfully into a death trap.”

“Which is the downside,” Grandpa affirmed.

Grandma leaned forward eagerly. “But if we know where we’re going, and have an idea what awaits us, and we stick to the path on the way there and back, not drinking the milk may give us the advantage we need to sneak past the apparition and reach the safe. Seth, how long were you in the manor before the whirlwind pursued you?”

“Several minutes,” Seth said. “Enough time to climb to the top floor, step out onto the roof, get my bearings, come back into the room, and start down the hall.”

“Forgoing the milk sounds like our best option,” Warren said. “You say the safe will appear tomorrow?”

“At noon,” Grandpa said. “And then not for another week. We can’t afford to wait.”

“What about daylight saving time?” Grandma asked. “This time of year, we recognize noon standard time as one o’clock.”

“With an apparition guarding the safe, timing will be essential,” Grandpa said. “When did daylight saving time go into effect?”

“Around World War I,” Grandma said. “Probably after the safe was created.”

“Let’s go by standard time, then, and hope the safe isn’t as smart as my cell phone, automatically updating itself,” Grandpa said. “We want to reach that room at one o’clock tomorrow afternoon.”

“Dale and I can tackle this,” Warren offered.

“I should come,” Seth said. “If I’m there, Coulter and Tanu can scout for us.”

“They can’t be out under the sun,” Grandpa reminded him. “And we have to do this around midday. In fact, in the interest of caution, since they can’t help, don’t mention any of this to them.”

“Maybe tomorrow will be cloudy,” Seth tried. “Besides, I’m the only one who has been inside the manor before. I know where Lena was talking about. And what if the apparition uses magical fear? I may be the only one of us not paralyzed!”

“We’ll consider your courageous offer,” Grandpa said.

“I don’t see how we’ll succeed without incurring some losses,” Grandma said, her brow scrunched. “Too much is riding on this for us to fail. We need multiple people going after the safe from multiple directions. Some of us will fall, but others are bound to get through.”

“I agree,” Grandpa said. “Dale, Warren, Ruth, and I should combine in a united offensive.”

“And me,” Seth insisted.

“I could come too,” Kendra offered.

“Your eyes can’t be closed to magical creatures,” Grandpa reminded Kendra. “Your ability to see and be seen might inadvertently give us away.”

“It might be handy to have somebody along who can tell what is actually happening,” Kendra maintained.

“We’ll bring walrus butter,” Warren said. “We’ll unveil our eyes if the need arises.”

“So the five of us,” Seth said as if the matter were decided. “Plus Hugo.”

“Hugo, yes,” Grandpa said. “Five, I’m not so sure.”

“I’ll even hang back if you want,” Seth proposed. “I’ll only go inside if it makes sense. Otherwise I’ll retreat. Think about it. If this fails, we’re all doomed anyhow. I might as well be there to help it succeed.”

“He makes a good case,” Warren conceded. “And we’ll be glad to have him if fear overcomes us. We know such fear exists.”

“All right,” Grandpa said. “You can join us, Seth. But not Kendra. Nothing personal, dear. Your ability to see really could spoil our one possible advantage.”

“Do we want help from any of the other creatures?” Seth asked.

“I doubt they could enter the manor,” Grandma said.

“But they could create a diversion,” Warren suggested. “Draw attention elsewhere. Many dark creatures await us beyond the hedge.”

“Good thinking,” Grandpa said, becoming animated. “We could send out several parties in different directions. Fairies and satyrs and dryads.”

“Ideally centaurs,” Grandma added.

“Good luck,” Dale harrumphed.

“Seth spoke with them earlier today,” Warren said. “Perhaps if we tickled their pride.”

“Maybe coming from the children, if they sounded sufficiently desperate,” Grandpa mused. “Regardless, I’ll speak with representatives from the other creatures here. We’ll drum up enough help to cause a commotion tomorrow. Remember, no walrus butter in the morning. Tomorrow the pond should appear encompassed by butterflies, goats, groundhogs, and deer.”

“What about the golden owls?” Kendra asked. “The ones with faces?”

“The astrids?” Grandma said. “Little is known about them. They rarely acknowledge other creatures.”

“I’ll prepare the cart,” Dale said. “If we’re all blind and covered, Hugo might be able to smuggle us to the manor unnoticed.”

“Won’t they go after Hugo?” Seth asked.

“A golem is not an easy target,” Grandma said. “Many potential enemies may not care to bother him if he appears to be alone.”

Grandpa clapped his hands together and rubbed them briskly. “Time is short. Let’s start making the arrangements.”

* * *

The sun was setting as Kendra and Seth trudged across an empty expanse of lawn toward the centaurs. The golden glow highlighted the bloated muscles of their chests, shoulders, and arms as the pair stood gazing stoically toward the pond.

“I don’t think you should come,” Kendra hissed. “You have too much of a temper. We need to sincerely beg.”

“How dumb do you think I am?” Seth replied. “Anyone can beg!”

Kendra gave him a dubious glance. “Can you humbly plead for a favor from a jerk who rubs your nose in it?”

He hesitated. “Of course.”

“You better not blow this,” Kendra warned, lowering her voice to a whisper. “Remember, by groveling, we’re manipulating them. Pride is their weakness, and we’re exploiting that in order to get what we need. They may gloat, but if they do what we ask, we’re the ones in charge.”

“And if they turn us down flat?” Seth asked.

“We’ll have tried,” Kendra said simply. “And we’ll leave it at that. We can’t afford extra problems, not with so much riding on tomorrow. Can you behave?”

“I will,” he said, sounding more certain than he had earlier.

“Follow my lead,” Kendra said.

“Let me introduce you first.”

As they approached, the centaurs did not watch them. When Kendra and Seth finally stood directly before them, the centaurs kept their solemn eyes steadily fixed upon some inscrutable subject of interest elsewhere.

“Broadhoof, Cloudwing, this is my sister, Kendra,” Seth said. “She wanted to meet you.”

Cloudwing glanced down at them. Broadhoof did not.

“We come to you on an urgent errand,” Kendra said.

Cloudwing regarded her momentarily. The silver fur on his quarters twitched. “We already declined the invitation to counsel with your grandsire.”

“This isn’t a repeated invitation,” Kendra said. “We’ve devised a plan to recover an item that may help reverse the plague. Many of the other creatures here have offered their help, but without you, we’re leaderless.”

Now both of the centaurs regarded her.

Kendra continued. “We need to divert the attention of the darkened creatures watching this area so my grandpa and a few others can slip away to pursue the item. None of the other creatures have the speed or ability to lead the charge through the main gap in the hedge.”

“Only tainted centaurs could truly challenge us,” Cloudwing considered, eyes on Broadhoof.

“We could outdistance the satiric sentries at will,” Broadhoof said.

“How do we know this scheme warrants our leadership?” Cloudwing asked.

Kendra faltered, glancing at Seth.

“My grandpa is willing to risk his life, and the lives of his family, to carry out the plan,” Seth said. “We can’t guarantee it will work, but at least it gives us all a chance.”

“Without your help, we’ll never know,” Kendra exaggerated. “Please.”

“We need you,” Seth said. “If the plan works, you’ll have rescued Fablehaven from my grandfather’s incompetent management.” He glanced at Kendra for approval.

The centaurs leaned together, conferring inaudibly.

“Your lack of leadership is indeed a problem,” Broadhoof pronounced. “But Cloudwing and I do not perceive it as our problem. We must decline.”

“What?” Seth cried. “Are you serious? Then I’m glad half the preserve is here to watch who stood idly by when Fablehaven was endangered.”

Kendra glared at her brother.

“We care little for the fate of satyrs and humans, and less for their reactions to our indifference,” Cloudwing stated.

“Thanks anyhow,” Kendra said, grabbing Seth’s arm to pull him away. He shook free of her.

“Fine,” Seth spat. “But I’ll be going out there tomorrow. Good luck ignoring the fact that you don’t even have the courage of a human boy.”

The centaurs stiffened.

“Am I deceived, or did the whelp label us cowards?” Cloudwing asked in a dangerous tone. “Our verdict not to lead your diversion had nothing to do with fearfulness. We recognized the activity as futile.”

Broadhoof fixed Seth with a fierce stare. “Surely the human youth misspoke.”

Seth folded his arms and stared back silently.

“If he means to stand by his insult,” Broadhoof said forebodingly, “I will demand immediate satisfaction. No one, great or small, tramples my honor.”

“You mean a duel?” Seth asked incredulously. “You’re going to prove your courage by beating up a kid?”

“He raises a valid concern,” Cloudwing said, laying a hand on Broadhoof’s shoulder. “Consorting with hogs will only leave us soiled.”

“The two of you are dead to us,” Broadhoof declared. “Depart.”

Kendra tried to drag Seth away, but he was too strong.

“All muscle and no backbone,” Seth snarled. “Let’s go find some satyrs to lead us. Or maybe a dwarf. Leave the frightened ponies to pretend they have honor.”

Kendra wanted to strangle her brother.

“We overlooked your insult out of pity,” Broadhoof fumed. “Yet you persist?”

“I thought I was dead,” Seth said. “Keep it straight, you nag.”

Broadhoof balled his fists, huge muscles bunching in his forearms. Veins stood out in his beefy neck. “Very well. Tomorrow at sunrise, you and I will resolve the issue of my honor.”

“No we won’t,” Seth said. “I don’t fight with mules. The fleas are my biggest concern. That, and the actual problems that need solving. You’re welcome to murder me in my tent.”

“Broadhoof is within his rights to challenge you to a duel after a deliberate insult,” Cloudwing asserted. “I stand as a witness of the exchange.” He extended a hand, indicating the surrounding area.

“Furthermore, this place is a refuge for creatures of light. As a human, you

are a trespasser here. Like the naiads in the pond, Broadhoof could slay you at will with utter impunity.”

Kendra felt her stomach drop. Seth looked shaken.

“Which would prove nothing about your honor,” Seth said, his voice almost steady. “If you care about honor, lead the diversion tomorrow.”

The centaurs put their heads together and spoke quietly. After a moment they parted.

“Seth Sorenson,” Broadhoof intoned weightily. “Never in my long years have I been so openly affronted. Your words are unforgivable. And yet I am not ignorant to the reality that they were spoken in a misguided ploy to gain my assistance, in counterpoint to the awkward flattery you attempted at first. For the insolence of denying my challenge, I should strike you down where you stand. But in acknowledgment of the desperate valor behind your words, I will stay my hand for the moment, and forget this conversation ever occurred if you drop to your knees, beg my forgiveness, claim insanity, and declare yourself a craven coward.”

Seth hesitated. Kendra elbowed him. He shook his head. “No. I won’t do that. If I did, I really would be a coward. All I take back is saying my grandfather mismanaged the preserve. You’re right that we were pretending to flatter you.”

With a ring of metal, Broadhoof unsheathed an enormous sword. Kendra had not previously noticed the scabbard hanging at his side. The centaur held the blade aloft.

“This brings me no pleasure,” Broadhoof growled broodingly.

“I have a better idea,” Seth said. “If you lead the diversion tomorrow, and I come back alive, I’ll duel with you. Then you can satisfy your honor the right way.”

Kendra thought the centaur appeared relieved. He spoke briefly with Cloudwing.

“Very well,” Broadhoof said. “You have accomplished your aim, though not without a price. Tomorrow we will spearhead your diversion. The day afterward, at dawn, we settle the matter of your impudence.”

Kendra seized Seth’s hand. This time he allowed her to conduct him away. She waited to speak until they were far from the centaurs. “What’s the matter with you?” It required all of her control to resist screaming the words.

“I got them to help us,” Seth said.

“You knew they were arrogant, you knew they might not help, but you insisted on insulting them! Not only is getting yourself killed a bad idea, it hurts our chances of saving Fablehaven!”

“But I’m not dead,” he said, patting his torso as if shocked to find himself intact.

“You should be. And you probably will be.”

“Not for two days.”

“Don’t speak so soon. We haven’t told Grandma and Grandpa what happened yet.”

“Don’t tell them,” Seth pleaded, suddenly desperate. “Things are bad enough. I’ll do whatever you want, just don’t tell.”

Kendra threw up her hands. “Now you beg.”

“If you tell, they won’t let me go to the manor, but they’ll need me. Also, they’ll worry needlessly. They’ll lose focus and make mistakes. Listen. You can tell them eventually. You can make me look as stupid as you want. Just wait until after we raid the manor.”

The reasoning behind his plea made some sense. “All right,” Kendra consented. “I’ll wait until tomorrow afternoon.”

His grin tempted her to change her mind.



The Old Manor

Alone, Kendra leaned against the smooth gazebo railing watching dozens of creatures take up positions around the field. Dryads and hamadryads clustered around indentations where the hedge was penetrable. Doren led a band of satyrs to the main gap by the path. Groups of fairies patrolled the air in glittering formations. Broadhoof and Cloudwing took up positions in the center of the field near Hugo and the cart.

Not all of the creatures were participating. The majority of the fairies flitted about the trellises of the boardwalk, playing among the blossoms. The dwarfs had unanimously taken refuge in their tents, having complained to Grandpa that running was not their strong suit. The more animal-like creatures had gone into hiding. Many satyrs and nymphs observed the proceedings from other gazebos.

Even in the shade, the midday heat was uncomfortable. Kendra limply fanned herself with one hand. She could not see Seth, Grandma, Warren, or Dale. They had collapsed a tent, and lay hidden beneath it in the bed of the cart. Grandpa stood in the front of the cart, supervising the final preparations, hands on his hips.

Kendra had kept her word and refrained from telling anyone about Seth's agreement with Broadhoof. Grandma and Grandpa had been overjoyed to hear that the centaurs would assist with the diversion. Kendra had done her best to appear equally pleased.

Grandpa raised a handkerchief in the air, waved it briefly, and then let it fall. As the silky square fluttered to the ground, Cloudwing reared, equine muscles churning beneath his silver fur. He clutched a huge bow in one hand, and across his broad back hung a quiver of arrows the size of javelins. Broadhoof unsheathed his tremendous sword with a flourish, the burnished blade catching the sunlight.

Together the centaurs raced across the grass toward the gap in the hedge, blurred hooves flinging up tufts of turf, galloping with such fluid speed that Kendra found herself breathless. Shoulder to shoulder they charged through the gap, stampeding over the dark satyrs who sought to impede their passage.

With a victorious shout, twenty satyrs detached themselves from the hedge at either side of the gap and followed the centaurs through, spreading out in all directions. A few hamadryads ran with them. While the satyrs were quick and nimble, the nymphs put them to shame, seeming more to fly than to run, effortlessly outdistancing any pursuers.

Kendra smiled to herself. No smitten satyr would ever chase down a hamadryad who did not wish to be caught!

Around the field, dryads and satyrs snuck through hidden openings in the hedge, often on hands and knees. Fairies flew over the hedge wall, angling skyward as their shadowy sisters gave chase. The satyrs watching from the boardwalk whistled, stamped, and shouted huzzahs. Many naiads surfaced, heads dripping, eyes wide as they observed the tumult.

Amid the commotion, Hugo charged forward, towing the cart. Grandpa had hidden himself under the tent with the others. Kendra held her breath as the hulking golem stormed through the gap in the hedge unmolested and the cart rumbled out of sight.

After the cart passed through the main gap, a few tall dryads followed, splitting off in different directions, their flowing robes and long hair trailing behind. Satyrs and hamadryads began returning under the hedge and through the gap. Some laughed; others appeared flustered.

Kendra glanced back at the naiads, their weedy hair glossed with slime, their wet faces surprisingly fragile and young for beings whose favorite pastime was drowning humans. Kendra locked eyes with one of them and waved. In response, they all hastily plunged under the water.

Over the next several minutes, more fairies, satyrs, and dryads returned. As they reentered the field, they were welcomed by embraces from friends. Most then turned to anxiously await the arrival of other loved ones.

More minutes passed, and arrivals grew sparse. Running hard, flanks lathered, the centaurs galloped through the gap, forcing a cluster of dark fairies to abandon their pursuit. Only two arrows remained in Cloudwing's quiver.

Less than a minute later, dodging and fighting several dark satyrs, Doren reappeared in the gap, leading a desperate knot of satyrs. Shoving opponents aside, a half dozen satyrs stumbled through the gap into the arms of friends.

Kendra saw a familiar figure standing at the threshold of the field. Verl, snowy fur matted with dirt, chest and shoulders marred by bites and scratches, strained to take a step forward. He had won through to the field, but his eyes widened with panic as an unseen barrier prevented his entry. Kendra saw his childish face begin to contort into a more goatlike countenance, watched his white fur begin to darken. Bleating black satyrs hauled him down from behind, piling on him. Moments later, when Verl arose, he had the head of a goat and fur as black as sable.

The satyrs and hamadryads withdrew from the gap. Kendra descended the gazebo steps and ran to Doren.

"Did they get away all right?" the satyr panted.

"Yes," Kendra said. "How awful about Verl."

"Nasty business," Doren agreed. "At least most of us made it back. The worst trouble came after a flock of dark fairies cornered one of the most powerful dryads. They changed her swiftly, and she went on to nab a bunch of us. I see the centaurs made it back." He nodded toward where Broadhoof and Cloudwing stood ringed by animated satyrs, grimly enduring the adulation.

"They were fast," Kendra said.

Doren nodded as he tried to wipe mud from his collarbone. "They can run. And they can fight. Cloudwing pinned a pair of dark satyrs to a tree with a single arrow. Broadhoof hurled the dark dryad into a ditch. Toward the end, a dark centaur showed up and forced them to retreat."

Broadhoof and Cloudwing trotted away from their admirers. Kendra gazed despairingly at the heavily muscled topography of Broadhoof's back. If Seth survived the escapade at the manor, the brawny centaur would be waiting. Kendra wondered whether her brother might be better off as a shadow.

* * *

Beneath the tent with four other bodies, Seth breathed hot, stale air. He closed his eyes and tried to focus on something other than his discomfort, imagining how refreshing it would feel to poke his head out and feel the wind rushing by as Hugo loped down the road. The day was hot and muggy, but nothing compared to the stifling atmosphere under the tent.

The morning had felt surreal for Seth, watching goats and deer roaming about the field, and groundhogs congregating in their camp by the pond. Grandpa had spent a good deal of time going over plans with a pair of horses and issuing commands to a strangely mobile pile of rocks.

Kendra had pointed out which goat was Doren, and had served as translator when they wished each other good luck. All Seth heard was baaing and bleating.

The entire scene around the pond looked so ridiculous that Seth had briefly wondered whether the milk simply made everyone crazy. But when the rock pile lifted him off his feet and gently set him in the cart, it was plain there was more much going on than his eyes could distinguish.

The cart jounced sharply, and Seth rapped his head against the side. Cradling his cranium, he wormed toward the center of the crowded cart, then rested his head on his folded arms, trying to relax as he inhaled the warm, stifling air.

For the first leg of the cart ride, he had been anxious, aware that dark creatures could fall upon them at any moment. But as the journey progressed, interference seemed less likely. The plan was apparently working. All they had to do was reach the manor without suffocating.

The uncomfortable tedium of the ride became Seth's chief concern. Lying virtually motionless, his body slick with sweat, he pictured his face over the vent of an air conditioner, the coolness washing over him. He imagined himself gulping down a tall glass of ice water, the glass so cold it hurt his hands, the water so frigid it made his teeth tingle.

He was stretched out beside Warren, and wanted to make conversation, or at least exchange a few whispered complaints, but he had been strictly admonished not to utter a word. He resolutely followed orders, holding still and keeping silent, even choking back coughs when the urge arose. Meanwhile, the cart rolled endlessly forward.

Seth slipped a hand into his pocket, fingering the dollop of walrus butter wrapped in plastic film. They each had a little, in case the time arrived when seeing magical creatures became preferable to deliberate blindness. He wished he could eat it simply for a sensation to divert his mind from his unfortunate surroundings. Why hadn't he brought candy? Or water? He lamented to think of his precious emergency kit sitting under his bed. How had he forgotten to bring it when he had gone down the trapped staircase? He had jelly beans in there!

The ride became more jarring, as if Hugo were dragging the cart over a giant washboard. Seth clenched his jaw to prevent his teeth from clacking. The stuttering vibrations made it difficult to think.

At last the cart came to an abrupt stop. Seth heard rustling as Grandpa peeked out.

"We're at the edge of the yard," Grandpa announced quietly. "As I feared, Hugo can go no farther. Out we go; I see no present threat."

Seth gratefully crawled out from under the tent, feeling validated that the others were at least as red-faced and drenched in sweat as he was. His clothes felt clingy and sticky, and although the air was not as fresh as he had hoped, it was still much preferable to the stuffiness in the cart.

Behind the cart stretched a weathered flagstone road, flanked by the remnants of old cabins and shacks. Many of the flagstones were out of place, and tall weeds thrived in the gaps. The uneven stone road explained the washboard feeling at the end of the ride. Seth had walked that road before—he should have guessed!

Ahead of them, the road doubled back on itself to form a looping driveway that granted access to an impressive manor. Compared to the timeworn road and the decrepit shelters bordering it, the manor was in excellent repair. The building rose three stories, with four stately pillars out front. Climbing plants had invaded the gray walls, and heavy green shutters shielded the windows.

Seth gaped at the manor, taking in a ghastly difference since his previous visit. Now, hundreds of slender black cords converged on the mansion from all directions, entering through the walls, a few of them fairly thick, most slender and hard to see. The shadowy cords snaked away from the estate in all directions, many disappearing into the ground, some winding through the surrounding vegetation.

“What’s with all the wires?” Seth asked.

“Wires?” Grandpa questioned.

“Ropes, strings, whatever,” Seth clarified. “They’re everywhere.”

The others regarded him with concern.

“You don’t see them?” Seth already knew the response.

“No wires,” Warren confirmed.

“I’ve noticed cords like this before,” Seth said. “Connected to the dark creatures. It looks like all the cords lead to the manor.”

Grandpa puckered his lips and exhaled noisily. “We’ve uncovered hints that the culprit was a creature who had somehow merged with Kurisock. And we had information that the apparition who haunts this property has some relation to the demon.”

“What could the creature be?” Warren asked.

“Anything,” Grandpa said. “When it merged with Kurisock, it became a new entity.”

“But if it merged with the demon, how can it be here?” Dale asked. “Kurisock must remain in his domain.”

Grandpa shrugged. “Best guess? Some sort of distant connection. Something like the dark cords that apparently unite the monster in the manor to the darkened creatures all over the preserve.”

“Do we still go after the artifact?” Warren asked.

“I see no alternative,” Grandpa said. “Fablehaven may not survive another week. This could be our only shot. Besides, we can’t plan to defeat whatever dwells here until we confirm what it is.”

“I agree,” Grandma said.

Dale and Warren nodded.

Grandpa glanced at his wristwatch. “We’d better get moving or the opportunity will pass us by.”

Leaving Hugo behind, Grandpa led them to the front steps of the manor. Seth remained on high alert, watching for suspicious animals, but saw no signs of life. No birds, no squirrels, no insects.

“Quiet,” Dale murmured suspiciously.

Grandpa raised his hand and twirled a finger, suggesting they do a lap around the manor. So near the building, Seth could not avoid touching some of the dark cords. He was relieved to find them as intangible as a shadow. As they progressed, Seth stayed ready for an attack at any instant, especially as they rounded each new corner, but they finished a complete circuit around the manor without encountering any interference. They identified a few windows low enough to grant them access, as well as a back door.

“Last time the front door was unlocked?” Grandpa whispered to Seth.

“Yes.”

“Ruth and I will enter through the front,” Grandpa said. “Warren will take the back door. Dale, choose a side window. Seth, you wait outside. Should we fail, unless there is a monumentally compelling reason to do otherwise, return immediately to Hugo and take word to your sister and the other creatures. If we become shadows ourselves, we’ll try to contact you. Remember, everyone, we want the northernmost room on the third floor.” He gestured to show which was the northern side of the manor. “Probably at the end of a hall. The combination is 33–22–31.” He checked his wristwatch. “We have about seven minutes.”

“What’s the go signal?” Warren asked.

“I’ll whistle,” Grandpa said, raising a pair of fingers to his lips.

“Let’s get this over with,” Dale said.

Warren and Dale jogged around the manor out of sight while Grandpa and Grandma mounted the steps. Grandpa tried the front door, found it unlocked, and stepped back, eyes on his watch. Seth’s hands were clenched into such tight fists that when he uncurled his fingers, he found that his nails had printed tiny crescents in his palms.

Eyes on his wristwatch, Grandpa slowly raised his fingers to his lips. A piercing whistle shattered the silence. Clutching her crossbow in one hand and flash powder in the other, Grandma followed Grandpa through the front door. Grandpa closed the door behind them.

From the side of the house, Seth heard wood splintering and glass breaking. He figured it was Dale gaining access through a window. Silence returned.

Seth flexed his fingers and tapped his toes. He could feel his heart beating in his hands. Staring at the quiet house was torture. He needed to see what was happening inside. How could he judge whether there was a monumentally compelling reason to enter and help if he didn't know what was going on?

Seth climbed the steps to the front porch, nudged the front door open, and peered through the resulting crack. The house was much as he remembered—well furnished but heavily powdered with dust and festooned with cobwebs. Grandma and Grandpa stood frozen at the foot of a sweeping staircase. At the top of the stairs, dust swirled in a vortex from floor to ceiling. All of the wires and cords of varying thickness converged on the whirlwind in a clot of shadow vaguely shaped like a human figure.

Seth took a step through the doorway. The air felt severely chilled. His breath plumed white in front of him. Grandma's hand with the crossbow trembled as if she were striving to lift it under tremendous duress.

The spinning column of dust glided down the stairs. Seth's petrified grandparents made no move to get out of the way. Although he did not experience the same paralyzing terror that gripped Grandma and Grandpa, the cold was real, and the sight horrifying. If he failed to act, his grandparents were doomed—the black hub of the shadow plague was bearing down on them.

He pulled the walrus butter from his pocket, tore the plastic, smeared a fingertip in the paste, and stuck the finger into his mouth. As he swallowed, the scene resolved itself more clearly. The pillar of dust vanished, replaced by a spectral woman swathed in flowing black garments, her bare feet hovering several inches above the stairs.

Seth recognized her! She was the same apparition who had appeared outside the attic window on Midsummer Eve the previous year! She had fought alongside Muriel and Bahumat in the battle at the Forgotten Chapel!

All of the dark threads converged on her. Her clothes and skin were drenched in shadow. Her eyes were black voids. Undulating ribbons of material stretched from the apparition toward his grandparents, moving as if coaxed by a slow breeze.

“Grandpa! Grandma!” Seth yelled. They did not budge. “Stan! Ruth! Run!” Seth screamed the words, his voice cracking. Neither of his grandparents flinched. The apparition paused. Her soulless pits gazed at Seth for a heartbeat. Seth ran toward his grandparents, moving quicker than the fabric, but with more ground to cover. The tendrils of black fabric arrived first, seizing Grandpa and Grandma Sorenson like tentacles. Seth skidded to a stop, staring in shock as shadow overcame them.

Seth turned and ran out of the front door. His grandparents were shadows. He had to hurry. Maybe he could still rescue Dale or Warren.

While racing around the house, Seth struggled to convince himself that he would find a way to restore his grandparents to normal. And Tanu. And Coulter. He wondered how much time remained before the safe was scheduled to appear. Even if everyone else failed, he had to make it to that upper room and claim the artifact.

It was apparent which window Dale had entered, courtesy of the unhinged shutters and broken glass. With a hop, Seth grabbed the windowsill and boosted himself up. Dale stood in a dusty parlor, unmoving, his back to the window.

“Dale, back up,” Seth hissed. “You have to get out.”

Dale gave no indication of having heard the warning. He did not twitch. Beyond him, through a doorway, Seth saw the apparition gliding in their direction.

Seth dropped from the window and dashed to the back of the house. Maybe while the shadow lady claimed Dale, he could bolt up the stairs.

He flung open the back door and found Warren sprawled on the far side of the kitchen floor, positioned as if he had been trying to crawl forward.

How long would it take to lug Warren outside? Would the time spent dragging Warren cause him to miss his window of opportunity for slipping up the stairs? Maybe, but he couldn’t just leave him there! Crouching, Seth looped his arms under Warren’s and began hauling the larger man backward across the tile floor toward the door.

“Seth,” Warren breathed.

“You with me?” Seth asked, surprised.

Warren tucked his feet beneath himself, and Seth helped him stand. “So cold . . . like the grove,” Warren mumbled.

“We have to hurry,” Seth exclaimed. He started across the kitchen, but Warren did not follow. Once again, he appeared paralyzed.

Seth returned to Warren and grabbed his hands. Life rekindled in his eyes.

“Your touch,” Warren murmured.

“Run,” Seth said, leading his friend by the hand through the house toward the entry hall. Staggering along with stilted strides, Warren managed a respectable pace. They reached the bottom of the stairs and started up. Breathing hard, Warren stumbled, fighting his way up the steps with his free arm and both legs. Seth tried his best to pull the struggling man forward.

Glancing down the steps, Seth saw the shadowy apparition return to the entry hall. Garments unfurling and billowing with dreamlike slowness, she drifted toward them, levitating forward and upward.

Seth and Warren reached the second-story hall, passing a photograph of Patton and Lena hanging on the wall. Seth held Warren with both hands—the added contact seemed to invigorate him. Shambling forward, they arrived at the foot of a staircase to the third level just as the spectral woman reached the second floor and came floating down the hall.

They were most of the way up the stairs when Warren stumbled badly. Seth lost his grip and Warren tumbled down several steps, coming to rest in a motionless heap. Seth leaped down to him, clasping one of Warren’s hands in both of his.

Warren stared at him, pupils unevenly dilated, blood trickling from the corner of his lips. “Go,” Warren mouthed. He dug a hand into a pouch at his waist, pulling out a fistful of flash powder.

The shadowy apparition appeared at the base of the stairs, dragging her numberless dark wires. Warren flung the powder at her. There was no crackle or flash. Her fluttering garments flowed toward them.

Seth released his friend and charged up the stairs two at a time. If he failed to claim the artifact, all these sacrifices would be in vain. He dashed down the third-story corridor to the north end of the manor, relieved at how fast he could run without towing Warren, eyes fixed on the door at the end of the hall. His legs and arms pumped hard until he rammed the door with his shoulder, clawing at the knob.

It was locked.

Seth stepped back and kicked the door. It shuddered but did not open. The shock of the impact hurt his shin. He kicked the door a second time to no avail. Taking a few steps back he crouched and charged, shoulder lowered, transforming himself into a projectile, aiming not at the door but beyond it. Wood cracked and split, the door flew open, and Seth tumbled through to land on his hands and knees.

Rising, he shut the splintered door as best he could. The room he had broken into was broad, with two shuttered windows. A huge oriental rug covered the hardwood floor. Bookshelves lined one wall. There were a couple of chairs in a sitting area beside a canopied bed. He saw no safe.

Had they been correct to account for daylight saving time? Had the safe come and gone? Or was it yet to arrive? Perhaps the safe was currently there, but hidden. Whatever the answer, Seth had only seconds before he joined the others as a shadow.

He raced to the bookshelf, frantically scooping armfuls of volumes out of place, hoping to find a hidden safe in the wall. When that yielded no result, he turned, eyes darting around the room, and there it was, standing in a corner where it had not been a moment before—a heavy, black safe, almost as tall as Seth, with a silver combination dial in the center.

Bounding across the room to the safe, he began turning the dial. It rotated smoothly, unlike the dial on his locker, which was jerky and clicked a little when you reached the correct number. He spun the dial right twice to 33, left once to 22, then directly back to 31. When he pulled the handle, the door swung open silently.

A single object rested on the floor of the safe, a golden sphere approximately a foot in diameter, its polished surface interrupted by several dials and buttons. Seth could not imagine what the peculiar device did.

He pulled the sphere from the safe, finding it somewhat heavier than it looked. The room had been cold when he entered, but the temperature was now dropping rapidly. How near was the shadow lady? Perhaps just outside the door.



Seth dashed to a window and threw open the shutters. There was no roof outside this window, just a three-story drop to the yard. Desperate, he began pressing the sphere's buttons.

And suddenly he was not alone in the room.

A tall man with a mustache appeared in front of him. He wore a white shirt with the sleeves rolled back, gray trousers with suspenders, and black boots. He was fairly young, with a solid build. Seth instantly recognized the mustached man from his photographs. It was Patton Burgess.

"You must be the youngest safecracker I have ever seen," Patton said amiably. His expression changed. "What is going on?"

The door to the room blew open. The shadowy apparition hovered at the threshold. Sweat beaded on Patton's brow, and he stiffly tried to turn, his body jerking weakly. Seth took his hand, and Patton swiveled to face the apparition. "Hello, Ephira."

The apparition recoiled.

"What has happened to you?" Patton backed toward the window, keeping hold of Seth's hand. "I suppose darkness always was a downward spiral."

"No roof," Seth warned quietly.

Turning, Patton leaped onto the windowsill. Releasing Seth's hand, he jumped, not down, but up, twisting to catch hold of the eaves of the roof above. His legs scissored as he hoisted himself up. Then he reached a hand down. "Come on."

Ephira glided into the room, face enraged, fabric unwinding, rippling toward Seth. Clutching the sphere in one arm and blindly trusting Patton, he climbed onto the windowsill, stretched out his free hand, and pushed off. Patton's hand closed tightly around his wrist and swung him onto the roof.

"We need to get out of here," Seth said.

"Who are you?"

"The caretaker's grandson. Fablehaven is at the brink of destruction."

Patton rushed along the roof, shingles groaning and splitting beneath his boots. Seth followed. Patton ran toward the corner of the roof near where a tall tree grew. Surely he wasn't going to jump!

Without hesitation, Patton sailed off the roof, catching hold of a limb that sagged and broke. Releasing it, he caught hold of a lower limb. Hand

over hand, Patton made his way toward the trunk. When he got there, he swung up, straddling the bough. "Toss me the Chronometer."

"You expect me to jump?"

"When jumping is the sole option, you jump, and try to make it work. Toss it."

Seth threw the sphere to Patton, who deftly caught it in one hand. "What branch should I aim for?"

"Go left of where I went," Patton said. "See it? I left the best branch for you."

The branch was at least ten feet from the roof, and five or six feet lower. It would be easy to miss it. He pictured his hands slapping against the limb, failing to grasp it securely.

"Do not think," Patton ordered. "Back up a few steps and take the leap. Looks worse than it is. Anyone could do it."

Seth stared at the distant ground. To fall from this height was almost certain death. He backed up, the shingles creaking underfoot.

Peering over his shoulder, Seth saw the apparition floating toward him along the roof. That was the extra incentive he needed. He took three steps and flung himself off the roof. As he fell, the branch rose to meet his outstretched hands. The impact was jarring, but he held on. The limb drooped and bobbed, but it did not break.

Like Patton had done, Seth advanced hand over hand toward the trunk of the tree. Patton was already climbing down below him. Seth descended recklessly, concerned about the shadow lady above. There were no limbs for the last ten feet. He hung and dropped. Patton caught him.

"You have a way out of here?" Patton asked.

"Hugo," Seth said. "The golem."

"Lead on."

They dashed across the yard. When Seth looked back, he could no longer see Ephira. "Where'd she go?"

"Ephira detests sunlight," Patton said. "Coming out on the roof like that pained her. She never was very fast, and she looks more weighed down than ever. She knows she won't catch us, at least not by giving chase. Any notion what happened to her?"

"You know the revenant in the grove in the valley between four hills?"

Patton shot him a surprised glance. “Matter of fact, I do.”

“We think Kurisock got hold of the nail that gave the revenant his power.”

“How did the revenant lose the nail?”

They reached the cart and clambered into the bed. “Go, Hugo,” Seth panted, “fast as you can, run to the pond.” The cart began rattling over the unkempt road. Seth located the spare flash powder and shared some with Patton. “Actually, I pulled the nail out.”

“You did?” Patton looked astonished. “How?”

“Pair of pliers and some courage potion.”

Patton regarded Seth with a broad grin. “I think the two of us are going to get along just fine.”

“Keep an eye out for dark creatures,” Seth said. “Somehow between Kurisock, the shadow lady, and the nail, a plague has spread through Fablehaven turning the light creatures dark. Dark fairies, dwarfs, satyrs, dryads, centaurs, brownies—you name it. If the darkness spreads to humans, they turn into shadow people.”

Patton smirked. “Looks like I landed in hotter water than I planned on.”

“Which reminds me,” Seth said, “how are you here? You’re not even old.”

“The Chronometer is one of the artifacts. It has power over time. Nobody knows all it can do. I’ve learned a few tricks. I pressed a certain button on the Chronometer, knowing that when the button was pressed again, I would leap forward to that point in time and remain there for three days. You must have pushed the button and called me here.”

“No kidding,” Seth said.

“I only hit the button as an additional precaution to protect the artifact. I figured if a thief ever got hold of it, the culprit would eventually push the button, and then I could steal it back. I never dreamed I would land myself in a predicament like this.”

“My Grandpa Sorenson is a shadow. So is my Grandma. Everyone but my sister, Kendra.”

“Why are we going to the pond?”

“Dark brownies took over the house. The pond repels the dark creatures.”

“Right. The shrine.” Patton looked thoughtful. He spoke hesitantly. “What about Lena? Has she passed yet?”

“No, actually, she’s a naiad again.”

“What? That is not possible.”

“Lots of impossible things have been happening lately,” Seth said. “It’s a long story. Lena was the person who told us about the safe. We should probably get under the tent.” Seth started pulling the tent up.

“Why?”

“The dark creatures are everywhere. When we came to the manor, none of us drank the milk. We hid under the tent, and no dark creatures bothered us.”

Patton stroked his mustache. “I don’t have to drink milk to see the creatures here.”

“I just ate some walrus butter, so I can see them now too. Hiding may not do as much good.”

“After what happened at the manor, I wager we can expect a serious ambush. We ought to avoid the paths. Have Hugo abandon the cart and carry us to the pond cross country.”

Seth considered the idea. “That might work.”

“Of course it will.” Patton winked.

“Hugo, stop,” Seth ordered. The golem complied. “We’re leaving the cart here, and you’re going to carry us as quickly as you can through the woods back to the pond. Try not to let any creatures see us. And grab that tent; we’ll need it back at the refuge.”

The golem slung the tent over his shoulder, cradled Seth in one arm and Patton in the other, and then tromped off the road into the trees.

Chapter 19



Duel

Hooves clomping over the whitewashed planks, Doren sprinted along the boardwalk after Rondus, a portly satyr with butterscotch fur and horns that curved away from each other. Puffing hard, Rondus cut through a gazebo and started down the stairs to the field. Only a few steps behind, Doren went airborne and slammed into the heavyset satyr. Together they pitched violently forward into the grass, staining their skin green.

Doren rose swiftly and started after a petite hamadryad with short, feathery hair. Rondus lunged at a small, thin satyr, wrapping his legs together in a savage embrace. The small satyr toppled with a yelp.

Kendra sat on a wicker chair in a nearby gazebo watching the game of tackle tag. Each new individual tackled became a tackler until the last participant was brought down. The last person tackled became the first tackler of the next round.

The agile hamadryad twirled away from Doren several times, but he stayed doggedly after her until he finally got a hand on her waist, scooped her into his arms, and set her on the grass. The satyrs tackled each other as if causing injuries were the point of the game, but they treated the hamadryads more gently. The hamadryads quietly returned the favor by allowing themselves to be caught. Having seen the hamadryads in action earlier that day, Kendra knew that the satyrs would never have been able to lay a hand on them unless the nymphs only evaded them halfheartedly.

Kendra most enjoyed watching the hamadryads take down the satyrs. The nymphs never dove at them or wrapped them up. They knocked satyrs to the turf with perfectly timed shoves and nudges, or else by tripping them. What the satyrs made look hard, the hamadryads made look effortless.

The frenetic game helped distract Kendra from her worries. What if nobody returned from the excursion to the manor? What if her friends and family had all been transformed into shadows that she lacked the ability to see? How long would it be before she followed?

“Why not join in this round?” Doren asked, calling up to the gazebo from the grass below.

“I’m not big on tackling,” Kendra said. “I prefer watching.”

“It isn’t as rough as it looks,” Doren said. “At least it wouldn’t be for you.”

At that moment, Hugo loped through the gap in the hedge across the field, ramming dark satyrs aside, holding Seth high in one hand and a stranger in the other. Once inside the field, Hugo slowed.

“Well, pluck out my horns and call me a lamb,” Doren murmured. “Patton Burgess.”

“Patton Burgess?” Kendra asked.

“Come on,” the satyr said, already running across the grass.

Kendra vaulted the gazebo railing and took off after Doren. Where was the cart? Where were Grandma and Grandpa? Warren and Dale? How was it possible that Patton Burgess was with Hugo and Seth?

The golem set Patton and Seth on the ground. Patton smoothed his suspenders and adjusted his sleeves.

“Patton Burgess!” Doren exclaimed. “Back from the grave! Should have known you’d turn up again sooner or later.”

“Glad to see you aren’t mangy and snarling,” Patton said with a smile. “I was grieved to hear about Newel. And you must be Kendra.”

Kendra stopped in front of him, a little winded by her run. He looked familiar because of his photographs, but they did not quite do him justice. “It’s really you. I’ve read your journals.”

“Then you have an advantage over me,” Patton said. “I look forward to getting acquainted.”

Kendra looked to Seth. “What about the others?”

“Shadows,” Seth answered.

Kendra hid her eyes in her hands. The last thing she wanted to do was burst into tears in front of Patton.

“The creature at the manor was the lady outside our window on Midsummer Eve,” Seth continued. “The shadow lady who helped Muriel and Bahumat. She’s the source of the plague.”

“There is no shame in sorrow, Kendra,” Patton said.

Kendra lifted her damp eyes. “Where did you come from?”

Glancing at Doren, Patton hefted the golden sphere. “The object at the manor let me travel here temporarily.”

Kendra nodded, realizing that he didn’t want to elaborate about the artifact in front of the satyr.

Approaching hoofbeats made all of them turn. Cloudwing cantered over to them, pounding to a stop in front of Seth. The centaur stared at Patton, then inclined his head slightly. “Patton Burgess. How have you exceeded your life span?”

“We all have our little secrets,” Patton said.

Cloudwing shifted his gaze to Seth. “Broadhoof sends congratulations on your safe return. He wishes to remind you of your engagement on the morrow.”

“I remember,” Seth said.

“What engagement?” Patton interjected.

“Seth must answer for his egregious insults,” Cloudwing said.

“A duel?” Patton exclaimed. “A centaur against a child! This is low, even for Broadhoof.”

“I witnessed the exchange,” Cloudwing said. “Broadhoof provided the young human several opportunities for clemency.”

“I insist upon having words with Broadhoof,” Patton said.

“I am sure he will oblige,” Cloudwing answered. The centaur cantered away.

“He treated you politely,” Seth marveled.

“He has good reason to do so,” Patton replied. “I recently gave the centaurs of Fablehaven their most prized possession. Well, recently for me—a long time ago for you. Tell me about this duel.”

Seth glanced at Kendra. "When we left for the manor this morning, a bunch of the creatures here ran out past the hedge as a distraction, so Hugo could get away with us in the cart. We wanted the centaurs to lead the charge, so Kendra and I begged them. When they turned us down, I basically called them cowards."

Patton winced. "The only words a centaur hears are insults. Go on."

"They tried to get him to take it back but he kept antagonizing them," Kendra said.

"Finally I agreed to a duel if they would lead the charge," Seth said.

"And they led the charge?" Patton asked.

"They did a good job," Kendra confirmed.

Broadhoof and Cloudwing were galloping toward them. Patton whistled softly. "You deliberately insulted Broadhoof, he challenged you, you agreed on conditions, and he met the conditions."

"Right," Seth said.

"Then Cloudwing has it right. You owe Broadhoof a fight."

The centaurs halted in front of Patton. "Greetings, Patton Burgess," Broadhoof said, dipping his head.

"I understand you intend to seek satisfaction against a youngster," Patton said.

"His impudence was flagrant," Broadhoof replied. "We covenanted to resolve the matter tomorrow at dawn."

"The boy filled in the particulars," Patton said. "I can imagine how your reluctance to assist with their diversion would have appeared an act of cowardice to such youthful eyes."

"With respect, you have no cause to intervene here," Broadhoof said.

"I am asking you to pardon the boy," Patton said. "He may have been mistaken about your motives, perceiving indifference as cowardice, but his intentions were laudable. I fail to see what shedding his blood will resolve."

"We helped with the charade as requested in tribute to his courageous intentions," Cloudwing replied. "In so doing, we fulfilled our portion of the compact. The injuries to Broadhoof must not go unavenged."

"Injuries?" Patton asked Broadhoof. "Is your self-worth so fragile? Was the humiliation public?"

"I was present," Cloudwing said, "as was the sister."

“We have a binding arrangement,” Broadhoof declared with finality.

“Then I suppose we will require an arrangement of our own,” Patton said. “From where I stand, Broadhoof, your willingness to engage a child in a duel, whatever the provocation, is a sure mark of cowardice. So now a grown man is calling you a coward in front of your friend, a boy, a girl, and a satyr. Furthermore, I perceive your indifference as a greater fault than your cowardice, and condemn your entire race as a tragic waste of potential.” Patton folded his arms.

“Recant your words,” Broadhoof warned grimly. “My quarrel is not with you.”

“Wrong. Your quarrel is with me. Not tomorrow, or the day after, but now. I personally assume whatever blame you assigned to this boy, I support and restate every insult he uttered, and I offer the following terms. We duel. Now. If you kill me, the matter of the boy is settled. If I best you, the matter of the boy is settled. Either way, all debts end up paid. And you get the opportunity to resolve this with a man instead of through a senseless mockery.”

“A mockery?” Seth asked, sounding offended.

“Not now,” Patton muttered out of the side of his mouth.

“Very well,” Broadhoof said. “Without forgetting the good you have done for my kind, I acknowledge your challenge, Patton Burgess. Slaying you will bring me no joy, but I will consider all debts to my honor paid.”

“I requested the duel,” Patton said. “Choose your weapon.”

Broadhoof hesitated. He consulted briefly with Cloudwing. “No weapons.”

Patton nodded. “Boundaries?”

“Within the hedge,” Broadhoof said. “Excluding the woodwork and the pond.”

Patton surveyed the area. “You want some room to run. I can live with that. I am sure you will forgive me if I fail to make use of all the space provided.”

“We must clear the field,” Cloudwing said.

Patton looked at Doren. “Get the dwarfs to move up onto the boardwalk. And strike these tents.”

“You got it, Patton.” Doren ran off.

“When the field is clear,” Cloudwing said, “I will signal the commencement of combat.”

Broadhoof and Cloudwing cantered away.

“Can you take him?” Seth asked.

“I’ve never tested myself against a centaur in mortal combat,” Patton admitted. “But I was unwilling to discover whether you would have survived. In this predicament, we had a single certitude—mercy would not have come to your rescue. Centaurs have let important wars pass them by without lending a hand, but insult their honor, and they fight to the death.”

“But if you die, you won’t be able to return to your own time!” Seth exclaimed. “History will be changed!”

“I’m not aiming to lose,” Patton said. “And if I do, at this point in time, my life is over and done with—I don’t feature how what happens now can change what already happened.”

“Because if you don’t return, what already happened will never happen!” Seth cried.

Patton shrugged. “Maybe. Too late to back out now. Guess I better focus on winning. When jumping is the sole option . . .”

“ . . . you jump,” Seth finished.

“Kendra,” Patton said, “I suppose you have been told that you shine like an angel.”

“By fairies,” Kendra said.

“Does your brother know?”

“Yes.”

“You are more than fairystruck. Could you be fairykind?”

“It’s supposed to be a secret,” she said.

“Would be for most eyes,” Patton said. “And I thought being fairystruck was an accomplishment! Seth, never let your opinion of yourself get inflated. There is always somebody out there to humble you!”

“You were fairystruck?” Kendra asked.

“One of my little secrets,” Patton said. “We will have much to catch up on if I live through this.”

A group of satyrs had already struck Kendra’s tent. Another was tearing down the big one. A huge team of them had invaded the dwarfish encampment.

"I've never seen the satyrs work so hard," Kendra remarked.

"They will do almost anything for sport," Patton said. "The field will be clear in no time. You had better go find a place to watch."

"Why didn't Broadhoof want to use his sword?" Seth asked.

Patton grinned. "He knows how much I like using swords."

"It isn't fair," Kendra complained. "He has hooves."

Patton patted her shoulder. "Pray for me."

"Good luck," Seth said. "Thanks."

"My pleasure," Patton said. "I can always use an extra feather in my cap. I just regret missing the original exchange! A boy your age criticizing a centaur would be a sight worth seeing!"

Kendra and Seth set off toward the boardwalk.

"If you get Patton killed, I'll never forgive you," she seethed.

"He knows how to handle himself," Seth replied.

"You haven't seen the centaurs in action," Kendra said. "I don't want to watch this."

As Kendra and Seth took up positions on the boardwalk, the satyrs cleared the last of the tents from the field. Kendra noticed one satyr toting a reluctant dwarf under one arm. She glanced back at the pond, but no naiads had surfaced. What would Lena think if she knew Patton was here, not a photograph, but the actual man in his prime?

Walking toward the boardwalk, Patton waved at the onlookers. Cheering satyrs and dryads returned the gesture. He seemed to be positioning himself in order to give everyone a good view of the fight.

Cloudwing trotted toward the boardwalk with a regal bearing. He raised a muscular arm. "The contest between Patton Burgess and (he made a strange, braying sound) will commence on my mark. Stand ready. Go." He dropped his arm.

Broadhoof came loping across the field, face stern, massive muscles rippling. Patton stood his ground, hands at his sides. Broadhoof increased his speed to a furious gallop. "Prepare to defend yourself, human!" Broadhoof roared.

Kendra fought the urge to turn away. Patton looked small and defenseless as the raging centaur bore down on him. He was going to be

flattened! At the last second, Patton skipped to the side with the nonchalance of a matador and the centaur raced past him.

Broadhoof wheeled around for a second charge. "I am not here to dance," the centaur declared. If anything, Broadhoof came at Patton even faster the second time. Patton feinted to the left. When Broadhoof swerved, Patton stepped in the other direction. As Broadhoof thundered past him, Patton swiveled and punched the centaur squarely in the flank.

The blow knocked the centaur crooked. With pain etched on his features, Broadhoof stumbled badly, narrowly avoiding a fall. The spectators groaned empathetically, then applauded, the satyrs in particular hooting their approval.

Broadhoof slowed and turned. Fixing Patton with a murderous glare, the centaur walked toward him. Straightening his shirt, Patton calmly awaited his arrival. When Broadhoof drew near to Patton, he reared, lashing out with his sharp hooves. Patton backed away just enough to stay out of range.

Advancing patiently, Broadhoof reared again and again, front hooves flailing. Each time Patton kept just out of reach. "I am not here to dance," Patton mimicked with a smirk.

The spectators chuckled.

Angered, Broadhoof curveted recklessly forward, stamping and bucking and swinging his fists. Dancing nimbly, ducking and twisting, Patton ended up at the side of the wild centaur and vaulted onto his back, clamping Broadhoof in a headlock while riding him like a rodeo cowboy. Leaping and plunging, Broadhoof reached back for Patton. Taking the opportunity to release the headlock and seize one of Broadhoof's hands, Patton slid off his back and abruptly wrenched the centaur to the ground.

With one palm braced against Broadhoof's meaty forearm, Patton bent the centaur's hand to an unnatural angle. He also appeared to have one of his fingers in a painful lock. The centaur's face contorted in agony. When Broadhoof endeavored to rise, Kendra heard a sharp crack. The centaur quit struggling, and Patton shifted his grip.

"I have the upper hand here," Patton warned loudly. "Yield, or I'll break your bones one by one."

"Never," Broadhoof gasped venomously.

Cupping one hand, Patton momentarily relinquished his hold in order to clap the centaur on the ear. Broadhoof howled. Patton quickly reestablished the hold, levering the centaur's arm to a more vicious angle.

"This contest is over, Broadhoof," Patton said. "I don't want to leave you permanently maimed, or to deprive you of your senses. Yield."

Sweat shined on Broadhoof's flushed face. "Never."

The crowd was now silent.

Patton added pressure to the trembling arm. "Which is worse? To yield, or to lie before an audience while a human humiliates you with his bare hands?"

"Slay me," Broadhoof pleaded.

"Centaur's are nearly immortal," Patton said. "My intent is not to prove why we say 'nearly.' I vowed to best you, not to dispatch you. If I must, I'll simply leave you incapacitated for whatever time remains to you, an irrefutable monument to human superiority."

Cloudwing walked forward. "You are at his mercy, Broadhoof. If Patton refuses to end your life, you must yield."

"I yield," Broadhoof relented.

The crowd roared. Kendra stared in shocked relief, hardly noticing as the enthusiastic satyrs jostled against her. She saw Patton help Broadhoof to his feet, but could not hear the words they exchanged over the clamor around her. Kendra began shouldering through the crowd to get to the lawn. She had not fully appreciated how much the satyrs disliked the centaurs until she witnessed the exultant tears they shed as they embraced one another.

As Broadhoof plodded away with Cloudwing, Kendra and Seth ran to Patton. None of the satyrs or naiads were thronging him. They apparently preferred celebrating at a distance.

"That was incredible," Seth said. "I heard something snap . . ."

"A finger," Patton said. "Remember this day, Seth, and take great care before you offend a centaur. I despise injuring a vanquished opponent. Curse Broadhoof for his stubborn pride!" Patton clenched his jaw. Were his eyes misty?

"He forced the situation," Kendra reminded him.

“I fought him because the brute would have it no other way,” Patton said. “I hurt him for the same reason. Yet I cannot help admiring his resistance to yield. Breaking him was not pleasurable, even knowing that he would have killed me had our roles been reversed.”

“I’m so sorry it happened,” Seth said. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. One moment.” Patton cupped his hands around his mouth and raised his voice. “Satyrs, dryads, and other spectators—but most especially satyrs. The price of these festivities is that you return the field to how it looked before. I want every tent stake where it belongs. Do we have an understanding?”

With no direct response, the satyrs moved to carry out his orders.

Patton turned back to Kendra and Seth. “Now, if I comprehend the situation correctly, Lena is over yonder in the pond?”

“Right,” Kendra said. “She’s a naiad again.”

Patton placed his hands on his hips and sniffed. “Then I expect I had better go say hello to the missus.”



History

Even though Lena went back into the water against her will, she has voluntarily remained there,” Patton recapped as he, Seth, and Kendra overlooked the pier from a gazebo. Although he had set off full of confidence to converse with Lena, he now seemed nervous about her potential reaction.

“Right,” Kendra said. “But she has always been very responsive to any mention of you. I think she’ll come when you call.”

“Naiads are peculiar creatures,” Patton said. “Of all the beings at Fablehaven, I consider them the most selfish. Fairies take notice if you flatter them. Centaurs get riled if you insult them. It is difficult to win the attention of a naiad. Their only preoccupation is their next diversion.”

“Then why do they bother drowning people?” Seth asked.

“For sport,” Patton said. “Why else? There is little deliberate malice in it. Swimming is all they know. They find the idea of water killing somebody hilarious. They can never get enough of it. Plus, naiads are avid collectors. Lena once mentioned they have a chamber full of prized trinkets and skeletons.”

“But Lena is different from other naiads,” Kendra said. “She cares about you.”

“A victory years in the making,” Patton sighed, “hopefully not undone by her return to the water. Her interest in me was what eventually separated Lena from the other naiads. Little by little, she began to care for someone other than herself. She began to enjoy my company. The others loathed her for it. They despised having a reason to wonder whether there might be more to existence than wallowing in fruitless self-absorption. But now I worry that her mind may have reverted. You say Lena remembers our marriage fondly?”

“After you died, I don’t think she ever really found her place,” Kendra said. “She went out to experience the world, but ended up back here. I know she hated growing old.”

“She would,” Patton smiled. “Lena dislikes many aspects of mortality. We’ve been married five years—from my point of view, I mean—and our relationship has not been easy. We had a very stormy argument not long before I came here. We have yet to make up. Back in my time, if Lena received an offer to return to the water, I suspect she might gladly accept it. I’m encouraged to hear that our marriage survives in the end. Shall we find out if she still wants me?” He studied the water with trepidation.

“We need her to grab the bowl,” Kendra said. “At least to try.” As they had conversed in the gazebo, Kendra had explained how she became fairykind, and how she hoped to use the bowl to approach the Fairy Queen a second time.

“I wish I had my violin,” Patton lamented. “I know just the melody I would use. Wooing Lena the first time around was hard enough, but at least I had time and resources. I hope she responds favorably. I would prefer wrestling another centaur to learning that her affection for me has cooled.”

“Only one way to find out,” Seth said.

Patton descended the stairs from the gazebo to the pier, tugging on his sleeves and smoothing his shirt. Seth moved to follow him but Kendra held him back. “We should watch from here.”

Patton strode along the pier. “I’m looking for Lena Burgess!” he called. “My wife.”

Numerous overlapping voices responded.

“It couldn’t be.”

“He’s dead.”

“They were chanting his name earlier.”

“Must be a trick.”

“It sounds just like him.”

Several heads surfaced as he reached the end of the pier.

“He’s back!”

“Oh, no!”

“The devil himself!”

“Don’t let her see!”

The water near the end of the pier became turbulent. Lena poked her head up, eyes wide, and was promptly dragged under. After a moment she resurfaced. “Patton?”

“I’m here, Lena,” he said. “What are you doing in the water?” He kept his voice conversational with a hint of curiosity.

Lena’s head disappeared again. The water churned.

Voices resumed.

“She saw him!”

“What do we do?”

“She’s too wriggly!”

Lena yelled, “Unhand me or I’ll leave the pond this instant!”

A moment later her head rose above the water again. She gazed raptly at Patton. “How are you here?”

“I came forward in time,” he said. “I am only visiting for three days. We could use some assistance—”

Lena held up a hand to silence him. “Say no more, human,” she demanded sternly. “After much travail, I have reclaimed my true life. Do not attempt to befuddle me. I need time alone to realign my thoughts.” With a wink, she disappeared beneath the water.

Kendra heard the naiads murmuring in surprised approval. Patton did not move.

“You heard her,” a snide voice called to him. “Why don’t you crawl back into your grave!”

A few nervous titters followed the comment. Then Kendra heard other voices, desperate ones.

“Stop her!”

“Grab her!”

“Thief!”

“Traitor!”

Lena burst from the water at the end of the pier, leaping into the air like a dolphin. Patton caught her in a strong embrace, dousing his shirt and trousers in the process. She wore a shimmering green slip. Her long, glossy hair hung heavy and wet, draped over her shoulders like a shawl. In one webbed hand, she gripped the silver bowl from the Fairy Queen’s shrine. Lena leaned her forehead against Patton’s, then her lips found his. As they kissed, the webbing between her fingers dissolved.

All around the pier, naiads wailed and cursed.

Cradling Lena in his arms, Patton walked back toward the gazebo. Kendra and Seth descended the stairs to the pier. Patton deposited Lena on her feet.

“Hi, Kendra,” Lena said with a warm smile. She was familiar—her eyes, her face, her voice—and yet so different. She stood a couple of inches taller than before, her skin smooth and unblemished, her body curvy and fit.

“You’re beautiful,” Kendra said, reaching to give her a hug.

Lena stepped back, grasping Kendra’s hands instead. “I’ll get you soaked. You’ve grown so tall, dear. And Seth! You’re a giant!”

“Only compared to tiny naiads,” Seth said, looking pleased. Standing straighter, he was more than half a head taller than her.

“You’ll only have Patton for three days,” Kendra reminded her friend, concerned that Lena would end up regretting her decision.

Lena handed Kendra the untarnished bowl, then gazed adoringly at her husband, caressing his face. “I would have left the pond for three minutes.”

Tilting his head down, Patton rubbed his nose against hers.

“I think they need some alone time,” Seth said disgustedly, tugging on Kendra.

Patton locked eyes with Seth. “Don’t go. We have much to discuss.”

“The yellow and purple tent is soundproof,” Seth said.

“Sounds perfect.” Holding Lena’s hand, Patton led her up the stairs and into the gazebo.

“Not long before you died,” Lena said, “you told me we would be together again someday, young and healthy. At the time I assumed you meant heaven.”

Patton gave her a wry smile. "I probably meant this. But heaven will be nice too."

"I can't tell you how thrilling it feels to be young again," Lena gushed. "You look fairly boyish yourself. You're what, thirty-six?"

"That's not far off."

Stopping, Lena pulled her hand from his and folded her arms. "Wait a minute. Early in our marriage, you came forward in time to visit me, and you never told me."

"Evidently not."

"You and your secrets." She returned her hand to his. They continued across the field toward the striped tent. "What were you doing before you came here?"

"Last thing I did was press a button on the Chronometer," Patton said in a confidential tone, nodding to the sphere Seth was carrying. "I was hiding it in the manor. Before I locked it up, I pushed a button that would send me forward in time to the next instance when the button was pressed."

"I pressed it," Seth announced.

"You didn't tell me about the artifact until you were in your sixties," Lena scolded. "I rarely knew what you were up to."

"We just had a fight," Patton said. "About the drapes in our bedroom. Remember? It started about the drapes, and ended up being about how I wasn't living up to my promises—"

"I remember that spat!" Lena said nostalgically. "In fact, that may have been the last time you ever raised your voice at me. That was a hard period for both of us. Take heart. Not long afterward, we hit our stride. We had a beautiful marriage, Patton. You made me feel like a queen, and reciprocating was effortless."

"Resist telling me too much," Patton said, covering his ears. "I would rather watch it unfold."

They reached the tent and entered. Patton dropped the flap to shield the door. They sat down on the floor, facing one another.

"I can't believe you left the pond so eagerly," Kendra said to Lena. "I've wanted you out of there ever since you entered."

"You were sweet to come for me," Lena replied. "I remember when you first tried to talk me out of it. My mind was cloudy. It functioned

differently. I had lost much of who I became in mortality. Not enough to really fit in, but enough to stay put. Life in the pond is indescribably easy. Virtually meaningless, but devoid of pain, almost devoid of thought. There were many things I did not miss about mortality. In a way, returning to the water was like dying. I no longer had to cope with living. Until I saw Patton, I wanted to stay dead.”

“You feel lucid now?” Patton asked.

“Like my old self,” Lena said. “Or I guess I should say like my young self. With my present mind, with or without you, Patton, I would never choose the numbness of the pond. That spell grips me only when I’m in there. Tell me about this plague.”

Kendra and Seth related all the details about the plague. Seth told about his meeting with Graulas and the cords he had seen connected to Ephira at the manor. Lena was saddened to hear that Grandma, Grandpa, and the others had become shadows. Patton expressed surprise at the mention of Navarog.

“If Navarog has truly emerged from captivity, you have not heard the last from him. In lore, Navarog is widely acknowledged as the most corrupt and dangerous of all dragons. Recognized as a prince among demons, he will stop at nothing to liberate the monstrosities confined in Zzyzx.”

Next the conversation shifted to the artifacts. Kendra and Seth shared all they knew about the five artifacts, and recounted how they had recovered the healing artifact from the inverted tower. Kendra went on to outline her exploits at Lost Mesa, and told how the Knights of the Dawn lacked information about one of the secret preserves.

“So the inverted tower held the Sands of Sanctity,” Patton said. “I never checked. I wanted to leave the traps armed and undisturbed.”

“Why did you take the Chronometer from Lost Mesa?” Kendra asked.

Patton scratched his mustache. “The more I thought about the potential of those artifacts to open the gates of the great demon prison, the less I liked how many people knew where they were hidden. The Knights of the Dawn mean well, but organizations like that have a way of keeping secrets alive and helping them spread. I knew only one person in the world I would trust with such vital information. Me. So I took it upon myself to uncover all I could about the artifacts, in order to make them harder to find. The only artifact I ever actually removed was the one at Lost Mesa.”

“How did you get by the dragon?” Kendra asked.

Patton shrugged. “I have my share of talents, among them taming dragons. I am far from the most accomplished dragon tamer you will meet—barely passable, in fact—but I can normally conduct a conversation without losing control of my faculties. The artifact at Lost Mesa was protected by a wicked dragon named Ranticus, rotten to the core.”

“Ranticus was the name of the dragon in the museum,” Kendra recalled.

“Correct. Vast networks of caverns lurk below Lost Mesa. After much exploration, I learned of a band of goblins with access to the lair where Ranticus dwelled. The goblins worshipped him, using their secret entrance to bring him tributes—food, mostly. Slaying a dragon is no small feat, a task more for wizards than for warriors. But there is a rare weed called daughter-of-despair from which you can derive a toxin known as dragonsbane, the only venom capable of poisoning a dragon. Finding the weed and formulating the poison was a quest all its own. Once I had the toxin, disguised as a goblin, I brought Ranticus a dead ox saturated with the poison.”

“Couldn’t Ranticus smell it?” Seth wondered.

“Dragonsbane is imperceptible. If not, it would never work against a dragon. And I was heavily disguised, down to wearing goblin skin over my own.”

“You poisoned him?” Seth exclaimed. “It worked? Then you really were a dragon slayer!”

“I suppose I can own up to it now. During my lifetime I did not want word getting around.”

“You started a few of those rumors yourself,” Lena chided.

Patton cocked his head and tugged at his collar. “Vainglory aside, after disposing of Ranticus, I defeated the guardians of the artifact, a troop of ghostly knights, in a battle I would rather forget. Then, in order to avoid suspicions that I had removed the Chronometer, I needed to restore a guardian to the caves. When other business took me to Wyrmoost, one of the dragon sanctuaries, I swiped an egg and hatched it at Lost Mesa. I named the dragon Chalize and kept an eye on her during her infancy. Before long, the goblins took to her, and my assistance was no longer required. Some years later, I donated the bones of Ranticus to the museum.”

“Have you killed other dragons?” Seth asked eagerly.

“Killing a dragon is not always a good thing,” Patton said earnestly. “Dragons are more humanlike than most magical creatures. They have a great deal of self-possession. Some are good, some are evil, many are in between. No two dragons are identical, and few are very much alike.”

“And no dragons appreciate it when somebody outside their community slays one of their kind,” Lena said. “Most consider it an unpardonable crime. Which is why I insisted that Patton keep his dragon slayings unconfirmed.”

Seth stabbed a finger at Lena. “You said ‘slayings.’ As in multiple dragons.”

“Now would be a poor time to relive past adventures unrelated to our present predicament,” Patton said. “I can fill in some of your other missing connections. I know a lot about Ephira. Much more than I would like.” He lowered his eyes, the muscles tensing in his jaw. “Hers is a tragic story I have never shared. But I think the time has come.”

“You used to tell me I would hear this story one day,” Lena said. “Is this what you meant?”

“I expect so,” Patton replied, folding his hands. “Long ago, my uncle Marshal Burgess ran Fablehaven. He was never officially the caretaker—my proud grandfather retained the title but delegated all responsibility to Marshal, who managed the preserve admirably. Although not the best in a fight, Marshal was a skillful diplomat and a wonderful mentor. Women were his big weakness. He had an undeniable knack for attracting them, but he could never settle on one. Marshal weathered numerous scandals and three failed marriages before becoming infatuated with a certain hamadryad.

“Of all the tree nymphs at Fablehaven, she was the brightest, the bubbliest, the most flirtatious, always laughing, always leading a game or a song. Once she caught his fancy, Marshal became obsessed. When Marshal gave chase, I never knew of a woman who could resist him, and this vivacious hamadryad was no exception. Their courtship was brief and passionate. Amid ardent promises of everlasting fidelity, she renounced the trees and married him.

“I do not believe Marshal planned to betray her. I am convinced that he sincerely believed he would finally settle down, that winning a hamadryad

would allow him at long last to conquer his wandering heart. But his behavioral patterns were deeply ingrained, and before long, the infatuation began to wither.

“The hamadryad truly was a remarkable woman worthy of a loving mate. She quickly became my favorite relative. In fact, it was through her guidance that I became fairyrstruck. Tragically, our relationship was short-lived.

“Within months, the marriage unraveled. The hamadryad was crushed. She had forsaken immortality under false pretenses. The betrayal cut her to the core. It poisoned her reason. She abandoned Marshal and disappeared. I searched, but failed to find her. It was years before finally I pieced together what happened to Ephira.”

“Your aunt is the shadow lady!” Seth exclaimed.

“I’m beginning to see why you withheld this story,” Lena remarked sadly.

“Ephira became obsessed with regaining her status as a hamadryad,” Patton continued. “She did not care that such a feat was impossible. She saw it as the only possible compensation for her unjust treatment. As part of her desperate pursuit, she loosed one of Muriel Taggert’s knots. She later visited the swamp hag, who directed her to Kurisock. It was finally the demon who struck a bargain with Ephira that would enable her to return to a nonmortal life.

“To understand what comes next, you must realize that the life of a hamadryad is inextricably connected to a particular tree. When the tree dies, she dies with it, unless the connection is passed through a seed of the original tree to a new one. Because their trees can be reborn as seedlings, hamadryads are virtually immortal. But the tree also constitutes a weakness, a secret that must be zealously guarded.

“When Ephira fell to mortality, she lost the connection with her tree. But any magic that can be done can also be undone. Ephira still knew where her tree was located. Under orders from Kurisock, she cut it down with her own hands, burned it, and brought the last seed to the demon.

“The bond between Ephira and her tree may have been sundered, but like all broken magic, it was mendable. Using his unusual gifts, Kurisock bound himself to the seed, and through the seed to Ephira, reforging her connection.”

“But she didn’t turn back into a hamadryad,” Kendra realized, chills racing down her back. “She became something else.”

“Something new,” Patton agreed. “She became dark and spectral, tainted by demonic power, a negative of her former self. Merging with Kurisock magnified her vengeful feelings. Still within her rights to enter the manor, she returned and destroyed Marshal and some others who lived there. I managed to swipe the key pages of the treaty from the register and flee.”

“How did you piece all this together?” Kendra asked.

“I became preoccupied with knowing. Many of the details are inferences, but I am convinced they are correct. I interviewed Muriel and the swamp hag. I found the tree Ephira cut and burned. And finally I visited the tar pit and beheld the dark sapling. I wish I had hazarded to hack it down at the time. Now, presumably, the nail from the revenant has been added to the accursed tree, heightening Kurisock’s might and Ephira’s power, making the darkness that cankered her soul contagious. The same way Kurisock transformed her by inhabiting the tree, he can now reach out through her and transform others.”

“Did you ever visit Ephira?” Kendra asked.

“I rarely approached the manor,” Patton said. “I left her notes, and a picture of me and Lena after we were married. She never responded. The only time I reentered the manor was to hide the Chronometer in the safe.”

“How did you get the safe in there?” Seth asked.

“I went during the night of the vernal equinox,” Patton said. “I had noted on a previous festival night that Ephira roams the preserve on those boisterous evenings. It was risky, but to me the danger was worth hiding the artifact in a secure place.”

“Patton,” Lena said tenderly. “What a burden this tale must have been! What a source of worry throughout our courtship and marriage! How did you ever fall in love with me?”

“You can see why I hesitated to share the story,” Patton said. “After I allowed myself to be drawn to you, I vowed our relationship would be different, that you would have all Ephira had lacked. But the story haunted me. Haunts me. Those who knew the tale of Ephira and Marshal questioned my judgment when I led you from the water. I sent away those who could not keep quiet. Despite my determination to make our relationship flourish,

there have been times when doubt has tormented me. I could not imagine what the tale might have done to you, with so much more at risk.”

“I’m glad I didn’t hear the account during the early years of our marriage,” Lena admitted. “It would have made a difficult period harder. But know this now: Ephira understood the risks before she made her leap. We all do. She did not have to ruin her existence, betrayal or no. And even though you may not want me to spoil the secrets of our years together, know this much: I made the right choice. I proved that, didn’t I, by choosing you again?”

Patton struggled with emotion. Veins stood out on the back of his fists. All he could manage was a nod.

“What an unfair situation for you, Patton, speaking to me after I’ve experienced our entire mortal relationship. You are not yet fully the man you will become. In your life, our relationship has not yet arrived at full fruition. I don’t mean to overwhelm you with implications about what our marriage will be, or make you feel obligated to take it there. Don’t worry, just let it happen. As I look back, I loved all of it, the man you were at first, as well as the man you became.”

“Thank you,” Patton said. “The situation is extraordinary. I must say, it is a relief to come here and find my best friend waiting.”

“We should save some of these words for later,” Lena said, glancing at Kendra and Seth.

“Right,” Patton said. “You all now know the secrets I have carried about Kurisock and Ephira.”

“Now the big question,” Seth said. “How do we stop them?”

The tent was silent.

“The situation is dire,” Patton said. “I am going to level with you. I have no idea.”



Fairykind

A heavy atmosphere pervaded the tent. The housefly performing acrobatics above Patton and Lena sounded unusually noisy. Kendra smoothed her hands over the fabric floor, feeling the contours of the ground underneath. She exchanged a concerned glance with Seth.

“What about this thing?” Seth asked, hefting the Chronometer. “Maybe we could travel back in time and stop the plague before it starts.”

Patton shook his head. “I spent months trying to unravel the secrets of the Chronometer. It has the reputation as the most difficult of the artifacts to use. Although the artifact allegedly has many functions, I managed to discover only a few.”

“Anything useful?” Seth asked, fingering a slightly raised dial on the sphere.

“Careful,” Patton warned sharply. Seth stopped fiddling with the dial. “I know the button to use in order to travel forward in time to the next moment that same button is pressed. I figured out how to set the Chronometer in order to make the safe appear once per week for a minute. And I can temporarily slow down time, making the rest of the world move faster than the person in possession of the Chronometer. I can’t foresee how any of those functions will help resolve our present concerns.”

“If we’re out of ideas,” Kendra said, “the Fairy Queen might be our best chance. I could return the bowl to the island and explain the situation.

Maybe she can help.”

Patton picked at a frayed gap where his sleeve had torn near the elbow. “I do not fully comprehend what it means to be fairykind, but I am well informed about the shrine. Are you certain returning a bowl will be sufficient excuse to tread on forbidden soil? Before you, Kendra, none have set foot on that island and lived.”

“A fairy named Shiara suggested I could,” Kendra said. “In a way I can’t explain, it feels true. Normally I can’t think of returning to the island without a feeling of dread. My instincts agree with what the fairy told me. The bowl belongs there. Replacing it should allow me access.”

“Shiara?” Patton said. “I know Shiara—silver wings, blue hair. I consider her the most reliable fairy at Fablehaven. She used to have a close friendship with Ephira. After I was fairystruck and Ephira vanished, Shiara became my closest confidante in matters pertaining to the fairy world. If I were ever to heed advice from a fairy, it would be hers.”

“You can talk to fairies too?” Seth asked.

“One of the advantages of being fairystruck,” Patton said. “Their language, Silvian, is otherwise quite difficult to master, although some have learned it through study. I can also read and speak their secret language. So can Kendra. That was how she deciphered the inscription I left in the vault at Lost Mesa.”

“That was in a secret fairy language?” Kendra asked. “I can never tell what language I’m hearing or speaking or reading. Everything seems like English.”

“It takes time,” Patton said. “When a fairy speaks, you hear English, but with practice you can also perceive the actual language the fairy is using. At first, the different languages are difficult to distinguish, probably because the translation is so effortless. With some effort, you will grow more conscious of the words you hear and say.”

“Why did you leave a message in the vault in the first place?” Kendra wondered.

“The unteachable fairy tongue is a well-kept secret,” Patton said. “The language is inherently incomprehensible to all creatures of darkness. I felt I needed to leave a clue regarding what I had done in order to prevent a panic if the Knights found the artifact missing, so I inscribed a message in an arcane language that only a friend of light would be able to comprehend.”

“Since you trust Shiara, are you okay with me going to the island?” Kendra asked.

“In this matter, you know better than I do,” Patton admitted. “Under less dire circumstances, I would implore you not to undertake such a risky venture. But this predicament is calamitous. Do I believe the Fairy Queen will be able to help us resist the plague? Hard to say, but she helped you once before, and some hope is better than none.”

“Then I’m going to try it,” Kendra said firmly.

“When you have to jump, you jump,” Seth agreed.

“Crossing the pond will be dangerous,” Lena cautioned. “The naiads are riled. They’ll want the bowl back. They’ll want vengeance for my departure. Patton had better ferry you across.”

“I would have it no other way,” Patton said. “I have some experience navigating those hazards.” He winked at Lena.

The former naiad raised her eyebrows. “And getting dragged into the pond by those hazards, if memory serves.”

“You’re sounding more and more like the Lena I know,” Patton said with a grin.

“As soon as the sun goes down, I’ll watch for Grandpa and Grandma,” Seth said. “They’ll probably drop by as shadows. Maybe they can still help us.”

“In the meantime, should we go to the pond?” Kendra asked.

“We ought to strike while daylight persists,” Patton said.

Seth stowed the Chronometer in a backpack that had formerly held camping gear. He hooked his arms through the straps, and they exited the tent together. Curious satyrs, dwarfs, and dryads had congregated outside. They began eagerly whispering to one another and gesturing at Patton.

Doren trotted up to Patton. “Show me the hold you put on Broadhoof!”

“To prevent an epidemic of crippled satyrs, I had best refrain,” Patton said. He held up both hands, raising his voice. “I have only returned for a short while. I journeyed forward through time, and mean to reverse this plague before I depart.” Several of the bystanders applauded and whistled. “I hope I can rely on your assistance as needed.”

“Anything for you, Patton!” a hamadryad cried in a breathy tone that earned a glare from Lena.

“We will want some privacy at the pond as we approach the shrine,” Patton said. “Your cooperation will be appreciated.”

Patton escorted Kendra toward the nearest gazebo. She felt tense as Patton led her up the steps and along the boardwalk. The last time she had crossed the pond to the island was among her scariest memories. The naiads had fought hard to capsize her little paddleboat. At least this time the sun was out, and she would not be alone.

Patton strode down the steps to the pier beside the boathouse. He walked over to the floating shed and smashed open the locked door with a single, measured kick.

“Patton is entering the boathouse!” shouted an exultant voice from below the water.

“We’ll have his bones in our collection after all!” raved a second naiad.

“Look who’s with him!” the first voice gasped.

“The viviblix who raised him from the grave!” a new voice mocked.

“Beware her zombie magic,” sang the second naiad.

“They have the bowl!” an outraged naiad noticed.

The voices became lower and more urgent.

“Hurry!”

“Gather everyone!”

“Not a moment to lose!”

The voices trailed off as Patton and Kendra entered the boathouse. The inside looked much as Kendra recalled. Two rowboats floated on the water, one broader than the other, alongside a small paddleboat outfitted with pedals. Patton tromped across the boathouse, selected the largest pair of oars, and placed them in the broad rowboat. Then he laid one of the next largest oars in the boat as well.

“Sounds as though our underwater antagonists mean to give us a rough time,” Patton said. “Are you sure you want to do this?”

“Do you think you can get me to the island?” Kendra asked.

“I am confident that I can,” Patton said.

“In that case, I have to try.”

“Do you mind retaining the bowl?”

Kendra held it up. “I’ve got it. I’m sure you’ll have your hands full.”

Patton pulled a lever beside the damaged door, and then started turning a crank. A sliding door on the far side of the boathouse gradually opened, granting direct access to the pond. Patton untied the rowboat and climbed inside. He held out a hand for Kendra and helped her into the craft. The boat wobbled as she stepped into it.

“You made it to the island in that little dinghy?” Patton asked, nodding at the paddleboat.

“Yes.”

“You’re even braver than I thought,” Patton said with a smile.

“I didn’t really know how to use oars, but I knew how to pedal.”

Patton nodded. “Remember, lean opposite from the direction they try to tip us. But not too far, or they might reverse tactics and tip you out of the boat the other way.”

“Gotcha,” Kendra said, glancing over the side, expecting naiads to accost them at any second.

“They can’t bother us while we’re in the boathouse,” Patton said. “Only once we pass beyond these walls.” He slid the oars into the oarlocks and held them poised to stroke. “Ready?”

Kendra nodded. She did not trust her voice.

Beneath the water just ahead of them, Kendra heard a giggle. Several voices shushed the laughter.

Dipping the blades of the oars into the water, Patton propelled the craft out of the boathouse. The instant the rowboat passed through the door, it began to pitch and rock. Grimacing, Patton wielded the oars aggressively, fighting to keep the boat steady. Bucking and tilting, the rowboat spun in tight circles. Kendra tried to position herself toward the center of the small vessel, but the violent jostling kept her lurching from side to side, clinging to the bowl with one hand while attempting to steady herself with the other.

“I’ve never seen an effort like this,” Patton growled, jerking one of his oars out of a naiad’s grasp.

The right side of the boat tipped alarmingly high, as if many hands were pushing it up. Patton lunged to the right, jabbing at the water with an oar. The right side dropped and the left tipped high, nearly rocking Kendra overboard. Patton flung himself in the other direction, steadying the boat.

The battle raged on for several minutes, the naiads tirelessly striving to capsize the rowboat and simultaneously towing them away from the island. The oars were instantly seized whenever Patton dipped them in the water, so he spent much of his time wrestling one or the other from an unseen grasp. Meanwhile, the boat twirled and swayed like a carnival ride.

As time passed, instead of dwindling, the attack became more brazen. Webbed hands reached up out of the water to grip the gunwale. During a particularly bad bout of tilting, Kendra toppled against the side of the boat and found herself staring into a pair of violet eyes. The pallid naiad had boosted herself out of the water with one hand and grasped at the silver bowl with the other.

“Back, Narinda!” Patton barked, brandishing an oar.

Baring her teeth, the determined naiad hauled herself farther out of the water. Kendra held the bowl away from Narinda, but the naiad caught hold of her sleeve and began pulling her overboard.

Patton brought the oar down sharply, slapping the naiad on top of her head with the flat of the blade. Shrieking, the frenzied naiad released Kendra and vanished with a splash. Another hand grabbed the gunwale and Patton instantly brought the oar down on the webbed fingers.

“Stay in the water, ladies,” Patton warned.

“You’ll pay for your audacity,” snarled an unseen naiad.

“All you have felt is the flat side of the oar,” Patton laughed. “I’m spanking, not wounding. Keep this up and I’ll deal out more lasting injuries.”

The naiads continued to hinder the progress of the rowboat, but they no longer reached up out of the water. Patton began using quick strokes that skimmed the surface of the water, throwing a great deal of spray with each pull. The rapid, shallow strokes were harder for the naiads to grab, and the rowboat began to make progress toward the island.

“Chiatra, Narinda, Ulline, Hyree, Pina, Zolie, Frindle, Jayka!” Lena called. “The water has never felt finer.”

Kendra turned and saw Lena sitting at the edge of the pier, smiling serenely, feet dangling in the water. Seth stood behind her, an eager look on his face.

“Lena, no!” Patton called.

Lena began humming a lazy melody. She kicked her bare feet gently, making small splashes. Suddenly, Lena yanked her feet out of the water and danced a step back from the edge of the pier. Groping webbed hands broke the surface of the pond nearby.

“So close,” Lena lamented. “You almost had me!” She skipped a few steps back along the quay and dipped her toe in, again hopping away just in time to avoid another grasping hand.

“The naiads have never made such a unified, persistent effort,” Patton muttered. “Lena is trying to distract them. Chop at the water with the spare oar.”

Kendra set the bowl in her lap and picked up the extra oar Patton had brought. Gripping it at the middle of the handle, she began stabbing the blade briskly into the water at either side of the boat. Occasionally the tip of the oar struck something. Kendra began hearing grunts and complaints.

Patton began dipping his oars deeper, and the boat surged toward the island. Encouraged, Kendra jabbed the water more frantically, breathing hard with the effort. She became so intent on hacking at naiads that she was caught off guard when the rowboat ran aground on the island.

“Get out,” Patton ordered.

Laying down the oar and picking up the bowl, Kendra stepped to the prow. She hesitated for a moment. Having survived the island once was no guarantee she would survive again. What if her confidence was misplaced? Others who had dared to tread on the island had been instantly transfigured into dandelion fluff. The moment her foot came into contact with the muddy bank, she might dissolve into a downy cloud of dandelion seeds and drift away on the breeze.

Then again, if she opted not to take this risk, her apparent destiny was to become a shadow person on a fallen preserve ruled by a demon and a wicked hamadryad. In a way, an exit as dandelion seeds might be preferable.

All considerations aside, she had made the decision already, and now just needed the courage to carry it out. The naiads could drag the boat back into the water at any moment!

Braced for the worst, she leaped out of the rowboat and onto the firm mud of the island. As on her previous excursion to the shrine, the moment

was anticlimactic. She did not transform into seeds. There was no signal to indicate she had done anything out of the ordinary.

Kendra glanced back at Patton, giving him a thumbs-up. He touched his forehead in a casual salute. A moment later, the boat was dragged back into the water and began to twirl.

“Don’t fret about me,” Patton instructed lightheartedly, skimming an oar across the surface of the water with a ferocious swing. “Go commune with the queen.”

On her prior visit to the island, Kendra had not known the location of the tiny shrine, and it had proven difficult to find. This time, bowl in hand, Kendra traipsed diagonally across the island, shoving between shrubs on an undeviating path to her destination. She found the gentle spring burbling out of the ground at the center of the island, trickling down a mild slope into the pond. At the source of the spring stood a finely carved statue of a fairy about two inches tall.

Crouching, Kendra placed the bowl in front of the miniature pedestal supporting the fairy figurine. At the same moment, Kendra inhaled an aroma like young blossoms blooming in rich soil near the sea.

Thank you, Kendra. The words were distinct in her mind, arriving with as much clarity as hearing could have provided.

“Is that you?” Kendra whispered, thrilled to have achieved contact so quickly.

Yes.

“I can hear you more clearly than last time.”

You are now fairykind. I can reach your mind with much less effort.

“If you can reach me so easily, why haven’t you spoken with me before now?”

I do not inhabit your world. I dwell elsewhere. My shrines mark the locations where my direct influence can be perceived. They are my contact points to your world.

The thoughts were accompanied by mirthful feelings. The combination of thoughts and emotions made Kendra feel as though she had never truly communicated with anyone before. “You’re called the Fairy Queen,” Kendra said. “But who are you really?”

I am molea. There is no word to aptly describe me in your language. I am not a fairy. I am the fairy. The mother, the eldest sister, the protector, the first. For the good of my sisters, I reside beyond your world, in a kingdom untouched by darkness.

“Fablehaven is in danger,” Kendra said.

Although I can rarely speak to their minds, I see through the eyes of my sisters in all the spheres they inhabit. Many of my sisters in your vicinity have been tainted by a terrible darkness. If such darkness were to pollute me, all would be lost.

For a moment Kendra could not speak, as a forlorn feeling overwhelmed her. She realized the bleak emotion had flowed from the Fairy Queen as part of her communication. When the emotion subsided, Kendra spoke again. “What can I do to stop the darkness?”

The darkness emanates from an object endowed with tremendous black power. The object must be destroyed.

“The nail Seth pulled from the revenant,” Kendra said.

The object inflames the anguish of a corrupt hamadryad and enhances the strength of a demon. The profane object is embedded in a tree.

For a moment, Kendra beheld a gnarled, black tree beside a fuming pool of tar. A nail projected from the tortured trunk. The image made Kendra’s eyes burn, and engendered a feeling of deep regret. Without accompanying words to explain the scene, Kendra felt certain she was witnessing the tree through the eyes of a dark fairy as perceived by the Fairy Queen.

“How can I destroy the nail?” Kendra asked.

A lengthy pause followed. She heard Patton’s oars sloshing as he continued to resist the attacking naiads.

“What if we make the fairies big again?” Kendra tried.

An image of giant dark fairies flashed vividly into view. Terrible and beautiful, they shriveled trees and oozed shadows. *Aside from the other potential drawbacks, I am still recovering from the energy it required to transform the fairies and initiate you as fairykind.*

“What did you do to me?” Kendra asked. “Some fairies called me your handmaiden.”

When I looked into your heart and mind, and witnessed the purity of your devotion to your loved ones, I chose you to serve as my agent in the world during these turbulent times. You are indeed my handmaiden, my steward. You and I draw energy from the same source. With the office comes great authority. Command the fairies in my name, and they will hearken to you.

“The fairies will obey me?” Kendra asked.

If you issue orders in my name, and do not abuse the privilege.

“What is your name?”

Kendra felt a response like melodic laughter. *My true name must remain secret. Issuing commands in the name of the queen will suffice.*

Kendra suddenly remembered when the fairy at the mansion where the Knights of the Dawn met had suggested she issue a command in the name of the Queen. “Can the fairies help me destroy the nail?”

No. The fairies lack sufficient power. Only a talisman imbued with tremendous light energy could unmake the dark object.

“Do you know where I can find a talisman full of light?”

Another long pause followed. *I could make one, but such an action would require destroying this shrine.*

Kendra waited. A vision unfolded to her mind. As if gazing down from high above, she beheld the island and the shrine shining in the midst of darkness. The water of the lake had turned black, and teemed with foul, misshapen naiads. The boardwalk and gazebos had crumbled; dark fairies flitted among the rotting debris. Darkened dwarfs, satyrs, and dryads roamed among withered trees and parched fields.

Preserving the shrine is not worth so much devastation. I would rather lose one of my precious points of contact with your world than see my sisters condemned to benighted slavery. I will concentrate the energy protecting this shrine into a single object. After I forge the talisman, my influence will no longer persist here.

“I won’t be able to contact you anymore?” Kendra asked.

Not from this place. As soon as the talisman passes beyond the hedge, the pond and the island will be stripped of all defenses.

“What do I do with the talisman?” Kendra asked.

Retain possession of the talisman. The energy inside of you will help keep it stable and fully energized. While in your possession, the talisman will cast an umbrella of energy that will help protect those around you. If you bring the talisman into contact with the dark object, both will be destroyed. Be forewarned. Whoever connects the objects will perish.

Kendra swallowed. Her mouth felt dry. "Do I need to be the person who touches them together?"

Not necessarily. I would prefer that you survive the endeavor. But whether you or another will complete the task, if the light and dark objects can be joined, the sacrifice will be worthwhile. Much that has darkened will be restored.

"Can we fix your shrine afterward?" Kendra asked hopefully.

This shrine will be beyond repair.

"I won't hear from you again?"

Not here.

"I'd have to find another shrine. Could I approach it if I find it?"

Kendra sensed laughter mingled with affection. *You wonder why my shrines are so heavily protected. Having points of contact to your world makes me vulnerable. If evil finds my kingdom, all creatures of light will suffer. For their welfare, I must keep my realm unspoiled, and so I zealously guard my shrines. As a rule, all trespassers must perish. I rarely grant exceptions.*

"Does being fairykind allow me access?" Kendra asked.

Not inherently. If you ever find another shrine, search your feelings for the answer. You have sufficient light to guide you.

"I'm afraid to try to destroy the nail," Kendra confessed. She did not want the conversation with the Fairy Queen to end.

I am reluctant to destroy this shrine. Kendra could feel her deep sadness. The emotion brought tears to her eyes. *Sometimes we do what we must.*

"Okay," Kendra said. "I'll do my best. One last question. If I survive this, what am I supposed to do? As fairykind, I mean."

Live a fruitful life. Resist evil. Give more than you take. Help others do likewise. The rest will take care of itself. Step away from the shrine.

Kendra backed away from the miniature statue on the tiny plinth. Her vision blurred, and a flood of sensations overwhelmed her. She tasted sweet honey, crisp apples, fleshy mushrooms, and pure water. She smelled plowed fields, damp grass, ripe grapes, and pungent herbs. She heard the rush of wind, the crash of waves, the roar of thunder, and the faint crackle of a duckling punching through an eggshell. She felt sunlight warming her skin and a light mist cooling her. Sight was temporarily unavailable, but she simultaneously tasted, smelled, heard, and felt a thousand other sensations, all distinct and unmistakable.

When her vision returned, Kendra found the tiny fairy statue shining intensely. She instinctively squinted and shielded her eyes, worried that the brilliant light might cause lasting damage. When she peeked, the radiance did not inflict any pain. Hoping the brightness was benign, she gazed openly at the statue. By contrast, the rest of the world became dull, drained, dreary. All color, all light, had converged on the thumb-sized figurine.

And then the statue shattered, stone flakes chiming as they dispersed. Upon the small pedestal remained a dazzling, egg-shaped pebble. For an instant, the pebble flashed brighter than the statue had gleamed. Then the light diminished, absorbed into the stone, until the ovoid pebble became rather unremarkable, except for being so white and smooth.

Color returned to the world. The late afternoon sun shone brightly again. Kendra could no longer sense the presence of the Fairy Queen.

Kneeling, she picked up the smooth pebble. It felt ordinary, weighing no more or less than she expected. Although it no longer glowed, she felt certain the pebble was the talisman. How could all the power protecting the shrine fit inside such a small, nondescript object?

Looking around, Kendra saw that Patton had the rowboat back on the shore. She hurried over to him, worried that the naiads would haul the boat away before she got there.

“No rush,” Patton said. “They’re under orders.”

“Reluctantly,” a voice muttered from under the water.

“Hush,” a different naiad scolded. “We’re not supposed to talk.”

“I got a free ride back last time as well,” Kendra said, stepping into the boat.

“Good news?” he asked.

“Generally,” Kendra said. “I’d better wait until we’re back at the tent.”

“Fair enough,” Patton agreed. “One thing I’ll say—that stone shines almost as brightly as you do.”

Kendra glanced at the stone. It was flawlessly white and smooth, but did not seem to her to emit any light. She sat down. Patton rested the oars across his lap. Guided by unseen hands, the rowboat coasted away from the island and drifted toward the boathouse. Glancing up, Kendra saw a golden owl with a human face gazing down at her from a high limb, a tear sliding from one eye.

Chapter 22



Light

Seth waited beside Lena in the gazebo above the pier. None of the satyrs, dryads, or dwarfs lingered on the boardwalk or in any of the other pavilions. As Patton had asked, they remained out of sight.

Kendra and Patton reclined in the rowboat, returning placidly toward the boathouse, apparently towed by the same naiads who had recently been attacking them. Seth wished he could have seen what Kendra was doing out on the island, but she spent most of the time screened by bushes. Lena had described a blinding light, but Seth had failed to see it.

“You were awesome at dodging those naiads,” Seth said.

“Anything to distract them from drowning my husband,” Lena replied. “Part of me will always love my sisters, but they can be such pests! I was glad for an excuse to bait them.”

“Do you think Kendra succeeded?”

“She must have made contact. Only the queen could have ordered the naiads to conduct them safely back to shore.” Lena narrowed her eyes.

“Something has changed about the island. I can’t quite put my finger on it. After the flash, there is a new feeling permeating this whole area.” Lips pursed, Lena thoughtfully watched the rowboat glide into the boathouse.

Seth bounded down the steps to the pier, arriving at the boathouse door as Kendra and Patton exited. “Anything good happen?” Seth asked.

“Pretty good,” Kendra said.

“What’s with the egg?” Seth inquired.

“It’s a pebble,” Kendra corrected, closing her fingers around it tightly. “I’ll fill you guys in, but we should do it back at the tent.”

Patton embraced Lena. “You were wonderful,” he said, pecking her on the lips. “However, I don’t enjoy seeing you so near those naiads. I can think of few people they would rather drag to the bottom of the pond.”

“I can think of few people they would have a harder time catching,” Lena responded smugly.

They mounted the stairs to the gazebo and then descended a few steps into the grassy field. Three towering dryads strode briskly toward them, obstructing their route to the tent. In the middle, tallest of the three, walked the dryad Seth had seen consulting with Grandpa and Grandma, her auburn hair flowing past her waist. The dryad to her left looked Native American and wore earthy robes. The dryad on the right was a platinum blonde with a gown like a frozen waterfall. All of the graceful women stood at least a head taller than Patton.

“Hello, Lizette,” Patton said amiably to the dryad in the middle.

“Don’t ‘hello’ me, Patton Burgess,” she said, scowling down at him, her voice melodious but hard. “What have you done to the shrine?”

“The shrine?” Patton asked, checking quizzically over his shoulder. “Is something amiss?”

“It has been destroyed,” the blond dryad announced firmly.

“After you sent us away,” the Native American added.

Lizette gazed at Kendra, her eyes narrow. “And your friend is outshining the sun.”

“I hope you aren’t insinuating that we overthrew the monument!” Patton objected scornfully. “Not only do we lack the desire—we lack the means! The Fairy Queen dismantled the shrine for reasons of her own.”

“You realize the preserve has permanently lost contact with her highness,” Lizette said. “We find this unacceptable.” She and the other two leaned forward menacingly.

“Less acceptable than Fablehaven and all who dwell here descending into irredeemable darkness?” Patton asked.

The dryads relaxed slightly.

“Do you have a plan?” Lizette asked.

“Has Kendra ever gleamed any brighter?” Patton exclaimed. “Her glow is a token of good things to come. Lend us a few minutes to confer in private, and we will announce our plot to reclaim Fablehaven, a strategy formulated by the Fairy Queen herself.” Patton glanced at Kendra as if hoping his words were true. Kendra gave a slight nod.

“There had best be a satisfactory explanation for this desecration,” Lizette threatened darkly. “This day will be mourned until the end of leaf and stream.”

Reaching up, Patton patted Lizette on the shoulder. “Losing the shrine is a grievous blow to all who love light. We will avenge this tragedy.”

Lizette stepped aside, and Patton led the others between the somber dryads. Although temporarily appeased, the towering women clearly remained unsatisfied.

When Seth, Kendra, and Lena reached the tent, Patton followed the others inside, dropping the flap to cover the opening.

“What happened?” Seth asked.

“The Fairy Queen destroyed the shrine in order to make this.” Kendra held up the pebble.

Patton squinted. “No wonder you have been gleaming so much brighter.”

“I don’t see any light,” Seth complained.

“Only some eyes can see it,” Lena said, eyes narrowed.

“Why can’t I?” Kendra asked. “The pebble only looked bright while the Fairy Queen was making it.”

“The light of the stone must have united with your inner light,” Patton said. “Your own light can be difficult to distinguish. I imagine you can see in the dark.”

“I can,” Kendra said.

“Whether or not you recognize it, Kendra, you carry much light within you,” Patton said. “With the stone, your radiance has grown even more brilliant. To those who can perceive such light, you glare like a beacon.”

Kendra curled her fingers around the stone. “The Fairy Queen filled the stone with all of the power protecting the shrine. When I remove the stone

from this area, dark creatures will be able to enter. If we touch the pebble to the nail in the tree, the objects will destroy each other.”

“All right!” Seth exclaimed.

“There’s a catch,” Kendra said. “The Fairy Queen said that whoever connects the objects will die.”

“Not a problem.” Patton dismissed the concern with a wave of one hand. “I will personally resolve this dilemma.”

“No you won’t,” Lena said anxiously. “You have to return to me. Your life can’t end here.”

“What we shared already happened,” Patton said. “Nothing I do here can change that.”

“Don’t you try to con me, Patton Burgess,” Lena growled. “I’ve put up with your pacifications for decades. I know you better than you know yourself. You’re always stretching for an excuse to protect others at your expense—partly out of a noble sense of duty, mostly for the thrill. You’re well aware that if you fail to return to the past, you may wipe out the majority of our relationship. My whole history could change. I refuse to lose our life together.”

Patton looked guilty. “There are many uncertainties with time travel. To my knowledge, the Chronometer is the only successful time travel device ever created. Most practicalities remain untested. Keep in mind, in your past, I returned after I traveled through time. Some would argue that nothing I do now can possibly contradict that reality. If I die during my visit here, somewhere else, along some alternate timeline, there might be a Lena I won’t see again. But your history is secure. Regardless of what happens to me, you will very likely persist here as if nothing in your past has changed.”

“Sounds like a flimsy theory,” Lena refuted. “If you’re wrong, and you fail to return, you could completely alter history. You have to go back. You have important duties to perform. Not only for my sake, for the good of countless others. Patton, I’ve lived a full life. If any of us must expire, it should be me. I could move on with no complaints. Seeing you again is the perfect culmination of my mortality.” She gazed at Patton with such undisguised adoration that Seth averted his eyes.

“Why does anybody have to die?” Seth asked. “Why not throw the stone at the nail? Then nobody would actually connect the objects.”

“We could try,” Patton said. “It introduces an additional element of risk. Merely getting close enough to the tree will be a challenge.”

“I could do it,” Seth said.

Lena rolled her eyes. “As candidates for uniting the talismans, you and Kendra are out of the question.”

“Am I?” Seth asked. “What if we get there and everyone but me ends up paralyzed by fear?”

“Ephira may not be able to radiate magical fear as readily as she could inside of her lair,” Patton said. “She may not even be able to reach Kurisock’s domain. Besides, as a dragon tamer, I’m fairly resistant to magical fear.”

“You froze back at the house,” Seth reminded him.

Tilting his head, Patton gave half a nod. “If needed, you can hold my hand and get me close, then I’ll take the stone the rest of the way.”

“I’m supposed to hold the pebble as long as I can, to keep it stable and fully charged,” Kendra said. “Maybe I should do it.”

“No, kids,” Patton emphasized. “My newest goal is to go my entire life without any children sacrificing themselves on my behalf.”

“As part of being fairykind, I can command fairies,” Kendra said. “Is there something they could do?”

“Since when can you command fairies?” Seth blurted.

“I just found out,” Kendra said.

“Then have a fairy connect the pebble and the nail!” Seth said enthusiastically. “The fairies have always hated me. Maybe you could have all of them destroy the nail together!”

“Seth!” Kendra exclaimed chidingly. “That isn’t funny!”

“Forcing a fairy to undertake a suicide mission could have serious repercussions,” Patton cautioned. “I don’t like it.”

“I love it!” Seth reaffirmed, grinning.

“Maybe I could ask for volunteers,” Kendra suggested. “You know, so it won’t be me compelling anyone.”

“This line of thinking is futile,” Lena said. “No creatures of light will be able to enter Kurisock’s domain.”

Kendra held up the egg-shaped pebble. “The Fairy Queen said that as long as I hold the stone, an umbrella of light will help protect those near

me.”

“Now, that is useful information,” Patton mused. “If the power that keeps this area a sanctuary of light were to enter a stronghold of darkness, the influx of positive energy might allow light creatures to enter.”

“Let’s recruit some fairies,” Seth said, clapping his hands together eagerly. “Better them than us.”

“We can try the fairies as a backup,” Patton replied. “But be forewarned—fairies are notoriously unreliable. And we should leave intentionally compelling a fairy to die on our behalf out of the question. I am more excited that we might be able to cajole some more responsible allies into joining us and helping us win through to the tree.”

“If all else fails, I’ll finish the task,” Lena vowed. “I’m young, I’m agile, I’m strong. I can do it.”

Patton crossed his arms. “Permit me to revise my latest goal—I also want to go my whole life without my wife dying on my behalf. If a fairy fails to voluntarily destroy the talismans, I’ll throw the stone. I have excellent aim. Then nobody will be touching the objects when they connect.”

“And if you miss?” Lena asked.

“We’ll worry about that if it happens.”

“Which is Pattonese for you will unite the objects yourself,” Lena huffed.

Patton shrugged innocently.

“Have you ever considered that you might be worth more to the world alive than dead?” Lena groused.

“If I were going to die doing something dangerous, it would have happened a long time ago.”

Lena swatted at him. “I hope I’m not there the day all your cocky words return to humble you.”

“You’ll be there,” Patton said, “scoffing and pointing.”

“Not if you’re in a coffin,” Lena grumbled.

“When should we do this?” Seth asked.

“Daylight is failing,” Patton said. “We’ll want the sun with us when we embark on this murky venture. I recommend we sally forth in the morning, with as many companions as will join us.”

“And I get to come, right?” Seth confirmed.

“We can’t leave you behind unprotected from dark influences,” Patton said. “This final gamble is all or nothing. Whether we triumph or fail, we will do it together, pooling our talents and resources.”

“Speaking of talents,” Lena said, “Seth had better get to the gap in the hedge, so he can see if any shadow people come to us with information.”

Only then did Seth notice how much the glow of the yellow and purple tent walls had reddened with the setting sun. “I’ll go right now,” he said.

“I’ll join you,” Kendra offered.

“Lena and I will go rally support among the other citizens of Fablehaven,” Patton said. “Our story will be that the Fairy Queen has given us the power to attack Kurisock and reverse the plague. We do not want to be any more specific, in case the information reaches unfriendly ears.”

“Got it,” Seth said, stepping out of the tent. The others followed. While Patton was mobbed by satyrs, dryads, dwarfs, and fairies, Kendra and Seth slipped through the crowd and headed for the main entrance. A few fairies flitted along behind Kendra, as if hoping to approach her, but when Patton began explaining the situation, they zipped away in his direction.

When Kendra and Seth reached the opening in the hedge, the dark satyrs stationed there backed away a good distance, a couple of them bleating angrily. They squinted at Kendra, fuzzy hands raised to shield their feral eyes.

“Looks like you’re blinding the freaky satyrs,” Seth said. “Do you think your rock will keep Grandma and Grandpa away?”

“Maybe my shininess will help them find us,” Kendra said.

Seth plopped down in the grass. The sun hung just above the treetops west of the field. “They’ll be able to come soon.”

“Who do you think will show up?”

“Hopefully all six of them.”

Kendra nodded. “Too bad I won’t be able to see them.”

“Well, I guess one person can’t have every single magical ability the universe has to offer. You aren’t missing much. You can’t really recognize them except by their outlines.”

Seth started plucking at the tiny blue flowers in the grass. Kendra sat with her knees scrunched up to her chest, hugging her folded legs. Shadows

crept across the field until the sun went down and twilight engulfed the clearing.

Kendra appeared content with silence, and Seth could not muster the effort to spark a conversation. He stared through the gap in the hedge, hoping to see a familiar shadow join the dark satyrs lurking beyond the opening. As the vivid sunset dimmed, the temperature faded from hot to warm.

Finally a single black form emerged from among the restless satyrs. The silhouette plodded toward the gap in the hedge as if resisting a mighty wind. Seth sat up. "Here we go."

"Who do you see?" Kendra asked.

"He's short and thin. Might be Coulter." Seth raised his voice. "That you, Coulter?"

With apparent effort, the figure raised a hand to display the missing fingers. He kept trudging forward, each step seeming to demand greater effort than the last.

"He's struggling," Seth said. "Must be your light."

"Should I back away?"

"Maybe."

Kendra rose and walked away from the gap in the hedge.

"Wait!" Seth cried. "He's waving his arms. He's motioning for you to come back. No, not just back, he wants you to come toward him."

"What if it isn't Coulter?" Kendra worried.

"He can't pass through the gap," Seth said. "Just don't get within grabbing distance."

Seth and Kendra walked toward the gap, stopping two paces from the entrance. Coulter hunched forward, trembling with the effort of each arduous step, but managed to keep his feet moving.

"Where is he?" Kendra asked.

"Almost to the gap," Seth said. "He looks like he's about to pass out."

Coulter slogged forward another few steps. Pausing, he leaned forward, bracing one hand against his thigh. Quivering, he strained to lift the other arm, but failed to hoist it very high.

"He's reaching for us," Seth said. "Step a little closer."

"I can't let him touch me!" Kendra exclaimed.

“Just a step,” Seth said. “I think he’s come as far as he can.”

“Why don’t I back away?”

“He wants you near him.”

Kendra took a cautious half-step forward, and suddenly Seth glimpsed flesh flickering beneath the shadow.

“I see him!” Kendra shrieked, lifting her hands to her lips. “Part of him, anyway, faintly.”

“Me too,” Seth said. “I’ve never seen any of the shadow people do that. I think you might be healing him. Yes! He’s nodding. Get closer!”

“What if he contaminates me?”

“Just a little closer. He still won’t be able to reach you.”

“What if he’s faking how far he can reach?”

“He fell to his knees!” Seth cried.

“I can see,” Kendra said, taking another half-step toward the gap in the hedge. Coulter flashed into clearer view, slumped forward, both hands buttressed against his thighs. His face looked anguished, contorted by tremendous effort. He tried to keep his head up, but it was slowly bowing.

“Help him!” Seth yelled.

Kendra stepped into the gap between the hedges and seized Coulter’s shoulder. Instantly he came into full view and flopped through the gap in the hedge to lie panting on the path.

“Coulter!” Seth exclaimed. “You’re back!”

“Barely,” he wheezed, face ruddy from the recent exertion. “Just barely. Give me . . . a minute.”

“We’re so happy you’re alive!” Kendra gushed, tears blurring her vision.

“We should . . . stay back . . . from the entrance,” he gasped, crawling away from the gap in the hedge.

“A pair of satyrs just took off running,” Seth reported.

“They’ll want to . . . spread the word . . . that Kendra can overcome the darkness,” Coulter panted. He sat up, taking deep breaths. Gradually he appeared to relax.

“Did you see my light?” Kendra asked.

Coulter chuckled. “Did I see it? I was scalded by your light, Kendra, blinded by it. I thought it might consume me. It scorched me differently than sunlight. Sunlight only inflicted pain. Cold pain. Your light beckoned as well as burned. It gave me warmth along with the pain, the first warmth I’ve felt since the shadow fairies transformed me. I could feel the darkness that possessed me cringing away from your light, and that gave me hope. I thought if I could just get close enough to your light, I would either perish or be cleansed. Either way, my frigid existence would end.”

“What was it like as a shadow?” Seth asked.

Coulter shivered. “Colder than I could ever describe. A normal human body would go numb long before it could experience the cold I felt. Sunlight intensified the cold into agony. As a shadow, it was tough to focus. My emotions became confused. I felt desolate. Utterly empty. My mind wanted to shut down. I was constantly tempted to collapse and wallow in my emptiness. But I knew I had to fight those inclinations. Tanu helped me keep my mind whole after he was changed.”

“Where is Tanu?” Kendra asked. “And what about the others? Have you seen Grandma or Grandpa?”

Coulter shook his head. “Gone, all of them. I met up with Warren and Dale briefly. As fellow shades, we could communicate, more like telepathy than speaking. They warned me she was after them, that she had already taken Stan and Ruth away. We split up, with plans to reunite at a rendezvous. None of the others ever arrived. I came here, hoping to warn you what had happened to the others. You were shining, I approached, and here we are.”

“What did Ephira do to them?” Kendra asked.

“Is that her name?” Coulter asked. “Warren and Dale suspected she was imprisoning them somewhere. Stashing them away. Hard to say for sure. Tell me, Kendra, why you were shining so brightly.”

“I’m not shining anymore?” she asked.

Coulter scrutinized her. “I expect you are, but not to my eyes.”

She eyed the dark satyrs, who had retreated even farther from the gap in the hedge. “We’ll give you all the details later, in a place where we won’t be overheard. The Fairy Queen gave me a gift full of light energy.” She lowered her voice to a whisper. “It might help us stop the plague.”

“It certainly cured me,” Coulter said. “Hurt plenty, though. I expect it will rank right up there with my least favorite memories.” He stretched his arms. “I guess it’s up to the three of us to rescue the others.”

“We also have Patton Burgess helping us,” Seth said.

Coulter snickered. “Right, and I expect Paul Bunyan will also be lending a hand. We should check if Pecos Bill is available.”

“He’s serious,” Kendra confirmed. “Patton came forward through time. He’s here. When Lena saw him, she abandoned the pond again, so we have her too.”

Coulter failed to resist a broad grin. “You’re pulling my leg.”

“Would we kid around during such a dangerous time?” Seth asked.

“I was raised on stories about Patton Burgess,” Coulter said, eagerness entering his voice. “I’ve always dreamed of meeting him. He died not long before I was born.”

“I don’t think you’ll be disappointed,” Seth assured him.

“Can you walk?” Kendra asked. “We could bring him here.”

Grunting, Coulter tottered to his feet. Seth steadied him as he swayed. “Now, don’t start coddling me,” Coulter griped. “I just need half a second to get my bearings.”

Coulter started walking toward the tent, his measured steps a bit wobbly. Seth stayed near him, ready to catch the older man if he stumbled. Coulter’s paces grew more confident, and his posture became more natural.

“Here they come,” Kendra said, pointing across the field. Holding hands, Patton and Lena were swiftly approaching.

“What do you know,” Coulter murmured. “Who could have guessed I would meet Patton Burgess in the flesh?”

“You found a friend,” Patton called to Kendra and Seth.

“Coulter!” Lena cried. “It has been far too long!” She danced forward and took his hands, sizing him up.

“You look young,” Coulter marveled.

“Patton Burgess,” Patton said, extending a hand. In a daze, Coulter gripped the hand and shook it.

“Coulter Dixon,” Coulter managed, his mannerisms unabashedly starstruck.

“I take it you were a shadow?” Patton asked.

“I staggered as close as I could to the space between the hedges, drawn by Kendra’s light. When she reached out and touched me, her radiance purged the darkness from me.”

Patton assessed Kendra. “I suppose a risk that paid off was a risk worth taking. Then again, had you become infected yourself, we could have been finished before we began.”

“How did it go with the others?” Seth asked.

“We can expect considerable assistance tomorrow,” Patton forecasted. “You willing to join us, Coulter?”

“Absolutely,” he said, nervously running a hand over his mostly bald pate, smoothing down the wispy tuft of hair in the middle. “I’m relieved you’re here.”

“Glad if I can help,” Patton said, “but our hope resides in Kendra. We should adjourn to the tent so we can fill you in on the details. Tomorrow we will decide the fate of Fablehaven.”



Darkness

The morning was already hot when Kendra awoke alone in her tent. She felt bleary, having slept late. Patton and Lena had spent the night in the big tent, Seth and Coulter in the other. Lying on her back with a sleeping bag tangled around her legs, Kendra felt sticky with sweat. How had she remained asleep when her tent was this stifling?

The egg-shaped pebble remained in her palm, held the same way as when she had fallen asleep. She fingered the smooth stone, which gave off no heat or light that she could perceive, but had empowered her to restore Coulter from his shadowy state with a brief touch. Would her touch retrieve any creature from the darkened state? The others seemed optimistic.

The task awaiting Kendra made her wish she could return to her dreamless slumber. If the Fairy Queen was right, whoever connected the light pebble with the dark nail would die today. She hoped that Seth and Patton had found a loophole, that throwing the stone or some similar trick would resolve the problem without a fatality. But if all other attempts failed, if nobody else could accomplish the feat, Kendra wondered whether she would have the courage to sacrifice herself. Losing her life would be worth it to save her friends and family. She hoped she would be brave enough to take the necessary action if the decisive moment arrived.

Slipping the pebble into her pocket, Kendra pulled on her shoes and tied them. She crawled to the door of her tent, unzipped it, and stepped

outside. The fresh air, though hot, was a relief after the stale confines of the tent. Kendra tried her best to blindly arrange her hair with her fingertips. Sleeping in her clothes had left her feeling in desperate need of a shower.

“She’s up!” Seth hollered, jogging toward her, wearing the backpack with the Chronometer. “Looks like we can do it today after all.”

“Why didn’t you wake me?” Kendra accused.

“Patton wouldn’t let us,” Seth said. “He wanted you rested. We’re all ready.”

Turning, Kendra beheld an impressive crowd of satyrs, dryads, dwarfs, and fairies occupying the field between the tents and the gap in the hedge wall. They were all staring at her. Her eyes swept across the gathering. She was keenly aware that she had just emerged from a hot tent dressed in the same clothes she had worn yesterday.

Hugo approached from a distance pulling the cart, flanked by Cloudwing and Broadhoof. Patton, Lena, and Coulter rode in the cart.

“Where did Hugo get the cart?” Kendra asked.

“Patton sent him to retrieve it at dawn,” Seth replied.

“The centaurs are joining us?” she asked.

“Almost all of the creatures are coming,” Seth enthused. “For one thing, Patton told them how the defenses protecting this area will collapse after we pass beyond the hedge. For another, they all respect him, even Broadhoof.”

“Good morning, Kendra,” Patton boomed joyfully as Hugo came to a stop near the kids. He looked dashing standing with one foot on the side of the cart. Had his clothes been laundered and mended? “Are you rested and ready for our outing?”

Kendra and Seth walked around Hugo to the side of the cart. “I guess so,” she said.

“I found a trio of volunteers willing to help us join the talismans should the need arise,” Patton said, gesturing at three fairies hovering nearby.

Kendra recognized Shiara with her blue hair and silver wings. She also recognized the slender albino fairy with black eyes who had helped carry her into battle against Bahumat. The third was tiny even for a fairy, with fiery wings shaped like flower petals.

“Greetings, Kendra,” Shiara said. “We are willing to give all we have to carry out the final wish our Queen imparted through this hallowed shrine.”

“We’ll be holding you in reserve,” Patton reminded them. “You three must remain hidden throughout the battle. We won’t ask for your assistance unless it becomes absolutely necessary.”

“We will not fail our Queen,” squeaked the red fairy in the tiniest voice Kendra had ever heard.

Patton jumped down from the cart. “Hungry?” he asked, holding out a napkin piled with nuts and berries.

“I don’t have much appetite,” Kendra admitted.

“You’d better eat something,” Coulter encouraged. “You’ll need your energy.”

“Okay,” Kendra relented.

Patton handed her the napkin. “You know, if sufficiently motivated, the fairies could outfit Hugo for battle.”

Kendra chewed on a crunchy mouthful of nuts and berries. The nuts tasted bitter. “You sure these are safe to eat?”

“They’re nutritious,” Patton assured her. “I asked the fairies to assist with equipping Hugo, but most were unwilling.”

“I offered to help,” chirped the albino fairy.

“We need you three to save your strength. Kendra, the majority of the other fairies would need to participate in order to get the golem soundly outfitted.”

“You want me to issue a command?” Kendra asked around a second unpleasant mouthful.

Patton cocked his head and touched his mustache. “The effort will tire them, but having Hugo in top form would be very useful.”

Kendra spit out the nuts she had been chewing. “I’m sorry, these are making me gag. Do you have any water?”

Lena tossed a canteen to Patton from the cart. He unstopped it and passed it to Kendra. She guzzled several swallows. The warm water had a metallic tang. She wiped her lips with her sleeve.

“Well?” Seth asked, glancing over at Hugo.

Would the fairies really respond to her demand? She supposed there was only one way to find out. “This command does not apply to you three,” Kendra told the reliable trio of fairies hovering nearby.

“Understood,” Shiara responded.

“Fairies of Fablehaven,” Kendra called out, using her best authoritative voice. “For the good of the preserve, and in the name of your Queen, I command you to outfit Hugo the golem for battle.”

Fairies streaked toward them from all directions. They swirled around Hugo, forming a scintillating, multicolored tornado. Some fairies flew clockwise, others counterclockwise, weaving past each other without colliding. Vivid bursts of light began zapping the golem. Scores of fairies detached from the twirling vortex to form wider rings. While some fairies continued to frantically orbit the golem, the stationary halos of hovering fairies twittered in dozens of overlapping melodies.

The ground rumbled. Jagged stones erupted through the turf at Hugo’s feet. The golem staggered as the earth beneath him began to churn. Ropelike vines snaked up his body. Uprturned soil flowed up his sturdy legs and Hugo swelled, becoming broader and thicker and taller.

The whirling column of fairies began to disperse and the chanting diminished. Numerous fairies fluttered slowly to the ground, clearly spent. The patch of soil where Hugo stood grew more stable.

Hugo let out a fearsome roar. He had grown a few feet taller, and considerably more massive. Brown vines with long thorns crisscrossed his torso and limbs. Rocks shaped like spearheads jutted from his shoulders, legs, and arms. Serrated plates of stone projected from his back. A group of fairies presented the golem with an enormous club made from a sturdy length of wood and a boulder the size of an anvil.

After delivering the club, more exhausted fairies spiraled to the ground. The fairies who retained sufficient vigor to fly coasted about languidly. A few of the earthbound fairies lapsed into unconsciousness.

“How do you feel, Hugo?” Seth yelled.

The golem’s gravelly mouth formed a gaping grin. “Big.” His voice sounded deeper and rougher than ever.

“All fairies who wish to move out with us should pile in the wagon,” Patton called. “I encourage those capable of movement to assist those who have fainted.” Removing a small ivory box from a pocket, he beckoned

Shiara and the other two emergency fairies. “You three belong in here.” The fairies compliantly flitted into the box.

Lena hopped down lightly from the wagon and began gently scooping up unconscious fairies. Coulter, Patton, and Seth assisted as well. Many fairies alighted on the wagon under their own power.

At first, Kendra watched the others in silence. At her behest, the fairies had expended their energy until they were exhausted. Their weakened state could lead to hundreds of them being converted into dark fairies in the upcoming conflict, and yet none had resisted the order. The power to compel others to obey her commands was sobering, even frightening.

Kendra knelt and began gathering fallen fairies, carefully arranging the limp, fragile bodies on her palm. The handful of unconscious fairies seemed almost weightless. Their translucent wings felt sticky against her skin, like gummy scraps of tissue paper. The fairies in her hand began to glow brightly, although none awakened. Placing the delicate bodies in the cart illustrated why she would have to be very careful with her new ability. She did not want to inadvertently harm these tiny, beautiful creatures.

Patton climbed onto the cart and waved his arms. Movement in the field ceased as all eyes regarded him. “As you know, I supervised this preserve for decades,” he began in a strong voice. “I have a profound love for Fablehaven and for all of the creatures who dwell here. The threat we now face is unlike any I have experienced. Fablehaven has never been closer to obliteration. Today we march on a stronghold of darkness. Some of us may not be able to enter, but I will be forever grateful to all who were willing to try. If you can help us win through to the tree beside the lake of tar, we will bring an end to the shadow plague. Shall we get under way?”

A resounding cheer answered his inquiry. Kendra watched as satyrs waved clubs, dryads brandished staffs, and dwarfs shook war hammers. The centaurs reared majestically, Broadhoof holding his sword aloft, Cloudwing shaking his tremendous bow. It was an impressive sight, until Kendra remembered that all those allies could be changed into enemies with a bite.

“Ready, Kendra?” Patton asked, reaching down for her.

Kendra realized that Seth, Lena, and Coulter had already joined Patton in the cart. The exhausted fairies were safely stowed. It was time to move out.

“I think so,” Kendra said, accepting his hand. He swung her up easily.

“Hugo,” Patton said, “protecting us as needed, please deliver us to the tree beside the lake of tar at the heart of Kurisock’s domain. Move swiftly, but do not outdistance those who have elected to accompany us unless I issue a special command.”

At his new height, Hugo had to hunch awkwardly in order to pull the cart without tilting the front too high. As the cart wheeled forward, Kendra stared at the golem’s jutting stones and prickly thorns. It looked like Hugo had joined a biker gang.

Satyrs, dwarfs, and dryads parted to let the cart pass, and then fell into step alongside and behind. As the cart approached the gap in the hedge, the dark satyrs stationed there fell back. When the cart passed beyond the hedge, Kendra discerned no particular sensation. She glanced back; the pond and the gazebos looked no different.

The dark satyrs fled before them, scattering into the forest. Hugo turned down the road toward the hill where the Forgotten Chapel once stood. Hamadryads skipped alongside the cart, a few of them holding hands with satyrs. The tall dryads paralleled them at a greater distance, gliding through the trees, unhindered by the undergrowth. The two centaurs made their way through the woods as well, out of sight most of the time. The dwarfs jogged behind the cart, moving without grace and breathing hard, but never lagging.

“I can see your light around us like a dome,” Patton remarked to Kendra.

“I can’t see it,” Kendra replied.

“It didn’t take shape until we passed beyond the hedge,” Lena said. “Then it became distinct, a bright hemisphere with us at the center.”

“Is it covering everyone?” Kendra wondered.

“The dome reaches a fair distance beyond the farthest dryads,” Patton said. “I will be interested to see how effectively it repels our foes.” He pointed down the road.

Up ahead, a group of enemies awaited in an undisguised trap. Logs and brambles had been stacked across the road to form an impressive barricade. At either side of the barrier crouched dark dwarfs and evil satyrs. Kendra spotted two tall women with dull gray skin and white hair peering over the top of the blockade. The dark dryads had hard, lovely features and sunken eyes. Above the barrier fluttered shadowy fairies.

Hugo strode forward, neither hurrying nor slowing. Kendra squeezed the stone in her fist. The satyrs and hamadryads held firm at either side of the cart, and the dryads whispered through the woods beyond the path. The dwarfs clomped noisily at the rear.

When the cart came within seventy yards of the barricade, the dark dryads shielded their eyes. At sixty yards, the dark dryads, sinister satyrs, and creepy dwarfs began to fall back. The dark fairies dispersed. By the time the cart was within fifty yards of the barricade, the darkened creatures were in full retreat, most of them abandoning the path to take flight through the woods.

The hamadryads, satyrs, and dwarfs surrounding the cart gave a victorious shout.

“Hugo, clear the path,” Patton ordered.

Setting his club aside, the golem released the cart and began fluidly hurling logs and boulders out of the road. The heavy objects thumped heavily as they crashed into the woods.

“It appears our protection is sound,” Patton told Kendra. “Your luminance did not even need to touch them. I wonder what would have happened had the light overtaken them.”

Hugo finished clearing the path and started pulling the cart again without any prodding from Patton. They passed the site where the Forgotten Chapel once stood and soon journeyed down paths Kendra did not know. They encountered two unmanned barriers but saw no further signs of any dark creatures. Evidently word had spread.

They traversed an unfamiliar bridge and advanced along a path barely wide enough to accommodate the cart. Kendra had never traveled so far from the main house at Fablehaven. The satyrs and hamadryads remained merry as they jogged alongside the cart. Only the sweaty dwarfs huffing and puffing at the rear seemed tired.

“I see a black wall,” Seth announced as they topped a gentle rise in the road. “Everything beyond it looks dim.”

“Where?” Patton asked, brow furrowed.

“Up ahead, near that tall stump.”

Patton scratched his mustache. “That is where Kurisock’s realm begins, but I cannot discern the darkness.”

“Me neither,” Coulter said.

“I see only that the trees beyond the stump have less vigor,” Lena said. Seth grinned proudly. “It looks like a wall made of shadow.”

“This will be the test,” Patton said. “My hope is that all who stay near us will be able to cross this border. If not, the five of us will proceed on foot.”

Broadhoof and Cloudwing trotted over to the cart. Cloudwing held an arrow nocked; Broadhoof gripped his sword. Kendra noticed that one of Broadhoof’s fingers on his free hand was discolored and swollen. “We have reached the fell province,” Cloudwing confirmed.

“If we are unable to enter, we will harass the enemies and attempt to draw some away,” Broadhoof declared.

Patton raised his voice. “Stay near the cart. If any are unable to pass into this dark realm, Broadhoof will escort you to the final refuge at Fablehaven, a sanctuary frequented by his kind. If we manage to penetrate the darkness, stay near us, and protect the children at all costs.”

Hugo had not paused during the exchange. The huge stump beside the path was drawing closer. All the creatures, dryads included, huddled near to the cart.

“The wall is falling back,” Seth announced.

“The light ahead is fading,” Patton reported a moment later.

“The light and dark seem to be canceling each other, creating neutral territory,” Lena guessed. “Make ready for trouble.”

Hugo never paused as he plodded past the stump. All of the other creatures remained with them.

“I never imagined my hooves would tread this profane ground,” Cloudwing murmured disdainfully.

“I don’t see our dome anymore,” Patton warned in a low voice. “Only a glimmer around Kendra.”

“The darkness is holding back in a wide circle around us,” Seth said.

Kendra observed no abnormal light or darkness, only the path winding ahead into a thick stand of trees. From the trees emerged a grotesque centaur. His fur was black, his skin maroon. In one hand he clutched a heavy mace. A bushy mane went from the top of his head down the center

of his broad back. He stood considerably taller than Broadhoof or Cloudwing.

“Intruders, beware,” the dark centaur called in a deep snarl. “Turn back now or face destruction.”

A bowstring thrummed as Cloudwing let an arrow fly. The dark centaur shifted his mace, deflecting the slender projectile.

“You are a traitor to our kind, Stormbrow,” Broadhoof accused. “Stand down.”

The dark centaur bared his grimy teeth. “Hand over the girl and depart in peace.”

Cloudwing pulled a second arrow. As he adjusted his aim, the dark centaur altered the position of his mace. “I have no shot,” Cloudwing muttered.

“Requesting permission to engage,” Broadhoof growled with a sidelong glance at Patton.

“Forward!” Patton roared, pulling out a sword. Kendra recognized it as the sword Warren had recovered from the vault at Lost Mesa. Warren must have brought the weapon when they had gathered the tents. “Charge!”

The cart lurched as Hugo rushed toward the centaur. Kendra grabbed the railing at the side of the cart to avoid toppling backward and dropped her eyes to avoid stepping on unconscious fairies as she shifted her position. She heard the centaurs’ hooves pounding. Looking up, she saw the dark centaur twirling his mace above his head, the muscles of his maroon arm bunching powerfully.

From the trees emerged a second dark centaur, not quite as large as the first. Behind the centaur came four dark dryads, several dark satyrs, and two dozen minotaurs. Most of the minotaurs looked shaggy and disheveled. A few had broken horns. Some were black, some red-brown, some gray, a few almost blond. Looming over all the other creatures strode three titanic men dressed in mucky furs. They had long, bedraggled hair and thick beards tangled in tar. Even at his new height, Hugo barely came to their waists.

“Fog giants!” Seth cried.

“Keep us away from the giants, Hugo,” Patton instructed.

The cart veered away from the colossal threesome. Broadhoof and Stormbrow charged one another at full gallop. The giants hustled to

intercept the cart. Satyrs, hamadryads, and dryads closed on the dark satyrs, dark dryads, and minotaurs. The winded dwarfs ran along behind, struggling to keep up.

Broadhoof and Stormbrow were the first combatants to meet. Stormbrow used his mace to deflect Broadhoof's sword, and the centaurs collided, tumbling wildly to the earth. An arrow from Cloudwing pierced the arm of the other dark centaur. Twirling their staffs, the dryads fell upon the minotaurs, gracefully whirling and leaping and dodging, landing fierce blows at will, effortlessly outclassing the shaggy brutes. But when the dark dryads joined the fray, two light dryads were quickly bitten and transformed, forcing the other light dryads to drop back and regroup.

As the fog giants came at them with enormous strides, it became clear that Hugo had no hope of avoiding them. "Engage the giants, Hugo!" Patton ordered.

Moving in loping leaps, Hugo released the cart and charged the giants, huge club raised high. The lead giant swung a cudgel at Hugo, who ducked the blow and bashed the giant on the kneecap. Howling, the giant crashed to the ground. The other two giants swerved away from Hugo. The golem dove at one of the giants, but, fervent eyes intent on Kendra, the giant smoothly hurdled him.

Lizette, tallest of the dryads, dashed alongside one of the giants, her head not much higher than his knee, jabbing at his shin with her wooden rod. Infuriated by the needling, the giant turned and began stomping at her. Narrowly avoiding each increasingly frustrated stamp, she baited the oaf away from the cart.

Patton, Lena, and Coulter jumped down from the cart as it coasted to a stop, looking tiny as they faced the final oncoming giant. The tremendous brute kicked at Patton, who spun to one side, barely avoiding the blow. The giant reached to grab him, but Patton sliced open his palm.

"Patton!" Lena called, having maneuvered behind the giant.

Patton tossed the sword to his wife. She caught it by the hilt and slashed the back of the giant's heel. He crumpled, clutching where his tendon had been severed.

Wearing a savage grimace, the giant Hugo had toppled scooted forward. Hugo returned and hobbled him with a pair of precise blows.

The giant stomping at Lizette noticed his fallen comrades, and then locked eyes with Kendra. Scowling, he abandoned Lizette and charged the cart. Hugo flung his oversized club, and the anvil-sized stone struck the giant in the back of the skull. The giant dove forward, his outspread arms landing a few feet shy of the cart. He briefly raised his head, eyes unfocused, and then his face drooped to the dirt.

Roaring, the giant Lena had slashed sat up, struggled forward, and kicked the cart, splitting it and flipping it over. Kendra went flying, the pebble still gripped in her hand. She landed sharply on her back, suddenly finding that she could get no breath into her lungs. Her mouth hung open, the muscles in her torso tensing repeatedly. No air would enter or exit. Panic overwhelmed her. Was her back broken? Was she paralyzed?

Finally, after a desperate gasp, she was breathing again. Kendra noticed fairies fluttering weakly around her, searching for a refuge besides the overturned cart. Hugo had caught up to the giant Lena had slashed. The giant punched the unarmed golem, sending Hugo tumbling, then growled, squinting at where sharp rocks and thorns had maimed his knuckles.

Seth knelt at Kendra's side. "You all right?"

She nodded. "I just had the wind knocked out of me."

Rising, Seth dragged his sister to her feet. "Do you still have it?"

"Yes."

Peering over Kendra's shoulder, Seth's eyes widened. "Here come reinforcements!"

Kendra whirled. Six dark dryads raced toward them from a different direction than the other dark creatures had come from. Above them soared a menacing swarm of shadowy fairies.

Kendra peered over her shoulder. Patton, Lena, and Coulter were contending with a quintet of minotaurs. Cloudwing was wrestling a dark centaur that had to be an altered version of Broadhoof. Stormbrow and the injured dark centaur were wreaking havoc among the satyrs and hamadryads, transforming them into creatures of darkness. Despite his injuries, the giant Lena had hamstrung continued to fend off Hugo.

With a meaningful glance, Seth and Kendra communicated what they both realized. Nobody was coming to help them.

The six dark dryads approached at superhuman speed, low and swift like jungle cats. Beams of blackness rained down from the oncoming dark

fairies. The shadowy streaks did not affect Kendra, but Seth yelled as they struck him, darkening his clothes and turning his flesh invisible wherever they struck. Some light fairies feebly rose to intercept the dark ones, but most were swiftly transformed.

“Run, Kendra,” Seth urged, an invisible patch spreading across the side of his jaw.

“Not this time,” Kendra said. The dark dryads were too quick for her to have any hope of escape.

The dark dryads closed in fast, reddened eyes glinting, thin lips parted to reveal hideous fangs. A dark dryad snatched Seth, hoisting him into the air with a single arm and plunging her teeth into his neck. He thrashed, but the gray dryad held him firmly, and a moment later he was invisible.

The six dryads formed a ring around Kendra, seeming somewhat hesitant to engage her. Kendra held up the pebble threateningly. Wincing, they fell back a couple of paces. Face scrunched into a mask of determination, one of the dark dryads sprang forward, grasping at Kendra. As soon as her gray fingers closed around Kendra’s wrist, her entire aspect transformed. Pale, lank hair became curly and dark. Gray flesh bloomed to full health. Looking startled, a tall, beautiful woman staggered away from Kendra, turning to face the dark dryads.

Kendra lunged at another dark dryad, swatting her surprised target on the arm as the dryad stumbled uncertainly backward. Instantly the dryad had fiery red hair, a creamy countenance, and flowing robes. The gorgeous dryad Kendra had first restored tackled a dark dryad, pinning her to the ground. Kendra raced over and patted the dark dryad on the cheek. Suddenly the dark dryad became a tall Asian woman.

Invisible fingers closed around Kendra’s wrist, and Seth reappeared. “I could have done that faster if you would hold still,” he panted, looking unsteady.

“No time,” Kendra said, charging after a fourth dark dryad, feeling almost like she was on a playground. She was It, and this was a high-stakes game of tag. The other three dark dryads were now in full retreat. Seth staggered along behind Kendra.

The dryad Kendra was chasing kept stretching her lead, so Kendra paused to consider a better move. All around the cart, shadowy fairies were turning huge quantities of fairies dark. Kendra turned her attention

elsewhere—fairies were too small and quick for her to lose time trying to touch them. The good dwarfs had caught up to the skirmish and were using their hammers to drop minotaurs. The dark side had reinforcements as well—goblins and dark dwarfs. Increasingly, dark fairies were joining the battle to transform satyrs and hamadryads.

Seth grabbed Kendra's arm. "Trouble."

She saw the problem a moment after he said it. The fog giant who had been knocked unconscious had reawakened and was drowsily crawling toward them. Kendra had no idea how her light talisman would affect him since he was not in a darkened state—as with a goblin or a minotaur, darkness was simply part of his nature.

As Kendra started backing away, the giant sprang, diving at her with unavoidable quickness, his huge hand closing around her waist. Blinding light flared for an instant, and the giant flopped away from her, convulsing, unconscious once more, his smoking palm seared and blistered.

The flash of light left the surrounding dark creatures temporarily dazzled. Kendra dashed to where the darkened version of Broadhoof was trying to sink his teeth into Cloudwing. With a valiant effort, Cloudwing wrenched Broadhoof toward Kendra, and she slapped him on the flank. Instantly Broadhoof was restored.

Cloudwing showed Kendra a rapidly spreading maroon wound on his arm, and she healed it with a touch. "Remarkable," he approved.

The fighting continued, but the dark creatures were now doing their best to remain far from Kendra as they relentlessly transformed satyrs, dwarfs, and dryads. Hugo had the giant he had been brawling in a chokehold, and the tremendous brute finally collapsed. The three dryads Kendra had transformed were helping Patton, Lena, Coulter, and Lizette fight off a group of dark hamadryads. Half of Patton's face was invisible, along with one hand.

Kendra and Seth raced to help, and the dark hamadryads withdrew, shifting their attention to easier prey.

Patton embraced Kendra, instantaneously becoming fully visible. "You're doing well, my dear, but the dark creatures are changing too many of our allies too quickly. We have to get to the tree before no allies remain."

"I know the way," offered the first dark dryad Kendra had transformed. "My name is Rhea."

“Hugo, Broadhoof, Cloudwing!” Patton called. The golem and the centaurs hurried to them. “Take us to the tree. We’ll be following Rhea.”

The two other dryads Kendra had transformed resolved to stay behind and help with the battle. Lizette, her autumnal robes torn, opted to accompany Rhea.

Broadhoof swung Kendra and Seth onto his back. Cloudwing bore Patton. Hugo picked up Coulter and Lena.

“Lead on,” Cloudwing proposed.

Rhea and Lizette ran in front, with Broadhoof behind them, Hugo on one side, and Cloudwing on the other. Broadhoof cantered so smoothly that Kendra had no fear of falling. She held her pebble high, and dark creatures lunged out of the way to let them pass. Glancing back, Kendra saw the two dark centaurs and several dark dryads following them at a distance.

Moving with astonishing speed, Rhea dashed into the woods from which the dark creatures had emerged. The trees were dense, but there was little undergrowth. Kendra held tightly to the pebble as tall trunks sped by on either side.

Before long, they halted abruptly at the rim of a bowl-shaped valley. To Kendra, it looked like they were peering into a crater. A pool of sludge simmered in the middle of the deep depression, the steaming black surface occasionally disturbed by slow bubbles. The only plant in the rocky valley was a gnarled tree beside the lake of tar. Leafless and contorted, the tortured tree was even darker than the seething sludge.

The dryads jumped down the steep side of the valley, and the centaurs followed. Kendra leaned back, squeezing with her legs, her stomach in her throat, as Broadhoof plunged down the sheer slope, his hooves guiding their fall more than propelling them forward. The slope leveled out, and miraculously she and Seth remained astride the centaur, whose hooves now clopped noisily over the rocky ground.

From hiding places among boulders and cavities in the ground emerged three dark centaurs, four dark dryads, several armor-clad hobgoblins, and an obese cyclops wielding a poleax. The black tree was not far ahead—maybe fifty yards. But many dark creatures barred the way.

“Huddle close to Kendra!” Patton urged.

Cloudwing, Broadhoof, Rhea, Lizette, and Hugo skidded to a stop.

Hoofbeats sounded behind them as two dark centaurs plunged down the valley wall, accompanied by more dark dryads. “Her touch will undo your darkness,” Stormbrow warned the others.

“Not mine,” the fat cyclops bellowed.

“She’ll burn you,” Stormbrow cautioned. “Her touch overcame a giant.”

The dark creatures stirred uncomfortably. The cyclops appeared uncertain.

“Have no fear,” a cold, penetrating voice rang across the valley.

All eyes turned to the lip of the valley beyond the tormented tree, where a spectral woman bundled in shadow floated down from the rim, her robes flowing strangely, as if underwater.

“Oh, no,” Seth breathed behind Kendra.

“The girl can do no lasting harm here,” Ephira continued. “This is our domain. My darkness will quench her spark.”

“Come no closer, Ephira,” Patton shouted. “Do not interfere. We bring release from the bleak prison to which you have been confined.”

Ephira gave a chilling, joyless laugh. “You should not have meddled here, Patton Burgess. I am not in need of rescue.”

“That will not stop us,” he replied in a softer voice.

“You cannot possibly imagine the depth of my power,” she purred, gliding ever closer.

“Too much darkness can be blinding,” Patton cautioned.

“As can too much light,” she replied. She now floated protectively in front of the black tree.

“A fact you will soon appreciate as never before.” Patton nudged Cloudwing with his heels. “Onward! Hugo, flatten our opponents!”

Hugo set down Lena and Coulter and rushed the blubbery cyclops. The oaf embedded his poleax in Hugo’s side before the golem seized him and hurled him into the lake of tar. Rhea and Lizette began battling dark dryads, driving them away from the centaurs. Hooves hammering the stony ground, Cloudwing and Broadhoof galloped forward, ramming enemies aside. Patton motioned for Broadhoof to loop around while he charged Ephira.

In order to impede both centaurs, the spectral woman glided sideways, dark tendrils of fabric flowing out in either direction. As soon as the fabric

reached Cloudwing, his legs buckled and he crashed to the rocky ground, snapping his right foreleg and his right arm. Patton sprang free, rolling deftly to his feet. An instant later, limping awkwardly, Cloudwing arose, taller, thicker, his flesh maroon.

Another grasping fabric tentacle tangled around one of Broadhoof's front legs. Grunting, the centaur clattered to an abrupt stop. Sweating and groaning, Broadhoof swayed, but remained standing. He began to transform as Cloudwing had, but then the effect faded. Kendra felt the pebble warming her palm. Beneath her, Broadhoof felt warmer as well. Her hand glowed red. Brilliant beams of light escaped between her fingers. The creatures of darkness fell back. Broadhoof quivered beneath her, temporarily darkening and then returning to normal.

"Ephira can't change him," Seth whispered.

More tendrils of dark fabric snaked forward to entangle the centaur. The stone was becoming uncomfortably hot. Ephira looked grimly focused. Broadhoof's breathing became increasingly rapid. He trembled, muscles clenched in anguish. Dimly Kendra was aware of Hugo wrestling with the dark creature Cloudwing had become.

Aware of the brightening pebble, Kendra opened her hand, flooding the area with harsh white luminance. The dark creatures retreated further, yowling, hands raised to their eyes. Ephira hissed, grasping Broadhoof with even more shadowy tentacles.

Hands balled into fists, tendons standing out on his thick neck, Broadhoof released a full-throated cry of agony. The centaur folded his legs and collapsed, slumping lifelessly to the earth. The stone no longer glowed. Broadhoof no longer breathed.

Ephira's flowing fabric slithered free from Broadhoof and reached for Kendra. Pushing away from the dead centaur, Kendra tried to avoid the fabric, but one serpentine ribbon brushed against her. The instant the fabric touched her, the stone flared brightly, and the length of fabric vanished in a blaze of white flame.

Ephira shrieked and reeled as if she had been physically struck. The other tendrils of fabric retreated from Kendra and Seth.

"Kendra!" Patton called adamantly. "The stone!"

Patton stood not far from Ephira, considerably closer to the black tree than Kendra. Trusting his judgment, she tossed the stone to him and he

caught it with both hands. Coulter and Lena were rushing to catch up to Patton. Hugo heaved the crippled, darkened Cloudwing into the lake of tar.

Scowling, Ephira raised a hand palm outward. Kendra felt a wave of fear wash over her, and noticed that both her skin and the stone that Patton held began to glow. She could feel the fear trying to take hold, but the emotion kept burning away before it could really penetrate. Lena and Coulter were no longer running. They stood immobilized, trembling. Coulter dropped to his knees.

Patton was also trembling. He took a few stiff steps. Flowing lengths of fabric reached out for him. Seth ran to him. Arriving an instant before the fabric, Seth seized Patton's hand.

Pinching the pebble between his thumb and forefinger, Patton touched the stone to the nearest fabric tentacle. With a fiery flash, the fabric disappeared.

Ephira screeched, once again retracting the other long strips of fabric. Coulter arose and Lena once again dashed forward toward Patton. Holding the pebble up menacingly, and keeping hold of Seth, Patton raced around Ephira. The shadowy woman glared at Patton with impotent rage, pivoting to follow him with her eyes.

Patton released Seth and gestured for him to return to Kendra. Seth hesitantly retreated. Ephira closed her eyes and raised both palms. Lena came to a stop again, and Kendra glowed brightly. Patton advanced as if weighed down. Paralysis seemed to be setting in, but he kept his legs plodding toward the tree. When he was within ten feet of the black tree he raised the hand with the pebble as if aiming a dart.

That was the first time Kendra noticed the nail near the base of the trunk. Ephira opened her eyes and howled. With a gentle motion, Patton tossed the pebble. It spun through the air on a perfect trajectory to ping against the nail. As the glowing pebble drew near, it abruptly changed course, soaring away sideways and bouncing over the rocky ground toward the lake of tar.

"What happened?" Seth yelled in disbelief.

"They repelled each other," Kendra moaned.

Dark fabric stretched from Ephira toward where Patton knelt hunched near the dark tree. Arms moving jerkily, Patton removed a small box from a

pocket and opened it. Three fairies zipped out. A moment later the tendrils of fabric twined around Patton and he vanished.

Dark dryads and hobgoblins mobbed Hugo, hacking at him with swords and beating at him with cudgels, attempting to drive him into the tar. Hugo resisted them staunchly, occasionally landing a blow of his own.

The dark centaur Stormbrow galloped along the edge of the asphalt lake, clearly heading for the pebble. Shiara reached the stone first. When she touched it, her natural glow increased a hundredfold. Gleaming blindingly, she fell to the ground, apparently having fainted. The other two fairies attempted to lift the pebble and also passed out, shining with eye-watering brilliance.

Kendra and Seth ran toward the stone, even though they could see that the centaur would obviously beat them to it and that Ephira was blocking their way. Stormbrow lowered an arm and scooped up the pebble. He instantly shrank slightly, and his maroon flesh changed to a healthy, natural color. His horse fur became white dappled with gray.

Stormbrow immediately dropped the flashing stone as if he had picked up a hot ember.

“Stormbrow!” Kendra called, skidding to a stop near Lena. “We need the stone!”

Ephira glided toward the rejuvenated centaur, all her fabric tentacles groping for him. Wincing, he picked up the stone and tossed it a moment before the black tendrils seized him and made him dark again.

He threw the stone much too far. It flew over Kendra and Seth, skipping across the hard ground until it stopped near Coulter. Crawling as if carrying a great weight on his back, Coulter approached the egg-shaped stone. Ephira whirled and raised a palm. Coulter froze momentarily. Sweat beading on his brow, his face contorted with effort, he crawled forward unsteadily. When he could crawl no longer, he slithered on his belly. His arm inched forward until he finally grasped the stone. Trembling, he shifted his grip, cradling the pebble on his forefinger in front of his thumb, as if preparing to shoot it like a marble.

“Here!” Kendra called, waving her arms.

“Seth,” Lena hissed, standing immobilized.

Seth took her hand. Freed to move, she ran with him toward the tree, sprinting so swiftly that he could hardly keep his feet on the ground.



With a hard flick of his thumb, Coulter shot the pebble. The egg-shaped stone rattled across the ground, stopping a few yards short of Kendra. Cold eyes burning, Ephira floated toward the fallen stone. Kendra pounced on the pebble, picked it up, and turned to face the oncoming apparition.

Ephira spread her shadowy wrappings wide and extended her palms at Kendra. Kendra and the stone shone brightly. She felt the fear skimming across the surface of her body, but none of it could truly reach her. The sight of Ephira was horrific, everything Kendra had feared on that first night when she had seen the apparition through the attic window, but all Kendra cared about was getting the pebble to the nail.

Ephira drew closer, arms groping, fingers splayed. She would not use her fabric this time—she wanted direct physical contact.

Kendra felt fingers close around her ankle. Looking down, she saw Patton on his hands and knees, having invisibly crawled to her. His face looked drawn, as if all vitality had been sapped away. He held up a hand, silently offering to take the stone.

“Kendra!” Lena’s clear voice called from behind Ephira. “Throw the pebble!”

Kendra could barely make out the former naiad beyond Ephira, glimpsed through rippling swaths of dark fabric, holding hands with Seth. There was no time to make a calm, reasoned choice. A few thoughts flashed through Kendra’s mind at once. If Ephira touched her, the spectral woman might destroy the stone, leaving the matter of the nail and Kurisock irresolvable. Patton did not appear to be in any shape to reach the tree again, especially with Ephira in the way. He looked exhausted.

Kendra threw the pebble.

The toss was imperfect, but, lunging, Lena made the catch.

Ephira turned, intent on a new target.

Lena and Seth neared the black tree. As if sensing danger, the tree began to shudder. The branches creaked and swayed. A root lifted as if the tree hoped to run away.

Patton extended a feeble hand toward his wife. “No,” he whispered. Kendra had never heard a word sound more forlorn, more defeated.

A few yards from the trunk, Lena shoved Seth away. She met Patton's gaze for a moment, her eyes tender, a half-smile on her lips, and sprang. Landing just shy of the nail, she scrambled forward jerkily, moving like a puppet with half of her strings cut. The trunk of the hideous tree bent slightly. Branches arched down to block her. Slowly, arduously, Lena's outstretched hand strained toward the trunk until the stone came into contact with the nail.

For an instant, all light and all shadow seemed drawn into those two objects, as if the world had imploded to a single point. And then a shock wave radiated outward, light and dark, hot and cold. The shock wave did not strike Kendra; it passed through her, momentarily stripping away all thought. Every particle of her body vibrated, especially her teeth and bones.

Silence followed.

Dimly, Kendra recovered her senses. Ephira crouched before her, no longer spectral and inhuman, a frightened woman draped in black rags. Her lips parted as if to speak, but she uttered no sound. Her wide eyes blinked twice. Then the remnants of her black robes deteriorated, and her body aged until she dissolved into a cloud of dust and ash.

Beyond where Ephira had perished, the tree lay torn asunder, no longer unnaturally black, but rotten to the center. Near the tree, inert, lay a slimy, shadowy lump of mush. Only when she noticed teeth and claws did Kendra realize it must be what remained of Kurisock. Not far from the tree, Seth was sprawled on his back, stirring slightly. Lena lay facedown and motionless at the base of the trunk.

Behind Kendra, a restored Cloudwing clambered out of the lake of tar, hobbling on his injured leg, his body gooey with steaming sludge. Some distance away, the hobgoblins fled from the restored centaurs and dryads. Seth sat up, rubbing his eyes. Broadhoof remained lifeless where he had fallen.

Patton surged to his feet and staggered a few steps before tumbling to the stony ground. He rose again and fell again. Finally, clothes torn and smudged, he proceeded on hands and knees until he reached Lena, pulling her to him and cradling her in his arms, rocking her limp body as he clung to her, shoulders heaving.



Good-byes

Two days later, Kendra reclined on her back behind a hedge in the yard, overhearing snatches of conversation from fairies. Around her, the garden was in full bloom, more splendid than ever, as if the fairies were attempting to apologize. She had overheard a few fairies lamenting the loss of their darkened state. From what Kendra had observed, only those creatures who had enjoyed being dark retained any memory of the experience.

Kendra heard the back door of the house open. Somebody else was coming to cheer her up. Why couldn't they leave her alone! They had all tried—Grandpa, Grandma, Seth, Warren, Tanu, Dale, even Coulter. Nothing anyone could say was going to erase her guilt for killing Lena. Sure, it had been a desperate situation, and yes, it may have been their best hope for success, but still, if she had not tossed Lena the stone, Lena would not have died.

Nobody called for her. She heard footsteps on the deck.

Why couldn't they treat her like Patton? He had wordlessly made it clear that he required time to grieve, and so nobody pestered him. He had taken Lena's body to the pond, arranged it tenderly inside a rowboat, set the craft ablaze, and watched it burn. That night he had slept under the stars. The next day, after they had discovered that the restored brownies had removed all the traps and repaired the house, Patton had spent most of his

time alone in a bedroom. When he chose to mingle with the others, he was subdued. He did not bring up Lena, nor did anyone else.

Kendra was not entirely unhappy. She was immeasurably glad that some dryads had found Grandma, Grandpa, Warren, Dale, and Tanu caged deep in the woods, unharmed, beside an old stump. She was pleased that all the darkened creatures had been restored, that satyrs and dryads once again frolicked in the woods, and that the nipsies were back inside their hollow hill rebuilding their kingdoms. She felt relieved that Ephira was no longer a threat, that the plague had been vanquished, and that Kurisock had met his demise. She found it fitting that the demon should end up as an unrecognizable clump of shadowy pudding.

The cost of victory, along with the part she had played, was what prevented Kendra from actually rejoicing. Not only did she grieve for Lena and Broadhoof, she could not silence certain nagging questions. What if she had jumped off of Broadhoof before he had died, allowing him to be changed to darkness instead of trapping him between light and dark until the struggle killed him? What if she had courageously used the stone to drive Ephira back, and had gone on to destroy the nail herself?

“Kendra,” said a slightly hoarse voice.

She sat up. It was Patton. His clothes remained torn, but he had washed them. “I didn’t think I’d see you again.”

He clasped his hands behind his back. “My three days are almost spent. I’ll soon be whisked back to my proper time. I wanted to have words with you first.”

That was right! He was leaving soon. Kendra suddenly remembered what she had meant to discuss with him before his departure. “The Sphinx,” Kendra said hastily. “You might be able to prevent a lot of trouble, he’s probably—”

He held up a finger. “I have already spoken with your grandfather on the subject. Not many minutes ago, in fact. I never did really trust the Sphinx, although if you think he is elusive now, you should try tracking him down in my day. I have met him only once, and it was no minor feat. In my time, many believe the Society of the Evening Star is gone for good. From afar, the Sphinx has been very kind to us caretakers. It would be difficult to find him, and harder still to rally support against him. I’ll see what I can do.”

Kendra nodded. She stared at the grass, mustering courage. She looked up, tears making her vision shimmer. "Patton, I'm so sorry—"

Again he held up a finger to silence her. "Say no more. You were magnificent."

"But if I—"

He wagged his finger. "No, Kendra, you had no other choice."

"And Broadhoof," Kendra muttered.

"None of us could have seen that coming," Patton said. "We were contending with unexplored powers."

"People around me keep dying," Kendra whispered.

"You're thinking about it all backwards," Patton said firmly. "Around you, people who should have died live on. Shadows return to light. You and Lena saved us all. I would rather it had been me, I would give anything, anything, but such wishing is futile."

"Are you okay?"

He exhaled sharply, half-laugh, half-sob. He brushed a finger across his mustache. "I try not to relive how I might have destroyed the nail myself instead of throwing the pebble. I try not to obsess about failing my bride." He paused, muscles pulsing in his jaw. "I must go forward. I have a new errand. A fresh quest. To love Lena for the rest of her life as much as she deserves. To never again doubt her love or mine. To give her my whole self, every day, without fail. To keep secret how her life will end, while forever honoring her sacrifice. I am in a unique position, to have lost her, and yet to have her still."

Kendra nodded, trying to restrain her tears for his sake. "You'll have a long, happy life together."

"I expect we will," Patton said. Smiling warmly, he reached out a hand to pull her up. "If I am done grieving, it is time for you to quit as well. It was a deadly predicament. We all should have perished. You made the necessary decision."

Others had assured Kendra of that very thing. Only as she heard the words from Patton did she sincerely believe it might be true.

He pulled her to her feet. "Your ride is here."

"My ride?" Kendra asked. "Already?" They walked toward the deck.

“It will be noon before long,” Patton said. “I overheard him saying he bears news. I did not let him see me.”

“You think I should go home?” Kendra asked.

“Your grandparents are right,” he assured her. “It is the best option. You cannot be kept from your parents any longer. You will be under constant watch by concerned friends—at home, at school, wherever you go.”

Kendra nodded vaguely. Patton stopped at the steps to the deck. “Won’t you come inside?” Kendra urged.

“I’m returning to the pond one last time,” Patton said. “I already said my farewells to the others.”

“Then this is it.”

“Not entirely,” Patton said. “I had a private conversation with Vanessa this morning. I temporarily put one of the goblins into the Quiet Box. She is a hard woman—I failed to break her. I believe she has useful information. At some point, if all else fails, you might consider bargaining with her. But do not trust her. I told Stan the same.”

“Okay.”

“I understand you discovered my Journal of Secrets,” Patton said.

“That was yours? Not much in it.”

Patton smiled. “Kendra, I’m disappointed. You know, it was your grandfather who wrote ‘Drink the Milk,’ not me. All of my words in the journal are written in the secret fairy language, in umite wax.”

“Umite wax?” Kendra thumped her palm against her forehead. “I never thought to try that. I learned about the wax a year after I stopped paying attention to the journal.”

“Well, pay attention to the journal. Not all of my secrets are in there, but you will find some that may prove useful. And I’ll be sure to keep adding to it. The troubled times are far from over for you and your family. I’ll do what I can from my own era.”

“Thanks, Patton.” It was comforting to think she would hear from him again through the journal, and to know he might find ways to help her.

“I’m glad we met, Kendra.” He gave her a tight hug. “You are truly extraordinary—it goes far beyond anything fairies could bestow. Keep an

eye on that brother of yours. If he doesn't get himself killed, he might save the world one day."

"I will. I'm glad we met too. 'Bye, Patton."

He turned and jogged away, glancing back once to wave. Kendra watched him until he disappeared into the woods.

Taking a deep breath, Kendra crossed the deck and entered through the back door. "Happy birthday!" numerous voices shouted.

It took Kendra a moment to make sense of the huge cake with fifteen candles. Her birthday was still more than a month away.

Grandpa, Grandma, Seth, Dale, Tanu, and Coulter all broke into song. Newel and Doren were there as well, adding boisterous harmonies. Dougan was also present, singing softly. So he would be their escort home. At the end of the song, Kendra blew out the tiny flames. Grandma snapped a photograph.

"It won't be my birthday for weeks!" Kendra scolded.

"That's what I told them," Seth laughed. "But they wanted to do it now since they won't be around for the actual day."

Kendra smiled at her friends and family. She suspected the celebration had more to do with her recent moodiness than it did with marking the day she was born. She smiled. "That is one advantage of holding a birthday party more than a month early—you totally surprised me! Thanks."

Seth leaned close. "Did Patton cheer you up?" he whispered. "He promised he would."

"He did."

Seth shook his head. "That guy can do anything!"

"I heard Dougan has news," Kendra said.

"It can wait," Dougan said. "I hate to interrupt the happy occasion. Gavin sends his best, by the way. He's out on assignment, or he would have joined me to escort you home."

"If you make me wait for the news I'll just be wondering about it the whole time," Kendra maintained.

"I agree," Seth seconded.

Dougan shrugged. "Stan knows some of this already, but given your level of involvement, I may as well inform all of you. Or perhaps I should say most of you." He paused, eyeing Newel and Doren.

“My finely tuned social weather vane is detecting a hint,” Newel said.

“Maybe we should remove ourselves for a few minutes,” Doren suggested. “Discuss a few secrets of our own.”

The two satyrs headed out of the room.

“Big secrets,” Newel emphasized. “The kind of secrets that keep you up late at night gnawing at your fingernails.”

“Secrets that would curl your hair,” Doren agreed.

Dougan waited until the satyrs were well out of the room, then proceeded in a low tone. “The Sphinx is a traitor. I’m sorry, Warren, when I lied to you about him not being Captain of the Knights of the Dawn. I had vowed to guard that secret. At the time I still thought it was worth protecting.”

“How did you confirm his treachery?” Warren asked.

“I conferred with my fellow Lieutenants about the artifact recovered from Fablehaven. None had heard of the incident—a severe breach of protocol. The four of us confronted the Sphinx, prepared to apprehend him. He made no protest as we named the suspicious circumstances, then arose slowly and told us he was disappointed it had taken us so long to suspect him. He picked up a copper rod from his desk and vanished, replaced by a burly man who instantly threw the rod out the window, transformed into a massive grizzly bear, and attacked. Fighting the werebear in such close quarters was dicey. Travis Wright was seriously wounded. Rather than try to take our enemy captive, we were forced to slay the beast. By the time we started hunting for the Sphinx, he was nowhere to be found.”

“Then it’s true,” Coulter murmured, sounding crestfallen. “The Sphinx is our great enemy.”

“And it’s my fault he escaped!” Kendra exclaimed. “I restored the power of that rod he used to teleport away!”

Grandpa shook his head. “If he had not had the rod, the Sphinx would have had other exit strategies.”

“What about Mr. Lich, his bodyguard?” Seth wondered.

“Mr. Lich had not been seen for days, and has not yet resurfaced,” Dougan reported.

“Now that the Sphinx has made his true allegiance known, he may hasten his plans,” Grandma said. “We’ll have to be ready for anything.”

“There is additional worrisome news,” Grandpa prompted.

Dougan frowned. “Lost Mesa has fallen. So far as we know, only Hal and his daughter, Mara, survived.”

“What happened?” Kendra gasped.

“Hal related the tale,” Dougan said. “First, a young coppery dragon got free from the labyrinth inside the mesa and used lightning attacks on the main house. Then, several of the skeletons inside the museum on the property came to life and launched their own assault. An enormous dragon skeleton caused the most notable harm—most likely reanimated by a powerful viviblix. A few dozen zombies got loose as well. Like here at Fablehaven, somebody wanted to close the preserve permanently. At Lost Mesa, the plot succeeded.”

“Like Vanessa told us,” Kendra murmured, “when the Sphinx commits a crime, he burns down the neighborhood to cover his tracks.”

“We left that dragon trapped inside the mesa,” Warren said. “We locked it ourselves.”

“I know,” Dougan said. “Sabotage.”

“Is there reason to suspect Hal or Mara?” Warren asked.

“Some suspicion must fall on the survivors of any such calamity,” Dougan said. “But they made contact with us voluntarily, and their grief over Rosa and the others seemed sincere. If you ask me, the culprit remains nameless.”

“Or he’s named after an Egyptian monument,” Seth said bitterly.

Dougan dipped his chin. “True, the Sphinx probably masterminded the assault, but we remain uncertain who executed his orders.”

“After taking what he wanted from Fablehaven and Lost Mesa, he tried to wipe out both preserves,” Kendra said numbly.

“He failed here,” Grandma said, “as he is destined to fail in the end.”

Kendra wished the words sounded less hollow.

“We are doing what we can,” Dougan said. “Keeping two pairs of eyes on Kendra and Seth through the coming months will be a major priority. Oh, Kendra, before I forget, Gavin asked me to give you this letter.” He held out a gray, speckled envelope.

“Happy birthday to you!” Seth exclaimed, his voice full of implications.

Kendra tried not to blush as she tucked the envelope away.

“Dear Kendra,” Seth improvised, “you’re the only girl who really gets me, you know, and I think you’re very mature for your age—”

“What about some cake?” Grandma interrupted, holding the first piece out to Kendra and glaring at Seth.

Kendra accepted the cake and sat down at the table, grateful for the opportunity to compose herself. She discovered that the cake had been prepared by brownies. Cutting into it she found creamy layers of vanilla filling, moist patches of chocolate mousse, gooey pockets of caramel, and an occasional clump of raspberry jam. Somehow the flavors never conflicted disagreeably. She could not recall a more delicious birthday cake.

Afterwards, Grandpa escorted Kendra up to the attic. She found her bags packed and ready.

“Your parents are expecting Dougan to deliver you this evening,” he said. “They’ll be happy to see you. I think they were on the verge of calling the FBI.”

“Okay.”

“Patton said good-bye?” he asked.

“Yes,” Kendra said. “He told me something important about the Journal of Secrets.”

“He mentioned I was to entrust it to you. You’ll find the journal in your bags, along with a few other birthday presents. Kendra, we’re going to keep the discovery of the Chronometer a secret for now, even from Dougan, until we become more certain whom we can trust.”

“I like that idea,” Kendra said. She stared into Grandpa’s eyes. “I’m scared to go home.”

“After all that has happened, I would think you would be more scared to stay here.”

“I’m not sure I want the Knights of the Dawn looking after me. They all might be working for our enemies!”

“Either Warren, Coulter, or Tanu will always be one of your guardians. I will only allow the most trustworthy eyes to watch over you.”

“I guess that makes me feel better.”

Seth burst into the room, followed by Dale. “Dougan says he’s all set. Warren is coming with us. You ready, Kendra?”

She did not feel ready. After a great loss, after a difficult victory, after suffering extreme trauma, she wished she could have some time to hibernate. Not two days. Two years. Some serious time to pull herself together. Why did life always have to roll relentlessly forward? Why was every victory or defeat followed by new worries and new problems? Adjusting to high school would be hard enough, let alone worrying about what new plots the Sphinx might be hatching and how Navarog, the demon prince, might factor into them.

Despite her uncertainties, Kendra nodded. Grandpa and Dale grabbed her luggage, and she followed them down the attic stairs. In the hallway, Coulter motioned for her to come inside his room. He shut the door behind her.

“What is it?” Kendra asked.

He held up the staff with the rattles she had brought back from Lost Mesa. “Kendra, have you any idea what this can do?”

“It seemed to make the storm worse on Painted Mesa.”

He shook his head. “Magical artifacts are my specialty, but in all my years, I have encountered few that could match the power of this staff. I experimented with it yesterday. After shaking it outdoors for less than fifteen minutes, I summoned clouds into what had been a clear sky. The more I shook the rattles, the more the weather intensified.”

“Wow.”

“You brought home an authentic, functional rain stick from Lost Mesa.”

Kendra smiled. “Gavin called it my souvenir.”

“Gavin must be a very generous person. An item of this magnitude is absolutely priceless. Take good care of it.”

“I will,” Kendra said, accepting the staff. “Should I leave it here?”

“It’s yours; keep it with you. Who knows when it might be useful? There is plenty of trouble on the horizon.”

“Thanks, Coulter. See you soon.”

“Count on it. I’ll be taking a shift to watch over you and Seth before long.”

Kendra exited the room and went down the stairs to the entry hall. Grandpa and Dale had already lugged the bags outside. In the doorway,

Seth dropped his emergency kit. It seemed to land with an unusually heavy clunk. Looking guilty, he picked up the box hurriedly and went out the door.

Finding herself alone for a moment, Kendra pulled out the envelope, tore it open, and removed the letter from Gavin. She unfolded the single sheet of paper, trying not to feel eager, trying to forget the stupid things Seth had guessed it might contain.

Dear Kendra,

I'm very sorry I can't be there to escort you home. Crazy news from Dougan, huh? I can hardly believe how upside down everything has become! I knew there was something shady about good guys wearing masks . . . they've done away with them now.

I'm off on another mission. Nothing as dangerous as what we went through together, but another chance for me to prove myself useful. I'll fill you in later.

Guess why I like letters? No stuttering!

You're an amazing person, Kendra. I want you to know how much I have appreciated getting to know you. Hopefully I'll get a turn standing guard over you and your brother in the fall. I hope someday soon we'll get to know each other better.

Your friend and admirer,

Gavin

Kendra reread the letter, then triple-checked the part about her being amazing and him wanting to get to know her better. He didn't just sign it "your friend." It was "your friend and admirer."

With a smile tugging at the corners of her mouth, Kendra folded up the letter, slipped it into her pocket, and walked out the front door, marveling at how fine a line divided dreading the future from looking forward to it.

Acknowledgments

I love writing the final words of a novel. It feels like a miracle when a story that resided abstractly in my mind finally takes concrete form. The months required to translate ideas into words culminate in a huge rush of satisfaction as I finish the initial writing phase and can then transition to polishing the narrative. Regardless of the imperfections in the first draft, I find it a vast relief to know that the story exists outside of my imagination.

Many people have contributed to making the third Fablehaven novel a reality. My understanding wife and children not only help me find time to write and promote my novels—they make the rest of my life worth living. The initial feedback I get from my wife routinely helps shape my ideas and my writing for the better.

Early readers who provided feedback include my wife, Mary, Chris Schoebinger, Emily Watts, Tucker Davis, Pamela and Gary Mull, Summer Mull, Bryson and Cherie Mull, Nancy Fleming, Randy and Liz Saban, Mike Walton, Wesley Saban, Jason and Natalie Conforto, and the Freeman family. Ty Mull had every intention of helping, but high school and video games interfered. My sister Tiffany was excused from contributing, since she is busy in Brazil.

Once again, Brandon Dorman created awesome art. The sweet centaur he drew for the cover had my inner ten-year-old high-fiving himself. Richard Erickson oversaw the design elements, Emily Watts kept me honest as editor, and Laurie Cook was the typographer. I'm grateful for their valuable contributions!

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Thank you, dear reader, for continuing to digest the *Fablehaven* series. I'm already working on the fourth book. If you're enjoying the story, please tell others about it. Your personal recommendations make a big difference!

Swing by BrandonMull.com or Fablehaven.com to find out more about me and my books.

Reading Guide

1. Throughout the *Fablehaven* series, obedience has been an issue for Seth. What do you think Seth has learned about obedience since the first book? How is he more obedient in this book? How is he disobedient?

2. The Knights of the Dawn value members with special abilities. What abilities set you apart from others?

3. At Lost Mesa, Hal wants to protect the zombies even though they are disgusting and freaky. Do you agree with him? Why or why not? We have many types of dangerous, unsightly, and annoying animals in our world. Do you think it's important to protect even creepy animals from extinction? Why or why not?

4. For most of the book, an infectious shadow plague affected the creatures of Fablehaven. Have you ever seen evidence that evil can be contagious? Explain.

5. Grandpa Sorenson did not hold the creatures of Fablehaven responsible for their behavior while under the influence of the plague, nor did he fully blame dark creatures for their actions. What thinking led to those conclusions? Why did Warren disagree? What evidence is there to support both positions?

6. Do you agree with Grandpa that all humans have potential for good and evil? How do our choices define who we are?

7. Many characters have assisted Kendra and Seth during risky situations (including Grandpa, Grandma, Dale, Lena, Tanu, Coulter, Warren, Gavin, Dougan, and Patton). If you were in trouble, which of those characters would you most want on your side? Why?

8. On the roof of the old manor, Patton told Seth, "When jumping is the sole option, you jump." What did he mean? How does Patton exemplify this idea? Can you think of a time when you did something difficult because it was necessary?

9. Why was Lena willing to sacrifice herself at the end of the story? What did that sacrifice do for her relationship with Patton? How can selfless sacrifice strengthen any relationship?

10. Unbelief prevents Kendra's parents from perceiving the creatures at Fablehaven. In what ways can unbelief blind us to the possibilities around us?

11. If you could see in the dark like Kendra, smell any scent like a goblin, or maneuver as swiftly as a dryad, which would you choose? Why? How would you use this gift to your advantage?

12. If you were forty years old and were confined to the Quiet Box for fifty years and then released, you would still be forty years old. Suppose you had a child who was ten years old when you entered the Quiet Box. How old would that child be when you came out? Would you treat your child differently? How? How do you think your child would treat you? Why?

13. If you could spend a day at Fablehaven with Kendra and Seth, what is the first thing you would want to see? Who is the first person or creature you'd like to meet?

14. What would you do if Seth tried to coax you into the woods without Grandpa's permission?

15. As far as personality goes, how would you describe the centaurs? The dryads? The fairies? What are their strengths? What are their weaknesses? Which of those strengths and weaknesses do you have?

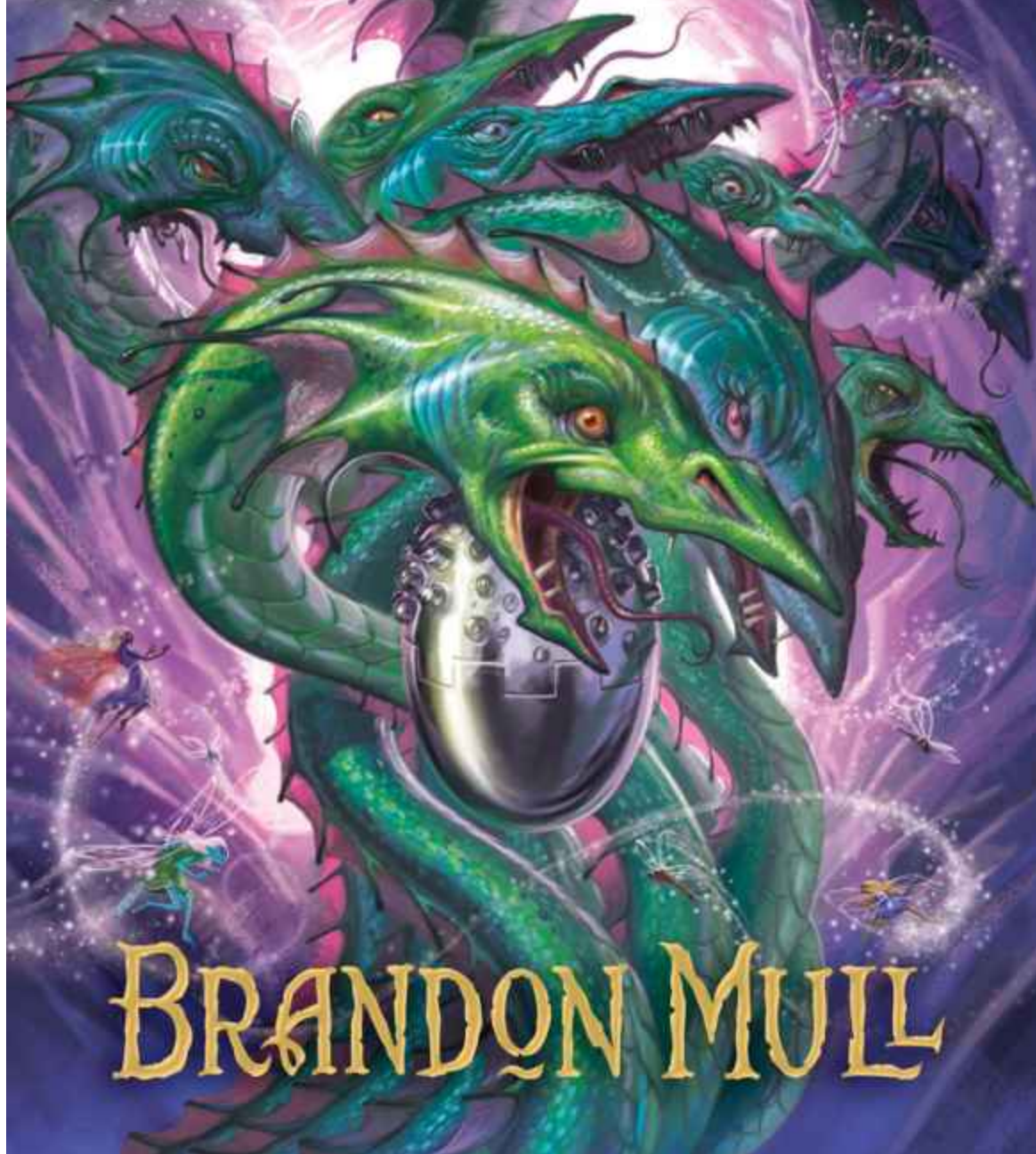
BOOK FOUR

Fablehaven: Secrets of the Dragon Sanctuary

THE NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING SERIES

FABLEHAVEN

SECRETS OF THE DRAGON SANCTUARY



BRANDON MULL

Mull, Brandon, 1974-

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Summary: When Kendra and Seth go to stay at their grandparents' estate,

they discover that it is a sanctuary for magical creatures and that a battle

between good and evil is looming.

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For Chris Schoebinger, the original caretaker of Fablehaven

Chapter 1



Journal

Kendra Sorenson briskly scraped the head of a wooden match against the rough strip on the side of a rectangular matchbox. Cupping her hand to shield the new flame, she held the burning match against the blackened wick of a candle stub. Once the flame spread to the wick, she shook out the match, thin strands of smoke winding upward.

Seated at the desk in her bedroom, considering the remains of the match, Kendra was struck by how quickly the fire had consumed the wood, leaving the top third fragile and charred, the substance transformed into an unrecognizable state. She contemplated the plague at Fablehaven that had swiftly turned many of the inhabitants of the magical preserve from beings of light into creatures of darkness. She and her family and friends had managed to reverse the plague before it destroyed the preserve, but their efforts had cost the life of Lena the naiad.

Snapping out of her reverie, Kendra set the spent match off to one side, slid three keys into a locked journal, opened the book, and began hurriedly leafing through the pages. This was her last umite candle—she could not afford to waste any of the special illumination that made the words on the pages visible.

She had brought the Journal of Secrets home from Fablehaven. It had once belonged to Patton Burgess, a former Fablehaven caretaker whom Kendra had unexpectedly met when he had traveled forward through time at

the end of the previous summer. Written in a secret fairy language, the words inside were further disguised by being inscribed in umite wax. Only under the light of an umite wax candle would the characters glow into view, and only by virtue of her status as fairykind could Kendra decipher them.

Reading and speaking fairy languages were only some of the abilities granted to Kendra after hundreds of giant fairies had mobbed her with kisses. She could see in the dark. Certain magical mind tricks failed to affect her, allowing her to penetrate the illusions that concealed most magical creatures from mortal eyes. And fairies had to follow any command she issued.

Kendra checked over her shoulder, listening for a moment. The house was quiet. Mom and Dad had taken to jogging at the rec center on weekday evenings, hoping to make it a habit before the New Year. She doubted the resolution would survive more than a couple of weeks, but for now it provided her an opportunity to peruse the journal unsupervised. Her parents were blind to the magical world she and her brother had discovered. As a consequence, when they had caught her reading a book full of strange symbols by candlelight, they thought she was getting involved with some bizarre cult. There was no way to explain that the book contained the secrets of a former Fablehaven caretaker. Not wanting her parents to confiscate the journal, Kendra pretended to have returned it to the library and had started reading it only when she could be sure of prolonged privacy.

Because the presence of her parents reduced her reading time, and because she had a limited supply of candles, Kendra had not yet read every word from cover to cover, although she had skimmed the entire volume. The voice in the journal was familiar—she had read many entries in some of Patton's less secretive journals at Fablehaven. While browsing the *Journal of Secrets*, Kendra had found where Patton described at length the story of how Ephira had become a spectral menace, omitting none of the dismal details, along with passages where he expressed his innermost fears about his relationship with Lena. Kendra had also learned about a passageway to a grotto beneath the old manor, various stashes of treasure and weapons concealed around Fablehaven, and a pool at the base of a small waterfall where an intrepid fortune hunter could catch a leprechaun. She found information about a secret chamber at the end of the Hall of Dread in the Fablehaven dungeon, along with the passwords and procedures

needed to gain entry. She read about journeys abroad to India and Siberia and Madagascar. She absorbed information about various preserves at the far corners of the globe. She scanned theories regarding possible threats and villains, including many alleged plots by the Society of the Evening Star.

Tonight, with the umite candle burning low, she turned to her favorite entry in the journal and read Patton's familiar handwriting:

Having returned scant hours ago from a singular adventure, I now find myself unable to suppress the urge to impart my thoughts. I have seldom considered whom I intend to read the covert information compiled in this record. Upon the occasions when I have paid heed to the matter, I have vaguely concluded that I was jotting these notations for myself. But I am now aware that these words will reach an audience, and that her name is Kendra Sorenson.

Kendra, I find this realization both thrilling and foreboding. You face challenging times. Some of the knowledge I possess could aid you. Regrettably, much of that same knowledge could usher you into unspeakable danger. I keep staging vigorous internal debates in the attempt to discern what information will grant you an advantage over your enemies and what information might further imperil your situation. Much of what I know has the potential to cause more harm than good.

Your enemies among the Society of the Evening Star will balk at nothing to obtain the five artifacts that together can open Zzyzx, the great demon prison. At the time I left you, to our knowledge, they had acquired only one artifact, while your able grandfather retained another. I have information about two of the artifacts that you lack, and could probably acquire more knowledge with some effort. And yet I hesitate to share. If you or others try to pursue or guard the artifacts, you might inadvertently lead our enemies to them. Or you could be harmed in the attempt to retrieve them. Conversely, if the Sphinx is in avid pursuit of the artifacts, I am inclined to believe that he will eventually succeed. Under certain circumstances, it would benefit our cause for you to have my knowledge in order to keep the artifacts out of his grasp.

Therefore, Kendra, I have elected to rely on your judgment. I will not include the specifics in this journal, for who could resist such temptingly convenient access, regardless of that person's integrity? But in the hidden chamber beyond the Hall of Dread I will disguise further details regarding

the hiding places of two of the artifacts. Unearth that information only if you find it becomes absolutely necessary. Otherwise, do not even mention that such knowledge exists. Use discretion and patience and courage. My hope is that the information will lie dormant for your whole lifetime. If not, information about the location of the hidden chamber awaits elsewhere in this journal. Go to the chamber and use a mirror to find the message on the ceiling.

Kendra, I wish I could be there to help you. Your loved ones are strong and capable. Put your trust where it belongs and make smart decisions. Keep that brother of yours in line. I am grateful to have such an exemplary niece.

Drumming her fingers on the desk, Kendra blew out the candle. Enough of the waxy lump remained to light it again, but the flame would not last long. Grandpa probably had more umite candles at Fablehaven by now, but getting them would be a hassle. She leaned back in her chair, pinching her lower lip. Between school and her volunteer day-care job, she had hardly found time to give the matter the contemplation it deserved.

She had not yet shared the message from Patton with anyone. He had trusted her judgment, and she was in no hurry to betray that trust. Patton was right that once the information about the location of the artifacts got out, people would want to pursue them. And he was also right that the Sphinx would be watching for a chance to exploit any such attempt. Unless information about the hidden artifacts became essential, she would let it be.

Throughout that fall season, Kendra had kept in touch with her grandparents. They did not talk openly about secrets on the phone, but they had found ways to pass needed information without getting too specific. Ever since the Sphinx had been revealed as the leader of the Society of the Evening Star, all activity by the Society had seemed to cease. But they all knew that the Sphinx was out there, watching and plotting, waiting for the opportune moment to strike.

Two members of the Knights of the Dawn kept Kendra and Seth under constant surveillance and smuggled them information when necessary. So far there had been no alarming incidents. Although the individuals assigned to protect Kendra and Seth rotated, at least one of their bodyguards was always a trusted friend like Warren, Tanu, or Coulter. For the past four days,

Warren had been watching them, along with a supposedly trustworthy girl named Elise.

Kendra sighed. After all the subterfuge during the past couple of years, she wondered if she would ever fully trust anyone again. Perhaps that was another reason she kept Patton's message to herself.

Something rustled faintly behind her. She turned to see that a folded sheet of paper had been slipped under her door. She crossed to the doorway, picked up the white piece of paper, unfolded it, and scanned the typed list. The more she read, the narrower her eyes squinted. She stalked out of her room, down the hall, and stopped in Seth's open doorway.

"Do you honestly expect to get a hang glider for Christmas?" Kendra asked her younger brother.

Seth glanced up from the desk where he had been doodling lizards on his math homework. "I certainly won't if I don't ask."

Kendra held up the list. "Who else got this?"

"Mom and Dad, of course. Plus I e-mailed copies to all of our relatives, even some distant ones I tracked down online. And I mailed a copy to Santa, just to cover all of my bases."

Crossing the room to stand beside her brother, Kendra wiggled the page in front of him. "You've never made crazy requests like these before. A set of custom golf clubs? A hot tub? A bullet bike?"

Seth snatched the list from Kendra. "You're only naming the big-ticket items. If you can't afford to get me a massage chair, you could get me a kite, a video game, or a movie. You'll find ideas on my wish list for any budget."

Kendra folded her arms. "You're up to no good."

Seth stared at her with the wide-eyed, mildly offended expression he typically used when hiding something. "Limiting what I *get* for Christmas is one thing. Limiting what I *ask* for is another. Who are you, the Grinch?"

"You normally use a strategic approach to Christmas, asking for a few presents you really want—and it usually works. You've never campaigned for anything that costs more than a bike or a video game system. You keep your wish list realistic. Why the change?"

"You're overanalyzing, Professor," Seth sighed, handing back the list. "I just figured it couldn't hurt to aim high this year."

“Why send the list to relatives so distant they don’t even know you?”

“One of them might be a lonely billionaire, who knows? I have a hunch that this could be my lucky year.”

Kendra regarded her brother. Even since the summer, he looked less like a kid. He kept getting taller, all gangly arms and legs, and his face looked slimmer, his chin more defined. They had not spent much quality time together over the fall. He had his own friends, and she was busy getting accustomed to high school. Now the holiday break loomed less than a week away.

“Don’t do anything stupid,” Kendra warned.

“Thanks for the brilliant advice,” he said. “Do you mind if I quote you in my diary?”

“Are you keeping a journal?”

“I’ll have to start if you keep dispensing such precious pearls of wisdom.”

“I have the perfect first entry,” Kendra suggested, glaring. “Dear diary, today I bought myself fancy Christmas presents with gold I stole from Fablehaven. I tried to pretend the gifts came from distant, billionaire relatives, but nobody was fooled, and the Knights of the Dawn have hunted me down and locked me in a grimy dungeon.”

Seth’s mouth opened and closed soundlessly as he commenced and then abandoned several possible responses. After clearing his throat, he finally managed, “You can’t prove that.”

“How did you sneak out gold?” Kendra exclaimed. “I thought Grandpa confiscated the treasure you and the satyrs took from the nipsies.”

“We’re not having this conversation,” Seth insisted. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“You must have had multiple stashes, and Grandpa didn’t find them all. But how are you converting gold and jewels into cash? A pawn shop?”

“This is nonsense,” Seth maintained. “Sounds to me like you’re the one with the criminal mind.”

“You have your guard up now, but I saw through it a minute ago. That gold wasn’t Newel’s or Doren’s to give you! After all that happened last summer, how did you walk out the front door with stolen treasure in your pockets? How shameless are you?”

Seth sighed in defeat. "Grandpa and Grandma weren't using it."

"Right, Seth, because they're the caretakers of Fablehaven. They're trying to protect the creatures and items hidden there. You might as well steal from a museum!"

"Kind of like you taking the rain stick from Lost Mesa? Or Warren keeping the sword he found there?"

Kendra flushed. "Technically, Painted Mesa wasn't part of the Lost Mesa preserve. Plus, I'm not hawking the rain staff to buy a WaveRunner! And Warren isn't trying to trade the sword for a snowmobile! Part of why we have those items is in order to protect them, not to sell them for a fraction of their value!"

"Settle down, I still have all of the gold."

"Maybe you should give it to me for safekeeping."

"Not likely," Seth snorted. He eyed her reluctantly. "But I'll return the treasure to Grandpa the next time we go back."

Kendra relaxed. "I can live with that."

"I don't have much choice since I live with the world's biggest tattler. What if I pay you off? Would you keep quiet? I could buy you some awesome Christmas presents."

"I'm not in the market for a hang glider."

"It could be anything," Seth offered. "Dresses, jewelry, a pony—whatever stupid girly junk you want!"

"The main thing I want this year is for my little brother to develop some integrity so I can stop baby-sitting him."

"I could always use some of the gold to hire some thugs to kidnap you and hold you captive until after the holidays," Seth considered.

"Good luck with that," Kendra said, crumpling the typed list and tossing it at the wastebasket beside the desk. The irregular ball of paper bounced off the lip of the wastebasket and landed softly on the floor.

Seth leaned down from his chair, snatched up the crumpled paper, and dropped it into the trash. "Nice aim."

"Nice list." Kendra strode into the hall and returned to her room. The scent of candle smoke still lingered so she opened the window, admitting a cold draft. She waved her hands to disperse the smell, then shut the window and flopped down on her bed.

Even far from Fablehaven, at their own house, with constant supervision from hidden bodyguards, Seth was still finding ways to cause unnecessary trouble! Part of her wished she could share the message from Patton with her brother. These days, he was the only person she could talk to about this type of problem. But she would not dare allow him access to the information in the Journal of Secrets. He would undoubtedly find a way to put that knowledge to bad use.

Her secrecy about the journal had caused some friction between them. When they discussed the subject, he knew by her vague answers that she was withholding information. But unable to translate the arcane writing himself, there was nothing he could do about her reluctance to share.

Rolling over onto her stomach, Kendra slid a hand under her mattress and pulled out five envelopes bound together by a rubber band. There was no need to read the letters from Gavin—she had the content memorized. But she enjoyed holding them.

He had promised that he would try to take a turn as one of her guards, but he had yet to show up. As a dragon tamer, he had unusual skills that had recently been required in some distant parts of the world. At least he had sent letters, delivered by bodyguards. In the notes, he shared details about his dealings with dragons: cutting skin tumors out of the slimy hide of a long, slender dragon; studying a rare dragon that lived underwater and used dense clouds of ink to confuse her prey; rescuing a team of magical plant experts from a small but ferocious dragon that spun webs like a spider.

Interesting as the dragons were, Kendra had to admit that her favorite parts of the letters were any mention of him missing her or looking forward to seeing her again. When she wrote him back, she made it clear that she was looking forward to seeing him as well, hopefully without sounding too overanxious. Closing her eyes, she pictured him. Was he getting better-looking in her memories?

Content to have held the letters for a moment, she slipped them back under her mattress. She had done her best to keep Seth from noticing the correspondence. He already loved to tease her about having a crush on Gavin. Imagine if her brother found evidence that it was sort of true!

From downstairs came the rumble of the automatic garage door opening. Her parents were home. Kendra sprang from her bed and snatched the journal and the candle stub from her desk, placing them on a high shelf

in her closet and moving folded sweaters in front of them. She unzipped her backpack and put a notebook and a pair of textbooks on her desk, although her homework was already finished.

Kendra took a deep breath. She only had to make it through two more days of school, and then winter break would allow her to relax and think through some of the issues that had been troubling her. She left her room and walked to the stairs, trying to compose her face into a casual expression with which to greet her parents.

Chapter 2



Stingbulb

Crunchy, dirt-flecked snow covered the ground outside of Wilson High School as Kendra proceeded down the steps toward the curb. Jagged, crusty mounds flanked the street and irregular piles bordered the sidewalk. Although the walkway looked clear, Kendra stepped carefully for fear of ice patches. A hazy ceiling of light gray clouds added monotonous shade to the cold day.

Idly swinging her backpack, Kendra peeked at the spots where her bodyguards normally loitered and noticed Elise leaning against a parked car across the street, penciling a word into a crossword puzzle. The woman did not make eye contact, but Kendra knew she was slyly watching. Elise appeared to be in her thirties—thin, medium height, with ruler-straight bangs. Kendra wondered if Warren thought she was pretty.

As Kendra turned left at the sidewalk that paralleled the street, she continued to survey the area. Most of the time she could spot Warren, but she did not try hard today, since he was probably off guarding Seth.

At the crosswalk, Kendra hustled to the other side of the street and then walked past the library to the huge rec center. The boxy brick structure housed a swimming pool, an exercise room, a basketball court, three racquetball courts, locker rooms, and a spacious day care. Kendra volunteered at the day care every day after school until five. It was an easy

job, and there were even occasional windows of time when she could get some homework done.

The closest elementary school got out before the high school, so when Kendra entered the day-care area, kids were already coloring, building with blocks, squabbling over toys, and running around. Some of the kids near the door greeted her as “Miss Sorenson.” None of them knew her as Kendra.

Rex Tanner stood across the room coaching a young freckled boy as he sprinkled fish food into the aquarium. An olive-skinned, middle-aged man from Brooklyn, Rex ran the day care and maintained a relaxed atmosphere. He had a natural, easy way with the kids. Nothing ever seemed to fluster him.

When the boy finished with the fish, Rex noticed Kendra and waved her over, his smile wider than usual. His curly hair, thick mustache, and lightly tinted glasses meant he always looked like he was wearing a corny disguise. When Kendra got close, she could smell that, as usual, he had gone heavy on the Old Spice.

“Hey, Rex,” she said.

“Kendra, good to see you, good to see you.” Whether addressing kids or adults, Rex normally spoke like he was hosting a show for young children. He clapped his hands, rubbing them together. “We’re going to explore the five senses today. I came up with a very exciting exercise. Come see what you think.”

She followed him to the counter at the back of the room where five square cardboard boxes stood in a row. Each box had a hole cut in the side.

“Am I supposed to feel what’s inside?” Kendra asked.

“Bingo,” Rex said. “Try to guess what you’re touching. Go left to right.”

Kendra reached into the first box, her fingers sliding off the surfaces of small, greasy spheres. “Slimy eyeballs?” she guessed.

“Peeled grapes,” Rex revealed. “Try the next one.”

Kendra reached inside the second box. “Intestines?”

“Noodles.”

The third box contained rubber erasers of various sizes, which she guessed correctly. The fourth felt empty at first, then she found something that felt like a potato. She was opening her mouth to guess when she felt a

stabbing pain in her thumb. Yelping, Kendra withdrew her hand. “What was that?” she cried.

“You okay?” Rex asked.

“Let me guess, cactus?” Kendra sucked the pad of her thumb, tasting blood.

“Close. A cactus fig. Edible fruit. I could have sworn I’d removed all the sharp spines!”

Kendra shook her hand. “Missed one.”

Rex blinked, looking off balance. “Let me get you a Band-Aid.”

Kendra checked her thumb. “No, it’s just a little prick.”

“Maybe we’d better limit the exercise to four boxes,” Rex decided.

“Probably. What’s in the last one? Rusty razors?”

“Damp sponges.”

“Did you use any of them to wipe up broken glass?”

Rex chuckled. “They should be safe.” He picked up the box with the cactus fig inside. “I’ll stow this back in my office.”

“Good idea,” Kendra said.

As Rex took the box away, Ronda came over. The overweight mother of three worked part-time at the day care, mostly during the afternoon shift. “You all right?” she asked.

“Rex had me feeling cactus fruit. Stuck me pretty good. I’m fine, though.”

Ronda shook her head. “For such a nice guy, he can be a real knucklehead.”

“It’s no big deal. I’m just glad the victim wasn’t a five-year-old.”

The rest of the afternoon went smoothly. Kendra had no urgent homework, so she was able to relax and enjoy the kids. She ran a game of musical chairs and a couple of rounds of Simon Says. Rex read a story, Ronda played her ukulele for singing time, and the touch exercise went over big. Soon the clock over the sink read 4:55 and Kendra began gathering her things.

She was shouldering her backpack when Rex came up behind her. “We have a problem, Kendra.”

Kendra turned, her eyes darting around the room, searching for what had broken or who was injured. “What is it?”

“I’ve got an irate parent on the phone in my office,” Rex apologized. “I need you for a minute.”

“Sure,” Kendra said, trying to guess what might have provoked the call. Had she treated any of the kids unfairly in recent days? No incidents came to mind. Perplexed, she followed Rex into his office. He shut the door and pulled the blinds closed. The handset of the phone was off the hook, resting on his desk. He motioned toward the phone. “Who is it?” she stage whispered.

Rex jerked his head toward the far corner of the office. “For starters, take a gander behind the filing cabinet.”

Furrowing her brow. Kendra moved toward the tall metal filing cabinet. Before she arrived, a girl emerged from behind the cabinet. A girl who looked exactly like Kendra. Same height, same hair, same face. It could have been her twin, or some trick with a mirror. The Kendra replica cocked her head, smiled, and waved.

Kendra froze, trying to process the bizarre sight. She had seen some impossible things in the past couple of years, but nothing more surprising.

Taking advantage of the stunned pause, Rex attacked from behind. One of his arms reached around Kendra’s torso, roughly pulling her against him. A pungent rag covered her nose and mouth. She bucked and squirmed, but the fumes from the rag quickly made her light-headed. The room swayed, and her sense of urgency faded. Senses muddy, she sagged against Rex and slipped into unconsciousness.

* * *

Kendra returned to consciousness by degrees. First she heard a distant babble of kids and parents. As she lazily tried to stretch, she became aware that her arms and legs were bound. Her alertness increasing, she remembered the mirror image of herself and how Rex had inexplicably attacked her. When she tried to call out, Kendra noticed the cloth wadded in her gagged mouth.

Only then did she open her eyes. She was on the ground behind Rex’s desk, trussed to a long piece of plywood. A pounding ache pulsed behind her forehead. She struggled, but her bindings were snug, and the board kept her immobilized. Panicked, she concentrated on breathing through her nose and listened as the prattle of kids and parents diminished to nothing.

Disorganized thoughts flashed through Kendra's mind. Could she somehow call fairies to her aid? She hadn't seen a fairy in months. Did her fairykind status grant her any advantages in her present predicament? Nothing came to mind. She needed a Tylenol; her head was really throbbing. Maybe Warren would rescue her. Or Elise. Kendra wished that Gavin had been here watching over her. Where was he? The most recent letter had come from Norway. Why had they crammed so much cloth in her mouth? One of the fluorescent lights in the ceiling was dying. Would Ronda miss her and come looking for her? No, that would be the purpose of the duplicate Kendra. The impostor would probably fool Warren and Elise as well. Where had the impostor come from? Could Rex be a member of the Society of the Evening Star? If so, he must have been some kind of undercover sleeper agent—he had worked at the day care for years.

The door to the office opened. Desperate hope surged inside of Kendra until Rex came and stood over her. "Just you and me, kid," he said pleasantly, crouching.

Kendra uttered muffled complaints, pleading with her eyes.

"Don't like the gag much?"

Kendra shook her head from side to side.

"Can you keep your trap shut? Believe me, I'll put you right back under." He opened a desk drawer and withdrew a small bottle and a rag. Unstopping the bottle, he moistened the rag and set it aside. "Cry out and you'll be sorry. If you think you have a headache now, just wait until after a second dose. You with me?"

Eyes wide and glistening, Kendra nodded.

Rex peeled the duct tape from her mouth and tugged out the saliva-soaked cloth. Kendra smacked her lips. Her tongue felt dry. "Why, Rex?"

He smiled, eyes squinting behind lightly tinted lenses. "Rex wouldn't do this to you, kiddo. Haven't you caught on? I'm not Rex."

"Are you some kind of shape shifter?"

"You're getting warmer."

"There were two of you," Kendra guessed. "Just like there was another me."

Rex sat down on the chair by his desk. "Want the lowdown? Honestly, I came from a tree. I was originally a fruit. A stingbulb. We're not supposed

to exist anymore, but here I am.”

“I don’t get it.”

A small smile tugged at the corners of his mouth. “When you reached into the box, playing the touch game, a stingbulb pricked you. Stingbulbs must be handled carefully. They become the first living thing they sting.”

“That clone of me used to be the cactus fig?”

“We’re amazing fruit. Takes about ninety minutes for the metamorphosis to occur. Throughout the transformation, we continue to draw matter and nutrients from the tree we were plucked from. Then the remarkable connection breaks, we survive for three or four days, and poof, we die.”

Kendra stared at Rex, thinking through the implications. “So the Kendra stingbulb is going to pose as me.”

“She is a remarkable duplicate. She even has most of your memories. She’ll do a good job imitating you. Your guardians will be none the wiser.”

Kendra scowled. “If she has my personality, why isn’t she helping me?”

Rex placed his palms together, tapping his fingers. “Not your personality. Your memories. The majority of them, anyhow. Like any stingbulb, she has her own consciousness. So do I. Just because I can access Rex’s memories doesn’t mean he gets to run the show. We stingbulbs follow whatever commands we are issued after our transformation. My course is set. Rex was complicated. I’m not. I was created for the purpose of abducting you. While Ronda was leading singing time, I was issuing instructions to your duplicate.”

“Why not disobey your instructions and let me go? The people who made you are evil! You don’t want to help the bad guys, do you?”

Rex chuckled, smiling broadly. “Don’t waste your breath. Stingbulbs are single-mindedly loyal, Kendra. Our awareness functions differently from yours. We accomplish what we’ve been programmed to do. Despite the fond memories of you that Rex possesses, I can only perceive you as my enemy. Tough luck. I’ll only exist for another day or two. I must fulfill my assignment.”

“What are you supposed to do with me?” Kendra whispered.

“Deliver you to my creator.”

“Who created you?”

His eyebrows went up. “You’ll see.”

“Are we going far?”

He shrugged.

“Is the Sphinx behind this?”

“Is that a name I should know?”

Kendra pressed her lips together. “What was the mission of the other stingbulb?”

“Posing as you is her main task. If your guardians suppose you are snug in your bed, imagine how simple it will be to smuggle you away.”

“What other tasks does she have?”

Rex nodded, leaning forward. “They said you would be full of questions, and that you would try to persuade me to help you. They said I should help you understand what had happened, that it would calm you. They didn’t tell me much more than I needed to know, and I have told you all that I can.”

“Who programmed you?”

“We’re done talking for now.”

“Rex, don’t do this—you know me, you don’t want to hurt me. Rex, they’ll kill me. They’ll hurt my family. Rex, please, don’t give in to them, this is life or death. They’re trying to destroy the world.”

He smiled as if the plea were cute and pathetic. “Enough chitchat. I’m pretty well oriented—been in this skin for more than a day. I can’t be confused or persuaded. Let’s enjoy some music. I really like music. I’ve never had ears before. Don’t scream, don’t try anything. It will only make matters worse.”

Rex switched on the radio atop his desk and turned up the volume. Kendra assumed the classic rock was meant to help mask any sounds she might dare to make. The blaring guitars and screaming vocals made it harder for her to think.

Would anybody catch on to this ruse? Would Warren come rushing to her aid? Or Elise? Or Seth? How could they possibly guess that somebody else had taken her place? Until he had revealed himself, it had not even crossed Kendra’s mind that Rex could be a fake. If the counterfeit Kendra

had her memories, what information might she share with their enemies? What might she steal? Who might she harm?

Rex remained beside Kendra in the chair, patiently watching her, occasionally beating an imaginary drum set. He showed no sign of letting his guard down. Try as she might, she could envision no way out of the predicament. It was a perfect, unforeseeable trap. The Sphinx had to be behind it. Would Rex take her to him? When? Closing her eyes, trying to tune out the rock music, Kendra yearned hopelessly for a plan.

Chapter 3



Impostor

Chewing on a bite of toast, Seth watched his sister shake an impressive pile of Cocoa Krispies into her cereal bowl. When she added milk, the mound of cereal rose, rice bits spilling over the edge of the bowl onto the table. As the cereal crackled, she brushed the fallen rice bits into her palm and popped them into her mouth. Then she dug in with her spoon.

“Hungry today?” Seth asked.

Kendra glanced over at him. “I love this stuff.”

“That’s your third bowl. Are you on some sort of anti-diet?”

She shrugged, spooning up another heaping mouthful.

“You’re probably just in mourning,” he teased, taking another bite of toast. “Last day of school until next year. No tests, no assignments, what will you do?”

“There’s not much going on today. Maybe I’ll skip.”

Seth laughed. “Nice. Good one. Where are you heading instead? Over to the movie theater? Burn up some quarters at the arcade?”

Kendra shrugged.

Seth studied his sister. “What’s your deal today? You hardly ever touch my Cocoa Krispies.”

“Guess I forgot how tasty they were.”

He shook his head in amused disbelief. “You know, you’re almost to the bottom of the box, where all the chocolate dust is hiding. It’s really good. Might as well.”

Kendra looked into the box, sniffed it, then dumped the cereal remnants into her bowl. She stirred the cereal with her spoon and resumed eating. Her eyes widened. “You’re right.”

“Make sure you drink the milk at the bottom. Whatever is left will be delicious.”

Kendra nodded, gulping down another mouthful.

Seth glanced at the clock. “I should get out to the bus stop, unless you’re serious about ditching. If you were, I’d stick around to witness the miracle.”

Kendra stared at him as if tempted, then rolled her eyes. “You know me better than that.”

“Do I? You almost had me going. Dad already left for work, Mom went to her painting group. We could pull this off.”

“Better hurry. There’s nobody here to drive you if you miss the bus.”

Seth snatched his backpack and headed for the door.

“Don’t just leave your junk on the table!” Kendra called.

“Could you grab it for me? I let you have the best part of the cereal.”

“You’re such a pest!”

Seth walked out the door. He still felt frustrated that Kendra had foiled his plans for a gold-funded Christmas. All of that work—hauling the batteries to Fablehaven to trade with the satyrs, collecting his payment from the nipsies, returning only part of the gold to Grandpa before sneaking the rest out—had gone to waste. Then again, he could still set aside a little gold and pretend to return it all the next time they visited Fablehaven. But with Kendra around, who knew when he could find a chance to convert gold into cash undetected?

His sister had sure been acting odd this morning. He had walked in on her smelling the decorative soap in the bathroom. Not just taking a whiff—she had been cupping the lavender rosebuds in her hands and inhaling with her eyes closed. And he knew from experience that consuming three huge bowls of sweet cereal would lead to a serious stomachache. Kendra normally ate a smallish, healthy breakfast. Furthermore, what was with her

comment about ditching? Even as a joke, that was out of character. He wished she hadn't planted the idea of skipping school in his brain. The possibilities were attractive.

When Seth saw the yellow bus lumber around a corner down the street, he hustled to the bus stop, taking care not to slip and fall with an audience watching. He arrived just in time, and his thoughts turned to horsing around with his friends.

* * *

As he descended the bus steps after school, Seth felt as though an enormous weight had been taken from his shoulders. Winter break was nothing compared to summer, but it was still long enough to pretend that school would never happen again. Walking to his house, he kicked chunks from the crusty snowbanks, scattering an icy spray with each impact. He found the front door locked. Mom had mentioned that she might be off running errands. He took out his key and let himself inside.

In the kitchen, Seth foraged for snacks in the cupboards. They were out of the best stuff, so he settled for Doritos and chocolate milk. After the snack, he plopped down in front of the TV and flipped through the channels, but of course nothing was on but talk shows and worse. He hung in there for some time, skipping around, hoping variety might substitute for quality, but eventually he surrendered. When he turned off the TV in despair, inspiration struck.

Mom was gone. Dad was at work. And for perhaps the last time in a while, Kendra was absent. He knew that she occasionally received letters from Gavin. Back in October, while hunting for the Journal of Secrets, Seth had found two notes buried in her sock drawer. Each had contained all sorts of awesome information about dragons. But then Kendra had chosen a new hiding place. He was sure that she had received more letters, but he had not recently found an opportunity to search thoroughly.

Hurrying up the stairs, Seth felt exhilarated and a little guilty. He trotted to Kendra's room and peeked between her bookshelf and the wall. Nothing. She used to keep the Journal of Secrets there. Like the letters, she had apparently moved it to a less obvious spot.

He started opening drawers, pawing carefully through the neatly folded clothes inside. Part of him wished he could accelerate the search by

dumping her junk on the floor and kicking over furniture, but obviously it was crucial that he leave no evidence of his intrusion. Why did his sister have so many drawers, so many clothes? As the process began to feel painfully slow, he started to reassess how badly he cared about seeing the letters.

He went to the center of the room, hands on his hips, eyes scanning high and low. Kendra was no moron. Where might she have chosen to hide the letters? Where was a really tricky spot? Maybe she had taped them under her desk? Nope, nothing there. Inside the vent in the wall? Not there either. Between the pages of her mammoth dictionary? No dice.

Seth began working his way through her closet. Inside a shoebox? Inside a shoe? On a shelf? Behind and beneath some sweaters on a high shelf, he found the Journal of Secrets and the umite candle stub.

He was surprised that she still kept something so important in a fairly obvious place. He would have hidden it behind the insulation in the attic or somewhere else truly out of the way.

Unbeknownst to Kendra, Seth had found the Journal of Secrets before. He had lit the umite candle, pondered the undecipherable symbols, realized he would never know what the book said without her to translate, and carefully replaced it behind her bookcase.

Seth flipped open the journal, in case she had stashed the letters inside. Nope, just blank pages. He considered hiding the journal in a different spot to demonstrate that she needed to keep it in a smarter place. The exercise would serve as a reproachful object lesson. But of course if he did that, his sister would know he had been snooping around her room, which would only lead to trouble.

And then, without warning, Kendra entered the room.

Seth stood frozen, his eyes dropping from his sister to the journal in his hands. What was she doing home? She should be at the day care for another hour!

“What are you doing?” Kendra accused sharply.

Seth tried to appear calm while he struggled to recover from the surprise and devise a plausible response. Meeting his sister’s stern gaze, he resisted the urge to try to conceal the journal. It was too late. She had seen it. “I wanted to make sure you’d hidden the journal in a safe place.”

“You have no right to come in here and go through my stuff,” she stated flatly.

“I wasn’t hurting anything. I was just bored.” He held up the journal. “You didn’t hide it very well.”

Kendra’s clenched fists quivered at her sides. When she spoke, she sounded barely in control. “Don’t try to pretend you’re my watchdog. For starters, Seth, you need to admit that what you did was wrong. You can’t pretend that this was okay.”

“I was invading your privacy,” he admitted.

She relaxed a tad. “Was that right or wrong?”

“Wrong to get caught.”

Her face reddened. For a moment it looked like she would charge him. Seth was startled by the extent of her reaction. “Have you done this before?” she asked, voice strained.

Seth knew he should placate her. But when people got this mad at him, even if they were right, it made him feel belligerent. “Would you believe that the first time I ever snuck into your room happened to be the one day you came home early? Talk about terrible luck!”

“I know you think that everything is a big joke. That no rules apply to you. But I’m not going to let this slide.”

He tossed the journal on her bed. “Settle down. It isn’t like I can read it.”

She huffed. “I’m surprised you would read anything on purpose.”

“You know what I like to read? Love letters. Those are my favorites.”

Kendra trembled with rage. He noticed her eyes flick to the bed. Seth tried not to smile. What was with her today? She was normally more clever than this. And less angry. “Get out,” she seethed. “Just wait until Mom and Dad get home.”

“You’re going to bring Mom and Dad into this? Are you planning on telling them about Gavin’s letters and your secret Fablehaven journal? Grow a brain.”

Face contorted with rage, Kendra rushed at him. Seth was taller than his sister, but not by much, and he found himself staggering away from her, blocking ferocious punches. What was with her? She was aiming at his face with closed fists! They had often wrestled around when they were younger,

but she had never gone after him like this. He didn't want to try to pin her down or push her away—that would just enrage her even more. Instead, he deflected the onslaught as best he could, maneuvering around so he could retreat out the door.

Fortunately, Kendra did not follow him into the hall. She lingered in her doorway, eyes fierce, hands gripping the door frame as if holding herself back from further violence. From below came the grumble of the automatic garage door grinding open. Kendra's expression melted from angry to worried and perhaps ashamed. "Stay out of my room," she said numbly, shutting the door.

In his room, Seth examined the bruises forming on his forearms. Something was definitely out of whack with his sister. Was she having trouble at school? Getting a B in some class? Maybe she had received bad news from Gavin. Whatever the cause, he definitely needed to go easy on her for a few days. Clearly, something had upset her enough to drastically alter her personality.

* * *

Seth awoke late that night to a gentle tapping at his window. He sat up, blinking, and squinted at his digital clock—3:17 a.m. The only light in the still room came from the face of his clock and the moonlight seeping in through the softly glowing curtains. Had he really heard a tapping sound? He plunged back into his pillow, curling up and snuggling into his comforter. Before sleep could enfold him, the tapping was repeated, faint enough that it might be only a twig scraping his windowpane as a branch shifted in a gentle breeze. Except there was no tree near his window.

More alert now that he realized the tapping had not been hallucinated, Seth scooted out of bed and crossed to the window. Pulling a curtain aside, he found Warren, looking a bit haggard, crouched on the narrow shelf of roof beyond the glass. He had already removed the screen.

Seth reached to unlock the window, then hesitated. He had been burned before by recklessly opening a window. There were creatures in the world that could disguise themselves with illusions.

Warren nodded, acknowledging the hesitation. He gestured toward the street. Leaning his cheek against the cool glass, Seth could see where Elise stood beside one of the cars they had been driving. She waved.

It might not be concrete proof, but Seth felt convinced. He opened the window. Shockingly cold air flowed past him.

Warren crept inside. As far as Seth knew, this marked the first time any of his bodyguards had entered the house. Back when Tanu was watching them, he and Seth had talked quite a bit, but it had always been outside. Only something extraordinary would have motivated Warren to drop by like this.

“You’re not going to turn into a goblin and try to kill me?” Seth whispered.

“It’s really me,” Warren said quietly, “although you probably shouldn’t have let me in, even after seeing Elise. The Society would stop at nothing to get to you.”

“Should I get Kendra?” Seth asked.

Warren held up both hands. “No, I approached you like this so we could talk in private. Elise and I are concerned about your sister. Have you noticed any odd behavior recently?”

Guilt surged through Seth. “She wasn’t herself today. Mainly it was my fault. She caught me snooping around her room and went ballistic.”

Warren eyed Seth thoughtfully. “Did her reaction seem extreme?”

Seth paused. “I shouldn’t have been in there. She had a right to be mad. But yeah, it was really extreme.”

Warren nodded as if the description fit his expectations. “Kendra snuck out of the house earlier tonight, a little after one. She went over the back fence. Elise was on watch. She spotted Kendra and followed from a distance.”

“Kendra knows she isn’t supposed to go anywhere without you guys,” Seth interrupted. “Why would she try to give you the slip? It isn’t how she operates.”

“You’re right, it doesn’t fit her behavioral pattern, but it gets much worse. Elise followed your sister to a public mailbox, where Kendra deposited a letter. You understand, Seth, our mission is to protect you from outside influences, and part of that mission includes protecting you from yourselves. Once Elise made sure that Kendra was safely back in the house, she verified that I was on guard and returned to the mailbox. She got inside, located the envelope Kendra had mailed, and checked to see what information it contained.”

“You guys go through our mail?” Seth asked, unsettled.

“Routine screening,” Warren assured him. “We have to make sure you don’t accidentally leak compromising information. Especially when a letter is mailed under such suspicious circumstances. We don’t check the mail you send through us to your grandparents—just communication to outside parties.”

“I assume Kendra messed up?”

Warren held up an envelope. “The message she sent was no mistake. Have a look.”

Seth accepted the envelope. Warren clicked on a flashlight. The envelope was addressed to T. Barker at a post-office box in Monmouth, Illinois. “Any idea who this is?” Seth asked.

“No clue. Doesn’t ring a bell?”

Seth considered the question. “I can’t think of any Barkers. As far as I can recall, we don’t know anybody in Illinois.”

“Read the letter.”

The envelope had been expertly opened. Nothing ripped, no evidence of intrusion. It could easily be resealed and mailed. He removed the folded paper inside and read the following:

Dear Torina,

They keep a close watch on me here. I’m not sure if I’ll find another chance to forward more info. I’m unsure whether they have the phones tapped, so I’ll probably stick to mail. By the way, so far so good. Nobody suspects, although Seth has been a pain.

I have key information. They found one of the artifacts! The Chronometer is in their possession at Fablehaven! They also have a journal from Patton Burgess. He claims to know the location of other artifacts. Those locations are not described in the journal, but are hidden at Fablehaven in a secret room beyond an area in the dungeon called the Hall of Dread.

I’ll try to write again if I learn anything essential. Before I finish here, I will try to hide Patton’s journal near the old tree

house at the creek along Hawthorn Avenue.

Faithfully yours,

Kendra Sorenson

Seth looked up at Warren. “What is going on?”

“Good thing we screen letters, although we never expected a note like this. Imagine the consequences if this message fell into the wrong hands.”

“It looks like her handwriting.”

“I’m confident that Kendra wrote it.”

“Is Vanessa out of the Quiet Box? Maybe she was controlling Kendra in her sleep.”

Warren shook his head. “I considered the possibility and contacted your grandfather. He checked. Vanessa remains in her prison. But that sort of thinking may be along the right lines.”

“Somebody must be blackmailing her or controlling her. She would never just betray us! Not on her own!”

“I can’t imagine that she would. Yet it is tough to read this letter and not see a deliberate attempt at crippling betrayal. Elise doesn’t know Kendra very well. She wants to take her into custody.”

Seth stood up. “She can’t lock up Kendra!”

“Simmer down. I’m not saying that is the only option. But whatever the method, given all that is at stake, immediately silencing Kendra has become necessary. I don’t want to incarcerate your sister, but we have to get to the bottom of this.”

“Do we confront her?” Seth wondered aloud. “Spring this on her and watch how she responds?”

“I’d love to hear an explanation. I haven’t managed to conjure up a reasonable one.”

“Unless somebody is using mind control.”

Warren shrugged. “After reading that letter, nothing would shock me. Whatever we do, we mustn’t disturb your parents.”

“You want to confront her right now?”

“We can’t wait on this. Besides, moving now should catch her off balance. If she’s a little groggy, it may help us extract honest answers.”

“Okay.” Seth led Warren to his door. “You’re right that we don’t want to wake Mom and Dad.”

“They don’t appreciate strange men visiting their home in the middle of the night?”

Seth chuckled darkly. “It wouldn’t be a good scene.”

“Let’s go find out why your sister is mailing potentially disastrous letters.”

Seth led Warren into the hall and tiptoed to Kendra’s door. He gently tried the knob. “Locked,” he mouthed. He leaned close to Warren. “We don’t need a key. Just a pin or a paper clip. Something skinny to poke in the hole and pop the lock.”

Holding up a finger, Warren removed what looked like professional lock-picking gear from a pocket. He quietly inserted one of the slender instruments into the tiny hole by the doorknob, and the lock clicked. Pocketing the tools, Warren swiftly opened the door and strode into the room with Seth right behind him.

Kendra sat cross-legged on her bed reading a letter. She looked up, annoyed at first, then perplexed as she recognized Warren. “What is it?” she asked.

Seth closed the door.

“You’re up early,” Warren said.

“I’ve had trouble sleeping,” Kendra replied, folding the letter.

“We need to talk,” Warren said.

Kendra shifted uncomfortably. “Why?”

Warren held up the envelope she had mailed earlier in the night.

For a moment her face betrayed pure terror. Then she scowled. “How dare you go through my personal—”

“Don’t even try it,” Warren cut her off. “I need honest answers right now or we’re carting you away. There was nothing personal about this note. It was naked treachery. Why, Kendra? We need an immediate explanation.”

Kendra’s eyes darted around the room as she flailed for a response. “I wasn’t sending it to an enemy.”

“I never said you were,” Warren replied. “Sending this type of information to anyone outside our circle of trust would qualify as a major betrayal. I have never heard of Torina Barker. Who is she?”

“Please, Warren, you have to trust me, you know I would never—”

“I will try to hide Patton’s journal near the old tree house at the creek along Hawthorn Avenue,” Warren read. He lowered the letter. “You’re right, Kendra, I would never have suspected you capable of this kind of disloyalty. Explain yourself.”

Her mouth opened and closed wordlessly. Suddenly her eyes filled with pain and worry. “Please, Warren, don’t ask more questions, I had to do it, they made me, I can’t explain.”

Warren studied her shrewdly. “This feels like an act. Seth?”

“She’s lying,” he agreed.

Abruptly Kendra looked angry. “I can’t believe you would treat me like this.”

“What I can’t believe is how clumsily you keep jumping from tactic to tactic,” Warren said. “Who am I speaking with? I’m not convinced that Kendra’s mind is behind these words.”

“It’s me, Warren, of course it’s me. Remember how I helped restore you from being an albino? Remember how we faced that three-headed panther with Vanessa? Ask me anything.”

“Why did you forget the combination to your locker?” Warren wondered.

“What?”

“I was watching you at school today. You had to go get help from the office to open your locker. Why?”

“Why does anybody forget anything?” Kendra protested, her voice unsteady. “The numbers just slipped my mind.”

“Why did you come home early from day care?” Seth asked.

“Rex was out sick. The lady replacing him said she didn’t mind if I ducked out early.”

Seth took a step toward his sister. “That is not a very Kendra-like thing to do. You’re right, Warren. This isn’t her. I don’t think it has been her all day.”

“I’m your sister,” Kendra insisted, eyes pleading. She jammed her hands into her pockets.

Seth waved a finger. “No. You are definitely not my sister. Know what you are? You’re a pig! I’ve never seen anyone down so many Cocoa Krispies!”

Warren grabbed Kendra’s arm. “I need you to come with me, whoever you are, until we can ensure you have released your hold on Kendra’s mind.” He spoke harshly.

Kendra slapped her free hand to her lips and swallowed. Warren pushed her back onto the bed, trying to swab her mouth with his finger. Kendra laughed. “Too late, Warren,” she said around his intrusive finger. She started to cough. “Quick-acting, leaves almost no trace. Everyone will think it was a stroke.”

“That was poison?” Seth asked, looking stricken.

Kendra pouted at him and nodded. “No more big sister. Hope you two are,” she started gagging and then recovered, “are proud of yourselves.”

Her body began to convulse.

“Do something!” Seth urged.

Warren leaned forward, gripping Kendra’s chin. “Whoever you are, you will pay for this.”

“Doubtful,” Kendra choked.

The convulsing stopped. Warren checked for a pulse in her neck. “She’s not breathing.” He pressed an ear to her chest, then started CPR.

Seth watched in horror, his legs weak beneath him, as Warren relentlessly attempted to revive his sister’s body. He wished she was awake and angry and punching him, whether her mind was in control or not—anything but this!

After several minutes, Warren finally backed away from the dead body. “Seth, I don’t know what to say.”

“You better leave,” Seth sobbed, cheeks soaked with tears. “Mom and Dad can’t find you with her like this.”

“I should have . . . I didn’t realize . . .”

“Who could have seen that coming?” Seth said hoarsely. He approached his sister, trying to find a pulse, caressing her face, searching for any sign of life. There was none.

Warren helped Seth tuck her in under her covers. Mom and Dad would think she had passed away peacefully in her sleep. Seth could not stop crying.

Finally Warren helped Seth back to his own room and into bed, then slipped out the window and replaced the screen. Seth found he could not sleep. Soon his pillow was drenched. He could not stop obsessing about the lifeless body in his sister's room. After all they had been through together, Kendra was gone.

Chapter 4



Captive

When the minivan eased to a stop in the darkness, Kendra had no idea whether they had reached their final destination. Bound and gagged in a cramped, enclosed trailer hitched behind the maroon vehicle, she had surrendered to the dismal theory that she might spend the rest of her life being shuttled from campground to campground.

Kendra had spent the previous day tethered to a tree in a remote, wooded camping area, eating applesauce, baked beans, and canned pudding. A modest campfire had held off the chill, but it occasionally became almost unbearable when the smoke wafted her way. This was after being transferred from the day care to the trailer in the dead of night, then driving for hours on highways and winding roads.

The phony Rex did not converse much, but he had tried to keep her relatively comfortable. Multiple quilts currently bundled her, and she rested on several pillows. The stingbulb impostor made sure she remained fed and hydrated. But there were plenty of inconveniences. She had not been able to use a real restroom, the gag was obnoxious, and her bindings had proven frustratingly secure.

Suddenly, the door at the back of the trailer rolled up and two figures shone flashlights at Kendra. She blinked and squinted into the light as the figures approached, wrapped her up in one of the quilts that surrounded her, and lugged her out of the trailer. Kendra opted not to squirm. What was the

point? Bound and gagged, the most she could accomplish by resisting was to get dumped on her head.

As the strangers carried her, part of the quilt fell away from her face and Kendra found herself gazing up at a big, run-down house against the backdrop of a starry sky. Inside her cocoon, she traveled up the porch steps and through the front door. Though the house was unlit, no amount of darkness could blind Kendra, and she saw that the interior was better furnished than the exterior would have suggested. She tilted as the strangers toted her up a staircase, then leveled out as they hauled her through a set of double doors and deposited her on the glossy wooden floor of a brightly lit room.

Glancing up, Kendra saw that one of the men lugging her had been the Rex impostor, the other a heavyset, bearded man wearing dark glasses. The two men withdrew, and Kendra shifted her attention to the room. Vibrant abstract art adorned the walls, tastefully illuminated by tracks of lights on the ceiling. A stylishly designed clock accented with neon hung above an ornate mantel. Dynamic metal sculptures of various sizes added further personality to the room.

“So you’re what all the fuss has been about,” a feminine voice declared.

Kendra rolled over to face the speaker. Apparently in her fifties, the woman had a slender figure and wore an elegant red gown. Her heavy makeup was well applied. The hand resting on her hip glittered with rings. She wore her blond hair short and curly, the style seeming a tad too young for her age.

The woman walked toward Kendra, high heels clicking, and pulled a switchblade from her handbag. The blade snapped into view. Kendra stared with wide eyes. Wearing an unreadable expression, the woman bent over and cut the gag away without scratching Kendra’s cheek.

“Don’t you dare scream,” the woman chided breezily. “No one will hear you, and my nerves can’t abide it.”

“Okay,” Kendra said.

The woman smiled. She had full lips and a broad mouth. Perfect teeth. Her light blue eyes were wide-set, her nose a bit thick, her ears small, her face shaped a little like a valentine. Even though some of her individual features almost seemed unfortunate, overall her face retained an undeniably

striking beauty. The years were trying to steal her looks with creases and lines, but she was successfully retaliating with cosmetics. “Am I the kidnapper you expected?”

“What are you going to do with me?” Kendra asked boldly.

“Untie you, if you promise not to make a ruckus. I must look like a rusty old relic to you, but please believe me that under no circumstances could you possibly fight your way out of this room. I’ll make you sorry if you try.”

“You don’t look old,” Kendra said. “I won’t try to escape. I know you have henchmen.”

“You are in serious danger of getting on my good side,” the woman said, bending down with her knife. The keen blade whispered through the cords.

Sitting up, Kendra massaged where the bindings had left marks. “Who are you?”

“I’m Torina,” the woman said. “Your host, your captor, your confidante—however you prefer to think of me.”

“I think *kidnapper* probably nails it.”

Torina tilted her head, absently fingering her pearl necklace. “I’m glad you have some spunk. I’m keeping a low profile these days, which means I’m slumming in a small Midwestern town breathing the same air as goats and hogs and cattle.” She closed her eyes and shuddered. Her crystal blue irises reappeared, locking on Kendra. “Maybe you can relieve some of the blandness.”

“Are you some kind of witch?” Kendra guessed.

Torina smirked. “I can stomach audacious if you keep it polite. Fortunately for you, I’ve met some smoking hot witches in my day, so I take no offense. I’m not a witch, per se, though I know my fair share of magic. Inside these walls my identity is no secret. I’m a lectoblix.”

“The type that can suck away the youth of other people?”

“Not bad,” Torina said, impressed. “Yes, I drain vitality from others in order to remain young. Before you start formulating smart comments, no, I have not done so in quite some time, which explains my haggard appearance. I prefer not to gratuitously abuse my ability.”

“You don’t look haggard,” Kendra assured her.

Torina regarded Kendra through lowered eyelids. "You have a knack for imitating sincerity. How old would you peg me?"

Kendra shrugged. "Late forties?" She deliberately guessed a little young. Early fifties would have been more honest.

Eyes suspicious, Torina uttered a brief, amused laugh. "My body is currently sixty-two."

"You're kidding! You really look much younger," Kendra said, noticing that Torina could not resist looking pleased. "But if you've drained vitality from others, you must be older than sixty-two."

"Goodness, yes, child! I would never divulge my actual age! You'd think you were conversing with a mummy!"

Studying her stylish captor, Kendra took a shuddering breath. "Are you going to suck away my youth?"

Torina chuckled. Her smile suddenly appeared brittle, and though the laugh was meant to dismiss the possibility as ridiculous, it carried a predatory undertone. "No, Kendra, you silly thing, the Sphinx would have my head! Besides, I live by a code. I am opposed to draining children. It stunts their growth, turns them into freaks. Too unfair." Torina paused, briefly scraping the corner of her lips with a long fingernail. "Then again, should you try to escape, I would have no choice but to hinder the attempt by those means which are available to my kind." Her eyes glittered.

"You don't have to worry about that," Kendra claimed.

"No, I don't," Torina agreed. "The windows are all barred. The bars are invisible, so as to avoid unwanted attention. The doors are locked and powerfully reinforced. I could leave you unsupervised and you would have no hope of escaping. But I have guards, and my whisper hound."

Grandma and Grandpa Sorenson had a whisper hound guarding the prisoners in the basement. Kendra did not know too much about it. "What does a whisper hound do?"

"Funny you should ask," Torina remarked, crossing to the door through which Kendra had entered. She opened the door and spoke a command in a foreign tongue. A gust of cold wind rushed through the doorway. "Keep very still, Kendra."

Kendra sat rigidly on the wood floor as frosty air swirled around her. The air settled, stirring mildly, and became even colder, a penetrating chill that made her teeth chatter. She held her breath as the frigid air caressed her

strangely. Torina issued another unintelligible command, and the cold pocket whisked away, gushing out the door.

“Now that the whisper hound has your scent, escape is out of the question,” Torina said, closing the door. “Bars on the windows are a needless redundancy. As are my associates who will assuredly keep a sharp eye on you. As are the spells I have in place on the doors.”

“I get it,” Kendra said glumly.

“For your sake, I hope you do. Now, dearest, I know it is no fault of yours, but you reek of wood smoke and tree sap. I am sorry to have subjected you to the outdoors. Such torture is cruel and unusual, but poor Rex was doing his best to keep a low profile. Our first order of business will be to restore you to a presentable state. You’ll find a fresh outfit in my bathroom along with such amenities as you may require.”

Beckoning for Kendra to follow, Torina clicked across the floor, through a doorway, and into a tastefully decorated bathroom. Kendra traced a hand across a granite countertop, taking in the groupings of expensive-looking cosmetic products. The heady aromas of fine soaps and lotions mingled in the air. Soft lights lined the mirror above the counter. Kendra thought her reflection looked unusually pretty.

“Amazing what proper lighting will do for a complexion,” Torina observed airily. “Here are your things.” She stroked a thick, soft towel and gestured at a green-and-white checkered dress. “You can use the jetted tub or the roomy shower. As for shampoos and body wash, what is mine is yours. I’ll leave you with some privacy. I’ll be nearby should you need anything.”

“Thanks,” Kendra said.

Torina exited, closing the door behind her. Kendra locked it. The bathroom had a window with opaque glass. It was large enough for a person to fit through. In case the invisible bars were a ruse, Kendra opened the window. It appeared to offer easy access to the roof, but when Kendra extended her hand, as Torina had promised, she could feel metal bars blocking any exit into the cold night. She closed the window with a sigh.

Folding her arms and leaning against a wall, Kendra considered the opulent bathroom. She would almost have preferred confinement in a dingy cell. It would have felt less treacherous. She did not appreciate the illusions

of friendliness and comfort. To Kendra, Torina came across like an alluring tropical plant poised to devour unsuspecting insects.

Yet here she was in a lovely bathroom, and she did need a shower, so she might as well. Kendra disrobed. Beneath her bare feet, the floor was tacky with hair-spray residue. The warm stream of the shower felt good, as did the perfumed body wash. After she had washed, Kendra lingered in the shower with her eyes closed, breathing steam, enjoying the sensation of the water running down her back, reluctant to end the solitary interlude.

Finally she shut off the water and toweled dry. She put on fresh undergarments and the checkered dress. Everything fit her just right.

Hair still damp, Kendra unlocked the door and returned to the trendy bedroom. Torina hastily pulled off a pair of reading glasses and tossed aside a celebrity magazine. Folding the glasses awkwardly and tucking them into her handbag, she stood up. "I was beginning to worry that you would never emerge."

"The shower felt good."

"The dress looks darling. Twirl for me."

Kendra obliged her.

"Very nice," Torina approved. "We should do something with your hair."

"I'm not really in the mood."

"Just style it a smidge? Or we could roll up our sleeves and have some real fun. Red and gold highlights? No? Another night, perhaps. I'm no amateur."

"I believe you. I'll take a rain check."

Torina smiled. "Shall we have a look around? Or should I just show you to your room?"

"I'm kind of tired."

"Of course you are, dear. But you must also feel unsettled, a stranger in a new place. Let me at least show you the aquarium, then I'll let you get some rest."

"You're the boss."

Torina led the way into the hall, heels clicking, hips swaying. Kendra followed, impressed by the décor. What would it cost to furnish such a large house so lavishly?

“Our aquarium is unique,” Torina commented, pulling open an ornate pair of doors. “It doubles as our library.”

Kendra halted in the doorway, astonished by the sight before her. Bookshelves lined the walls from floor to ceiling, interrupted by an occasional niche displaying antique scientific instruments. Bulky leather sofas and recliners offered plenty of places for a reader to relax, accompanied by a variety of handsome tables for added convenience. Aside from the lights in the ceiling, plentiful lamps contributed to the even illumination. But none of this held Kendra frozen in the doorway.

Dozens of fish drifted through the air, as if swimming in water. The more Kendra stared, the more details registered. Rays of various sizes patrolled the room, winglike fins flapping gently. An octopus clung to the side of an ottoman. Exotic fish with vivid stripes and splotches swam in synchronized schools. Crustaceans crept across the floor, antennae probing. A spotted, six-foot shark prowled the library in ominous circles.

In contrast to the bizarre vision before her, Kendra inhaled what seemed like normal air. Nothing in the room was even damp.

Torina sashayed into the spacious, fish-infested library. “Isn’t it a marvel? Come on in!”

“What about the shark?” Kendra asked.

“Shinga? He’s a leopard shark. We’ve never had any serious trouble out of him. The eels can get nippy—just stay away from the globe.”

Kendra hesitantly stepped into the room, enchanted by the fish swimming all around her. “Can I touch one?”

“Sure. Try the big one with the yellow stripes.”

The fish drifted within reach, fins flowing as if in water, and Kendra brushed a fingertip along its side. It felt slightly slimy, and surprisingly solid. “Are these real?”

Torina grinned. “Absolutely.”

Kendra noticed an orange fish with an elaborate series of spines nearing the doorway. “Should we close the doors?”

“They can’t get out.”

Kendra crouched down beside the octopus, tipping her head so she could see some of the suckers on the tentacles. The body of the octopus flexed, pulsing strangely, and Kendra hastily stepped away. Three seahorses

hovered nearby. Off to one side, beside a lamp, small fish gobbled up tiny fragments of floating matter. “This is so cool. How does it work?”

“The easy answer?” Torina asked, manicured hand on one hip. “Magic.” She compressed her lips thoughtfully. “How could I put this in layman’s terms? Imagine that in an adjacent reality, this library is full of water. A sturdy container holds all of it in place. Then imagine that these fish are able to inhabit both realities at once. They are fully interacting with both realities, while we remain oblivious to the water. That description isn’t exact, but it conveys the proper idea.”

“Unbelievable,” Kendra breathed, warily watching the sleek shark glide by almost within reach.

“We may be surrounded by barnyards and outnumbered by livestock, but not even countless miles of farmland can deny us at least a few truly sophisticated amenities.”

“How do you feed them?”

“Sometimes they devour one another, though we have some magical deterrents in place, particularly on the shark. Normally we just do to their food what we did to them, leave it floating in both realities, and they find it without much trouble.” Torina clapped her hands. “I have tested your patience long enough. Allow me to escort you to your room.”

Kendra let Torina usher her back into the hallway. Stealing a few backward glances at the surreal aquarium, she wondered how anybody would get any reading done in there. Torina directed Kendra up some stairs to a third level, where numerous doors flanked a narrow hallway. Kendra glimpsed an old man peering from one of the doorways, but he ducked away as they approached. Paying him no heed, Torina escorted Kendra to the third door on the right.

Beyond the door awaited a frilly trundle bed, a dresser, a bookshelf, a pair of nightstands, a modest desk, and a small private bathroom. The simple room had a single window and unadorned walls.

“This will be your room while you remain here,” Torina said. “You’re welcome to explore this floor. Please do not wander the rest of the house except by invitation. I would rather not resort to less comfy accommodations.”

“You’ve been pretty nice for a kidnapper,” Kendra said. “Too nice. It’s really weird. Are you going to fatten me up and eat me?”

Torina pursed her lips and gently scratched at the corner of her eye. "The witch references are getting tiresome, dear."

"What will you do with me? You mentioned the Sphinx."

"You answered your own question. I'll do what the Sphinx tells me."

Kendra's mouth felt dry. "Will he be coming here?"

A sly smile crept onto Torina's lips. "I am not his keeper, but I expect he will, sooner or later. Look, darling, I have no desire to make your situation harsher than necessary. Believe me, you can't escape, and nobody will find you. Don't rock the boat, and I'll keep things bearable."

Kendra doubted she could get more useful information out of Torina. "Okay. I'll try to be good."

"Sleep well, Kendra."

Torina closed the door.

Kendra sat on the edge of the bed. What would the Sphinx want? Information? Cooperation? Would he torture her? Could she resist torture? Ancient as he was, he probably knew a million ways to get people to talk. There were plenty of secrets that she needed to protect. Would he want to use her fairykind ability to recharge spent magical objects? Would he find ways to use her abilities to harm the people she loved?

She pictured the false Kendra currently sleeping in her bed. What was the impostor doing? Would she harm Seth or her parents? Supposedly the impostor had access to her memories. Was she already divulging secrets? Kendra lowered her face to her hands. By the time the Sphinx arrived, whatever secrets she possessed might be irrelevant.

There came a soft knock at the door. Kendra scooted off the bed and opened it. A pair of elderly men waited outside, one in a wheelchair, the other pushing.

"Welcome," said the man in the wheelchair. His white hair was disheveled. He wore thick horn-rimmed glasses, plaid pajamas, and felt slippers. A folded newspaper rested on his lap.

"Can we come in?" asked the man pushing the chair. Liver spots dotted his bald scalp.

"What do you want?" Kendra asked, not moving out of the way.

"To introduce ourselves," said the man in the chair. "We're your new neighbors."

The man behind the chair lowered his voice. "We know some things that might be of service." He winked.

Kendra stepped aside. "Isn't it late?"

"What do we care about late?" griped the man in the wheelchair. "Too many days are the same here. You get sick of it. A new face is front-page news." The bald man guided the wheelchair into the room.

"I'm Kendra."

"Haden," said the guy in the wheelchair. "The other geezer is Cody."

"We're not really geezers," Cody said. "I'm thirty-two. Haden is twenty-eight."

"Oh, no," Kendra said. "She drained you! What was it like? Can I ask?"

"The first bite is quick," Cody said. "It leaves you paralyzed. Then she really latches on, and you can feel your life ebbing away. Your body withers. Deflates. It doesn't hurt. It's dreamlike. Hard to describe."

"Torina can put on quite an act," Haden warned. "Don't trust her. Not for a second."

"Why do you guys live here with her?" Kendra wondered.

"We're prisoners," Haden said. "Torina chooses her victims wisely. I don't have any close relations. Even if I somehow busted out of here, old duffer like me, I'd have no place to go."

"Ditto," Cody echoed.

"So we cooperate," Haden said, resignation in his tone. "It beats the alternative."

"You don't want to end up in the basement," Cody cautioned. "Some of the other guys in our situation ended up down there. Not pleasant. They don't always return."

"How many of you are there?" Kendra asked.

Haden inflated his cheeks and exhaled slowly. "Seven, right now. Two in the basement. One on his deathbed. One mostly keeps to his room. Quiet type. And Kevin is her lapdog. Hangs on her every word. Steer clear of Kevin."

"Two others have died since I've been here," Cody added.

"That doesn't add up," Kendra complained. "You're talking about hundreds of years of vitality. Are there lots of lectoblives here?"

“Just her,” Haden said. “She’s an old one, and she’s slipping. Like a reusable battery that doesn’t hold a charge anymore. Every year she ages, what, at least twenty-five?”

“Closer to thirty,” Cody asserted.

“She steals forty or fifty years from us and consumes them in less than two.”

“How terrible,” Kendra said.

“She tries not to overindulge,” Cody said. “She hates to show any wrinkles, but too many disappearances and she’ll have to move the whole operation, find a new lair. She’s been here close to twenty years, near as we can figure.”

Haden lifted the newspaper from his lap and began unfolding it. “She’s on the prowl for new blood. Been running this ad in all the nearby counties for a week now.” He directed Kendra’s attention to a certain want ad:

Wealthy Dowager

Seeks Young Male Companion

autumnalsolace@gmail.com

“This is how she nabs victims?” Kendra exclaimed.

Haden and Cody exchanged an uncomfortable glance.

“We were dumb enough,” Cody said.

“Sounded like easy money,” Haden admitted. “I was curious.”

“She has something of a conscience, you see,” Cody said.

“Especially when she gets on a talk-show binge,” Haden interjected, rolling his eyes.

“She tells herself she’s just sapping years from gold diggers. Taking from takers. ’Course, we never got a chance to take anything. And she didn’t bother to find out what kind of guys we were.”

“No worse than most. No malice. We just stumbled across the wrong ad.”

“As some other poor fool will shortly.”

“And then we’ll have *another* new face.”

Cody raised his eyebrows. "Misery loves company."

Despite the actual ages the men claimed, the duo sure acted like crotchety old fogies. It made Kendra wonder how much their aged bodies affected their personalities. "Speaking of new faces," she said, "what were you guys going to tell me? You know, to help me?"

Haden adjusted his glasses. "Don't trust her. Don't disobey or you'll end up in the basement. Don't make her angry."

Cody's face became solemn. "I saw her suck the last years out of a guy who didn't know when to lay off the insults. She got younger and he got . . . dead. She normally leaves her prey with some final years. She feels enough guilt to leave most of us something. But don't cross her. She's capable of ugliness like you can't imagine."

"You're scaring the girl," Haden complained. "Here's the best tip—flattery works wonders. Even when she knows you're laying it on thick, Torina can't help but respond to generous remarks. Pathetic, really. Way I see it, deep down she so desperately needs to feel admired, she absolutely treasures sugary words, especially about her looks."

"She's extra vulnerable right now, while her age is showing," Cody agreed.

Haden harrumphed. "Old or young, she's always a sucker for compliments. Not so much that she'd let you go or anything. But she'll make your life easier if you play to her vanity."

"Word to the wise," Cody said, adding a wink for emphasis.

"Now that we've made our introductions," Haden announced, "we had better leave this young lady in peace."

"Don't be in such a hurry," Cody complained. "One last question. Kendra, tell us, what did you do to earn her attention? Why did Torina bring you here?"

"Don't press her to spill her guts on a first meeting," Haden growled.

Cody shushed him.

"I think it's mainly because I have information she wants," Kendra said.

"You're part of her world," Cody confirmed. "Not some girl off the street."

“I know there are magical creatures hidden among us, along with other dangerous people like her,” Kendra confirmed.

Haden and Cody nodded in silence.

“We don’t know much about the supernatural,” Cody said. “Only what we’ve gleaned since living here.”

“Tread carefully,” Haden advised. “We’ll try to watch out for you, keep our hearing aids to the ground.”

Cody wheeled Haden out the door.

“See you tomorrow, Kendra,” Cody said.

“Good night, guys. Sorry you’re in here.”

Haden twisted in his chair and pointed at her. “Same to you but more of it.”



Mourning

The crusty snow gleamed beneath the winter sun, refracting the light in dazzling patterns, as if the graveyard were flooded with diamonds. Eventually the rising breeze pushed the vanguard of a fleet of threatening clouds across the sun, reducing the glare, leaving the cemetery cold and bleak. Here and there, flowers and tiny flags added splashes of color to the snow-choked graves.

Dressed in a dark blue suit, hair neatly combed, Seth sat with his back against an eight-foot obelisk, resting his wrists on his knees. The suit coat offered only flimsy protection against the chill, but he hardly noticed. His sister had recently been laid to rest in the family plot near his Grandma and Grandpa Larsen. He had quietly told his parents that he needed a few minutes by himself.

No tears pooled in Seth's eyes. He figured he had used up his lifetime allotment over the past few days. Now he felt numb and dry, as if all emotion had been wrung out of him.

Footsteps crunched through the icy snow, approaching from the side and behind. A moment later Grandpa Sorenson stood over him, hands in his pockets. "How you holding up, Seth?"

Seth kept his eyes on Grandpa's shoes. "I'm okay. How about you?" They had not found a chance to really talk yet. Grandpa and Grandma Sorenson had barely arrived in time for the services.

“You can imagine,” Grandpa sighed. “The whole situation is an unbearable nightmare. We’ve been scrambling to piece together what happened.”

Seth’s head snapped up. “Find any leads?” This was what he needed. Everyone kept wallowing in the loss. He needed answers.

“Some. When you feel ready, we can—”

“I’m ready right now,” Seth assured him. “I need to know how and why.”

Grandpa nodded. “Some of our friends broke into the morgue and conducted an informal autopsy on Kendra. Seems to really be her. Not a changeling, at least. We still can’t fathom what species of mind control may have been at work here.”

“She wasn’t herself,” Seth stated. “It wasn’t Kendra calling the shots.”

“I’m sure of that,” Grandpa agreed. “So is Warren. The man who ran the day care where she volunteered, Rex Tanner, turned up dead in his condo over the weekend. What do you know about him?”

“Nothing. But that is really suspicious.”

“A safe guess is that whatever happened to Kendra originated at the day care. But the trail is cold.” Grandpa looked around, then motioned with one arm. “Your folks are gone. I told them I would bring you home. They were in no condition to argue. I want you to meet someone.”

Seth heard more footsteps approaching, these much stealthier than Grandpa’s. They rustled the snow rather than crunched. A bald black man wearing a long leather coat and dark, glossy boots came around the obelisk. Snowy gravestones reflected in his sunglasses.

“Seth, this is Trask,” Grandpa said. “He’s a detective and a Knight of the Dawn. He’ll help us get to the bottom of this.”

“You look the part,” Seth said. “Do you ride a motorcycle?”

Trask stared down at him. “I’m sorry for your loss.” There was a no-nonsense tone to his voice.

“Have you found out anything yet?”

Trask glanced at Grandpa, who gave a nod. “I spent the last couple of days in Monmouth, Illinois.”

“Where the letter was addressed,” Seth recalled.

“Kept an eye on the post office box. Spent some time at the local college, got to know the town and the outlying areas. Nice place. So far, we have nothing. I left a man watching the post office.”

“I’m glad you guys followed up on the letter,” Seth said.

“We’re nowhere near done,” Trask promised. “I want to hear firsthand about any oddities you noted regarding your sister’s behavior.”

Seth recounted how Kendra had acted at breakfast, how she had come home early from the day care, how she had overreacted when she found him in her room, and the final tragic confrontation with Warren.

“All of this happened on the same day,” Trask confirmed.

“Yep. Except the scary part with Warren was technically early the next day.”

“No strange behavior the day before.”

“Well, she kept to herself more than usual the evening before. Stayed shut up in her room.”

“After she got home from the day care,” Trask said.

“Right,” Seth said. “She seemed very much herself the day before.”

Trask turned his head toward Grandpa. “Everything points to the day care. Elise checked in the windows multiple times while Kendra was there. Nothing appeared amiss. I interviewed Ronda Redmond, a woman who works overlapping hours with Kendra. I presented myself as a private investigator. She claimed that the only time Kendra was out of her sight on the day in question was when Rex brought Kendra into his office for a minute or two to respond to a call from a parent. We’ve kept Ronda under heavy surveillance and have dug deep into her past. Whatever transpired, she seems to be an oblivious bystander.”

“That brings you up-to-date,” Grandpa said to Seth.

“I want to help find out more,” Seth said. “Maybe you can use me as bait.”

Grandpa shook his head. “We can’t risk anything like that until we better understand what we’re dealing with.”

“Warren and Elise are no rookies,” Trask said. “Neither am I. This was done with an unthinkable level of finesse. We’ll get to the bottom of it, but time will be required. Unless fresh details come to mind, Seth, you could best serve our needs by returning to Fablehaven with your grandfather.”

“To Fablehaven?” Seth asked.

“Tanu is already prepping your parents,” Grandpa said. “Given their agitated condition over the loss of Kendra, and his skill with potions, they will soon arrive at the conclusion that you should spend Christmas with your grandmother and me.”

“No,” Seth protested softly. “I want to be here, helping the investigation.”

“We can’t protect you as well here,” Trask said. “There are many causes for concern. We can’t be certain the letter was the only communiqué sent to our enemies by whoever was posing as your sister. Who can say what they may have already learned? We need to assume a defensive posture until we have a more complete grasp of the situation.”

“On your feet,” Grandpa said, extending a gloved hand.

Seth took it and let Grandpa haul him up. On his feet, he gained a better appreciation for Trask’s impressive height. They began walking across the snowbound cemetery.

“Have you kept track of Kendra’s belongings?” Grandpa asked Seth.

“I hid the journal and the letters, like Warren told me. And I found the rain stick from Lost Mesa. She actually hid it really well, behind the drywall in her closet. She cut a small opening and slid it in, then sealed it up pretty good. It took some time to figure it out.”

“We’ll bring those belongings home with us,” Grandpa said.

“Grandpa,” Seth said hesitantly. “I took some gold from Fablehaven last summer. I felt I’d earned it doing business with the satyrs, so I didn’t return all of it to you. Kendra caught me. Before she wasn’t Kendra anymore. She isn’t here to make me, but I wanted you to know I’ll return it all.”

Grandpa’s eyes grew moist. He patted Seth on the back and nodded.

* * *

The last time Seth had driven to Fablehaven, he had streaked through the night in the back of a flashy sports car piloted by Vanessa. The pace was considerably slower with Grandpa Sorenson at the wheel of a bulky SUV.

Grandpa and Grandma had spent two days consoling Seth’s heartbroken parents while Tanu assisted Warren, Elise, and Trask with the

homicide investigation. The days were frustratingly uneventful. No new clues were discovered. No enemies made a move. And they could find no ties between Rex and the Society of the Evening Star. The day-care supervisor appeared to have been an innocent victim.

Trask, Warren, and Elise had stayed behind to keep working. Unusually quiet and thoughtful, Tanu rode beside Seth, the seat belt barely long enough to stretch across his massive Samoan frame. Grandma sat up front with Grandpa.

Seth tried to sleep, but could never quite get comfortable. His imagination refused to stop inventing scenarios to explain what had happened to Kendra. He tried to keep an open mind, even to the point of questioning whether magical mind control had actually been employed. If somebody had used brutal blackmail, the stress alone might have altered her personality. But what leverage could have motivated Kendra to betray her family? Maybe she thought she was protecting them from something worse. But what?

The cell phone rang, and Grandpa answered. After a moment, the SUV accelerated briskly. "Have you told Dougan?" Grandpa said. "Keep trying. Right, do what you can for him, we'll hurry." Grandpa set the phone aside.

"What was that?" Grandma asked, alarmed.

"Maddox showed up in the attic," Grandpa said. "He's a mess. Skinny, dirty, injured, sick. Coulter and Dale are doing what they can."

Although he was thrilled to hear that the fairy trader had returned, it saddened Seth to picture the robust adventurer sickly and weak. At least Maddox was alive. "He came through the bathtub?" Seth asked. The previous summer, he had learned that Tanu had taken a large tin washtub to the fallen Brazilian preserve in order to give Maddox a portal home. The washtub shared the same space as an identical washtub in the attic at Fablehaven. After an object had been placed in one washtub, the object would appear to be in both, allowing an accomplice to remove it from the other. When the washtubs were far apart, the linked space allowed items to be instantly transported over great distances.

"He did," Grandpa said. "After all this time. Well done, Tanu."

"Sounds like Maddox will need some healing," Tanu said.

"Which is why I'm stepping on the gas," Grandpa replied.

"When it rains, it pours," Grandma remarked.

* * *

As the SUV turned off the road, Seth gazed out the window at the skeletal forest, amazed at how far he could see with the leaves gone and the undergrowth reduced to tangled twigs. He had previously only seen Fablehaven in summertime. Everything was now brown and gray, with a few snow patches lingering among the crumbling dead leaves.

The SUV raced down the driveway, through the gate, and up to the house. The gardens surrounding the house remained incongruously in bloom. Seth realized that the fairies must be responsible for the improbable verdure.

When they skidded to a stop, Tanu vaulted out of the car and dashed into the house. Ever since the call, he had been sorting through his potions and ingredients. Seth jogged inside after him.

Dale stood in the entry hall. "Hi, Seth."

"Where's Maddox?" Seth asked, unable to tell which way Tanu had gone.

"Up in your grandparents' bedroom. The nearest bed to the washtub."

"How is he?"

Dale whistled softly. "He's seen better days, but he'll pull through. You keep getting taller."

"Not as tall as you yet."

Grandpa and Grandma came through the front door together. "Where is he?" Grandma asked.

Dale led them up the stairs and down the hall to the room where Tanu sat in a chair beside the bed, rummaging through his potion bag. Coulter leaned against the wall in the corner. Maddox rested on the bed, lips dry, cheeks flushed, a filthy red beard hiding half of his face. "Good to see you, Stan," he croaked, craning his neck forward.

"Lie still," Tanu admonished. "Save words for later." The Samoan turned to look at Grandpa. "He's feverish, malnourished, and badly dehydrated. Probably has parasites. Broken wrist. Sprained ankle. Mild concussion. Cuts and bruises everywhere. Give me some time with him."

Grandpa shepherded the others out of the room. Coulter came with them. They gathered not far down the hallway.

“Has he divulged anything?” Grandpa asked in a hushed tone.

“He doesn’t have the artifact, nor does the Society,” Coulter said, passing his hand over his mostly bald head, matting down the tuft of gray hair in the middle. “He knows the location of the vault where the artifact is housed. I don’t have details. Dale and I were trying to make him rest.”

“Still no leads on the room beyond the Hall of Dread?” Grandpa asked.

Coulter shuddered. “Just a blank wall. I’ve spent some real time investigating, even though it isn’t my favorite environment.”

“You haven’t found the room from Kendra’s letter?” Seth asked. “I figured as caretaker you would already know all about it.”

“The secret was not handed down,” Grandma said.

“We aren’t even convinced that we want to learn the possible artifact locations,” Grandpa explained. “For now we just want to know we have access to the information should the need arise.”

“What exactly is in the Hall of Dread?” Seth asked. “You guys never get very specific.”

“Dangerous creatures that require no upkeep are jailed there,” Coulter said. “They need no food or drink. Beings like the revenant we met in the grove.”

“Do they radiate fear?” Seth asked.

“Some of them do,” Coulter said. “Makes working down there a pain and a half. I’d normally prefer to stay far from those cells.”

“Maybe I could help search for the room, since magical fear doesn’t bother me.”

Grandma shook her head. “No, Seth, in some ways that makes it more perilous for you. The threat posed by those creatures is real. Fear can be a good thing. It keeps us respectful of their power. Many of those entities could destroy Fablehaven if loosed.”

“I wouldn’t free them! I’m not a nut job!”

“But it might be interesting to see what they looked like,” Grandpa suggested.

“Have you seen them?” Seth asked. “What do they . . . wait a minute, you’re testing me.”

“Curiosity killed the cat,” Grandpa said. “And it has almost leveled Fablehaven in the past, if I recall accurately.”

“I’d follow your rules,” Seth said. “If the rule is no peeking, I won’t even consider it.”

“If we find a need for your special immunity, we’ll make use of it,” Grandpa promised.

“*If* you find a need,” Seth muttered. “I bet you won’t be looking very hard. Say, Coulter, how did you know Maddox had come through? I mean, he could only exit the bathtub he entered, isn’t that how it works? To come out on our side, somebody needed to physically lift him out.”

“That’s exactly right,” Coulter explained. “We posted Mendigo as a permanent sentry, watching the tub. Truth be told, we probably wouldn’t have kept the overgrown puppet stationed there much longer. After all these months, there was scant room for hope.”

Tanu opened the bedroom door and poked his head out. “I have him stabilized. He responded well to the treatments. I’ve advised him to sleep, but Maddox insists he wants to speak with you sooner rather than later. All of you.”

“Is he up to it?” Grandma asked.

“He’ll be all right. He’s determined. He’ll rest better after we give him a chance to be heard.”

Grandpa led the procession back into the bedroom. Maddox sat propped up by pillows. His skin shone with perspiration, and his lips already looked less chapped. His eyes regarded them alertly.

“You don’t have to stare like I’m in my coffin,” Maddox said, his voice stronger than before. “Inviting as the mattress feels, this isn’t my deathbed. I’d already be up and about if Tanu would allow it.”

“You must have quite a tale to tell,” Grandpa prompted.

“Aye, and I’ve learned a lesson or two. First and foremost—never accept assignments from the Knights of the Dawn.” He winked at Seth. “Where’s your sister?”

All of the other adults exchanged awkward glances.

“She’s dead,” Seth said flatly. “The Society got to her.”

Maddox blanched. “My apologies, Seth, I had no idea. What a tragedy.”

“Wasn’t your fault,” Seth assured him. “You’ve had plenty of your own trouble.”

“How did you survive?” Grandpa asked.

“Hiding in caves, mostly. Wet, dark, narrow places. I found chambers where Lycerna couldn’t reach me. Lived off terrible food, insects and fungus and the like. I lost track of time. Could hardly poke my head outside without something trying to bite it off. All openings to the cave remained heavily guarded, night or day, rain or shine. So I tunneled my own exit, made a break for the house, and found the washtub. If I hadn’t found a coded message from Tanu informing me about my free ride home, I’d still be sloshing through half-flooded caverns.”

“I’m glad my mission served a purpose,” Tanu acknowledged.

“Then he saves me twice over, administering miraculous potions. I’m doubly indebted, my friend.”

“Nonsense,” Tanu said dismissively. “You were risking your neck for us in the first place.”

“We’re glad you made it out alive,” Grandpa said. “We were beginning to lose hope.”

Maddox winked. “Never count me out. I’ve survived some close scrapes in my time.”

“Coulter mentioned that you have an idea where the artifact is located,” Grandma said.

“That I do,” Maddox replied. “I could draw a map, or even lead a team back there.”

“A map would suffice,” Grandpa said. “We’ll want to move on this swiftly, and you’re in no condition to go afield.”

“I’m surprised you didn’t return with some fairies in tow,” Coulter said.

“Almost did,” Maddox said, eyes brightening. “Came across some exotic specimens. I have a few patented methods for luring and befriending fairies, even under those dismal conditions. Without some help from the fairies, I could not have survived in the caves. I wanted to bring some with me, but in the end, I barely got out of there with my own hide intact. Wasted opportunity.”

“You should rest now,” Tanu urged.

“What about the map?” Maddox complained.

“We’ll bring you materials soon enough,” Grandma promised. “Close your eyes, recover some strength.”

Maddox looked around the room, at each person in turn. “Thanks for pulling me out of there and giving me a place to land. I owe you all.”

“On the contrary,” Grandpa said. “We owe you for undertaking such a perilous mission. Get some rest.”

Maddox closed his eyes and settled back into his pillows.



The All-Seeing Eye

Okay, Kendra,” Haden said, picking up a cunningly sculpted queen between a finger and a thumb. “Knowing how the pieces move and capture is only a small part of the game. Understanding position and values is crucial. I know a point system that ranks the values of the pieces in a useful way. Think of this queen as nine points.” He set it down and touched the other pieces as he named them. “Rooks are five, knights three, bishops three, and pawns one. That should help you calculate if a sacrifice is worthwhile.”

“What about the king?”

“Think about it.”

“Right. Top priority. You can’t really give it a number.”

“Good. White moves first, so it’s your turn.”

Kendra studied her row of pawns. She could move one of eight pieces a square or two forward. “Is there a best first move?”

“The early moves establish a lot about the game. Just experiment.”

Kendra bit her lip. “Isn’t chess sort of a game for old fogies?”

Haden raised his eyebrows. “Do I look like a young guy to you? My legs don’t work. Sort of limits my options. This keeps my mind agile. I’m excited to train a new opponent.”

Kendra picked up the pawn in front of her queen and moved it ahead two squares.

Haden's door opened and Cody entered. "We have a visitor," Cody announced.

"Who?" Kendra asked.

"The latest fly has landed in Torina's web," he replied.

Kendra stood up. "The next person she wants to drain!"

Haden mirrored Kendra's move, his pawn blocking hers from moving further forward. "You'll get used to it," Haden murmured.

"We have to warn him," Kendra declared.

"That may not go over too well," Cody said. "We'd just rile Torina and make life worse for everyone, the new victim included."

"Have you guys totally given up?" Kendra accused.

"We've accepted the unavoidable," Haden soothed. "Have a seat."

"No thanks," Kendra said, storming from the room. Cody stepped aside to let her pass.

"Hardheaded," she heard Cody mumble behind her. She was walking too quickly to discern Haden's response.

She reached the end of the hall and started down the stairs. What was the worst that could happen? Torina might suck away her youth? Kill her? Lock her in the basement? Kendra clenched her fists. She was already a prisoner. What was the use of pretending to be a guest? At least this offered a chance to help somebody, and maybe in the process help herself. If she didn't take advantage of opportunities like this, she would never get away.

Kendra reached the second floor. A broad goblin dressed in a suit barred access to the stairway down to the ground floor. His gaunt red skin stretched over jutting cheekbones and a prominent jaw. Veins corkscrewed grotesquely at the sides of his bulging forehead. "Get back upstairs," he growled, baring uneven teeth.

"I need to talk to Torina," Kendra demanded. "It's an emergency."

"No games," the goblin snarled.

"I've never met you before," Kendra said. "I have no reason to obey you. I have to speak with Torina. It's urgent."

"What makes you think she's down there? The mistress is occupied. She will come to you later. You belong upstairs."

Kendra tried to step around him and descend the stairs, but the thick goblin seized her arm with a rough hand.

“This is none of your business,” Kendra spat. “I have to go downstairs. You know I can’t leave the house. Let go of me or the Sphinx will turn you into ground beef.” They glared at each other for a moment. After a hesitant pause, the calloused fingers abruptly opened, releasing her arm.

“I’m not sure the Sphinx is yours to command,” the goblin chuckled.

Kendra rushed down the stairs. Obviously the goblin had some doubts, but she did not bother to point that out. She trotted through the entry hall, pausing when she saw a young man standing in the parlor, admiring a large painting in a gilded frame. A battered suitcase and an overstuffed duffel bag leaned against a sofa not far from him.

“Who are you?” Kendra asked from the doorway.

The young man turned. He had dark hair that hung to his shoulders and a scraggly mustache. A few pimples dotted his pale face. He wore a black T-shirt and tight jeans. “I’m Russ. Have you seen Torina?”

Kendra entered the room. “Are you here responding to the ad?”

“You got it. Are you a relative?”

“I’ve been kidnapped. Torina is holding me prisoner. You have to leave immediately!”

Russ snickered. “Good one. I like it. Should I run off screaming and call the cops?”

“I’m serious,” Kendra said. “Come on.”

She raced to the front door. Russ followed, displaying only mild curiosity.

Kendra tugged at the door. It was locked. She jiggled the handle desperately. “Help me break it down.”

“That will make a great first impression,” Russ chuckled. “They need to put you in the movies.”

Tears of frustration gathered in Kendra’s eyes. “I’m not acting, Russ. She’s a psycho. She keeps old men and kids locked up here. There’s no time! Please help me. Get away and contact Scott Michael Sorenson or Marla Kate Sorenson. They live outside of Rochester. My name is Kendra. I’m a missing person.”

Through her tears, Kendra saw that Russ finally looked uncomfortable. He started chewing one of his fingernails.

“What are you carrying on about, my dear?” a silky voice inquired. Torina strolled down the stairs, her black evening dress shimmering with

sequins. “Your mother won’t be back until four.”

Russ glanced from Kendra to Torina.

“Run, Russ,” Kendra pleaded.

“Kendra, go easy on poor Russ, he isn’t used to your antics. Why not run along and go play out back? Aunt Torina has arrangements to discuss with our new friend.”

Kendra had been caught in the act. She couldn’t see how she would get into worse trouble. It was all or nothing. “Russ, come out back with me, I need to show you something.”

“He’ll follow along in a minute or two. We have grown-up things to discuss.” Torina clicked across the floor to Russ, taking his hand. “Shall we adjourn to the parlor?”

“Don’t let her bite you, Russ, she’ll suck you dry,” Kendra warned. “Together we can take her, fight our way out of this.”

Torina’s radiant smile faltered ever so slightly. “Am I a vampire now? How novel! Young lady, I value a healthy imagination, but your behavior is bordering on impertinent. Jameson? Would you escort Kendra to her room?”

“Certainly, madam,” answered a rough voice. The goblin in the suit strode down the stairs. He glowered at Kendra. Glancing at Russ, Kendra realized that he could not recognize the goblin’s true form. To him, the monstrosity probably looked like an ordinary human butler.

Kendra raced for the back of the house, but the goblin intercepted her, gripping her shoulders painfully. The goblin steered her toward the stairs as Kendra screamed and writhed and tried to kick him.

“Such a display!” Torina exclaimed. “Your mother will hear about this, young lady.”

“Look at them!” Kendra shrieked. “Locked doors, people dragging me away! Get a clue, Russ!”

“What’s going on?” Russ asked, his voice nervous.

“The girl is mentally disturbed,” Torina purred. “Let me tell you a secret.”

The goblin heaved Kendra over his beefy shoulder. Staring back at Russ, she saw Torina nuzzle his neck, then catch him as he slumped to the floor, one leg twitching. As the goblin mounted the stairs, the pair passed out of sight.

* * *

Kendra crouched over the desk in her room, refolding a piece of stationery. The note already had so many creases that it was almost useless. She had tried once again to improve on the only design that had sort of worked, and once again the result had been unsatisfactory.

She folded the paper into the familiar basic shape, pressing hard on the creases, hoping the form would hold. When she finished, she held up the paper airplane, inspecting it from various angles. It would win no contests for beauty or function. She could almost hear Seth laughing at the pathetic attempt.

Why had she never learned to fold a proper paper airplane? Her brother could produce at least six varieties, all excellent flyers. They were sleek and simple, and he would add little extra tears or wrinkles to produce acrobatic effects.

The airplane she had designed after several miserable failures flew only a little better than crumpling up the paper and throwing it. She transported her ugly little plane to the window, opened it, and passed her hand between the invisible bars. Cold air flooded into the room. Experience had shown that a quick, gentle flick of the wrist was the best way to send the plane soaring. The dark night would conceal the flight, and hopefully some passerby would find one of the notes in the morning.

My name is Kendra Sorenson. I have been kidnapped. Please contact the police. Then contact Scott Michael Sorenson or Marla Kate Sorenson. They live outside of Rochester, New York. This is not a joke.

Not long after the goblin had locked Kendra in her room, she had decided to start an airborne letter campaign—the aeronautical equivalent of letters in bottles. Kendra debated about which way she should angle this next toss.



A key rattled in the door.

Kendra threw the plane and hurriedly shut the window, turning to face the doorway. Torina entered, exuding confidence. She wore the same flashy dress from earlier, but filled it out differently, her body now curvier. Her arms and legs were firm and toned, her skin soft and healthy. She wore much subtler makeup, relying on the natural radiance of her stunning features. Gazing triumphantly at Kendra, she looked like a prom queen ready for her big night.

After an awkward pause, Kendra realized that Torina was awaiting a compliment. “You look amazing,” Kendra said.

“People can say what they want,” Torina remarked casually, placing a hand on her slim waist. “Diet, exercise, pharmaceuticals, surgery, spa treatments, cosmetics—there is simply no substitute for youth.”

“You drained him?”

“Much more ruthlessly than I would have without your intervention,” Torina stated, eyes hard.

“Why?”

She closed the door and sauntered into the room. “The way I live grants me limited pleasures, Kendra. Toying with my prey is perhaps the most satisfying. I already had to settle for a less than adequate specimen. Then you soaked all the fun out of the whole encounter, forced me to rush it.”

“I’m so sorry,” Kendra apologized. “That must be rough when sucking someone’s life away isn’t super fun.”

“Don’t you dare mock me, missy,” Torina hissed. Outrage tightened her youthful features. Tendons stood out in her neck.

“You’re so beautiful when you’re angry,” Kendra said dramatically.

Torina’s fury transformed into fierce laughter. “Even though you’re joking, Kendra, you thought to say it, which means it must be true at some level.” She wiped a tear from the corner of one eye and crossed to the desk, gathering up the papers there and opening drawers to collect any extra stationery. “No more airplanes. We gathered the ones you’ve thrown so far. Origami isn’t your strong suit.”

“They weren’t very good,” Kendra admitted.

“Understatement of the year,” Torina murmured. “Look, normally I would relocate you to the basement for the stunt you pulled today. I gave you a lot of leeway and you burned me for it. But there is a certain euphoria that

comes with regaining my youth, and the Sphinx will be here tomorrow, so you can just stay locked in here until he's ready for you."

Kendra's legs suddenly felt wobbly. "The Sphinx?"

"Why do you think I settled for a subpar specimen like Russ?" Torina said emphatically, snapping her fingers as if to get Kendra's attention. "Read between the lines. I wanted to look my best for a reason. Impress the boss. Aren't you the same girl who supposedly took down Vanessa Santoro?"

"You know Vanessa?"

"Knew Vanessa. Past tense. As you're well aware, the Sphinx's little pet bit off more than she could chew. She's out of the picture. Word was you had something to do with it. I can't fathom how. I mean, Vanessa was overrated, but the girl wasn't completely incompetent!"

"What does the Sphinx want with me?" Kendra asked.

Torina flashed a predatory grin. "Great question. I'll let you mull that one over until he sends for you tomorrow. Sweet dreams." She strode to the door. "By the way, dear, don't lose sleep planning a daring escape. The whisper hound was under orders to let you roam the house. Until instructed otherwise, it will now keep you confined to this floor. Once the hound has your scent, you can't fool it."

"Wait, can I just—"

Torina cut her off by firmly closing the door. Kendra heard the lock click. She returned to the window, staring out into the gloom, unsure how she would possibly sleep.

* * *

Somebody was knocking on the door. Kendra squinted at the bright light pouring between her half-drawn curtains. She had rested poorly, waking many times in the night, plagued by unsettling dreams that evaporated under conscious scrutiny. And of course, once she had finally slipped into a deep sleep, somebody was pounding at the door.

"I'd invite you in, but the door is locked," Kendra called, still groggy.

"I have a key." It sounded like Cody. "And I have breakfast."

Kendra rubbed her eyes. She had slept in her clothes. "Come in, then."

The door opened and Cody entered with a tray. "Scrambled eggs, sausage, bacon, toast, yogurt, and juice," he announced, setting the tray on

the desk. “You barge down the stairs, infuriate Torina, and end up with a first-rate breakfast. Maybe I should start acting a little less compliant!”

“Don’t get too jealous. This may be my last meal.”

Cody shrugged. “They’re expecting visitors. They told me to deliver this. I’m supposed to suggest that you be on your best behavior. So I’ve suggested it.”

“You want some bacon or something?”

He hesitated. “I couldn’t take your food.”

“Have a strip. And some sausage, too. How am I supposed to eat all that?”

“Personally, I’d use the toast to make a breakfast sandwich. If you’re willing to part with a strip and a link, I’ll call it my tip.” Cody placed some bacon and sausage on a napkin and exited the room. She heard the lock reengage.

Kendra sat at the desk. Molten cheese glued chunks of ham to the fluffy eggs. The sausages glistened with grease but tasted good, and the bacon had a pleasant crunch. As she was sipping some juice, the door unlocked and Torina entered, wearing a flirtatious sundress and sandals.

“He’s here,” she announced, girlishly flustered. “Did you sleep in those clothes? Really, Kendra, we need to get you washed up and presentable.” There was an edge of excitement to her expression and voice, as if she were about to greet her favorite rock star.

“Is he really going to care what I’m wearing?” Kendra replied, munching on a bite of toast.

“I care,” Torina said. “How’s breakfast? I made it for you.”

“I’ll be sure to let the Sphinx know how domestic you are.”

“I am going to miss the music of your sarcasm,” Torina pouted. “Done eating?”

“You didn’t give me much time.”

“He’s early.”

“Why don’t we skip the shower?”

Torina giggled nervously. “Seriously, come now, or I’ll have Jameson scrub you down.”

Kendra drained the last of her juice. “You win.” She stole a final bite of toast as she rose and followed Torina down to the lavish bathroom. Soon she stood under a warm spray, wondering how the upcoming encounter would

play out. She had not seen the Sphinx since he had hidden behind a mask at a Knights of the Dawn gathering the previous summer. Now that he had been exposed as an enemy, what would he do with her?

She tried not to dwell on the possibilities. Worrying would just leave her rattled. She needed to relax and stay ready to deal with whatever problems actually materialized.

After finishing her shower and toweling off, Kendra put on the black slacks and blouse that Torina had laid out for her. In the mirror, the outfit actually looked pretty cute. She returned to Torina's room, and the blond lectoblix insisted that Kendra let her style her hair. Kendra reluctantly sat in a chair in front of the bathroom mirror while Torina added some curl.

"What do you think?" Torina asked at last, adding a final squirt of hair spray.

Kendra swiveled her head from side to side. The end result actually looked fabulous. "Guess I'm ready for my date."

"I'm glad you can still joke. You have now officially passed my inspection. Shall we?"

Kendra followed Torina down the stairs to the main level. On her way to the rear of the house, Kendra became peripherally aware of a group of adults conversing in the living room, but her focus remained on where Torina was heading. Stopping in front of a heavy wooden door, Torina rapped twice, then opened it, favoring Kendra with a sugary smile that silently conveyed, *you are no longer my problem*.

When Kendra entered the study, the Sphinx rose to greet her. The last time she had seen him unmasked had been outside the Quiet Box at Fablehaven. He was dressed simply, his maroon shirt untucked over dress pants, his feet bare. Short, beaded dreadlocks framed his ageless face. Dimly, Kendra heard the door shut behind her.

The Sphinx took her hand, clasping it affectionately in both of his. "I am so happy to see you again, Kendra," he said, his voice mellow, the accent prompting Kendra to envision tropical islands. The greeting was so warm and gentle that she almost found herself relaxing.

"I wish I could say the same," Kendra responded cautiously, removing her hand from his grasp.

"Please," he said, motioning to one of two chairs positioned to face each other. They both sat down. "You have ample reason to feel frustrated."

“You’re a traitor,” Kendra said. “What is it with people pretending to be nice as they hold me prisoner? Torina has the same personality disorder. What do you want with me?”

“I mean you no harm,” the Sphinx replied, unruffled. “I need to have a conversation with you. Cornering you has been a difficult task, now that I have fallen out of favor with your dear ones.”

“You mean since you stole the artifact from Fablehaven, released a demon prince from captivity, torched Lost Mesa, and got Lena killed?”

The Sphinx leaned forward, fathomless eyes intent. “I always admire spirit, Kendra. I do not blame you for perceiving me as your enemy. I am aware of the pain my actions have caused. However, your comments raise a question. Why do you label the prisoner from the Quiet Box a demon prince?”

Kendra silently admonished herself for the outburst. She needed to say as little as possible. The Sphinx had no reason to suspect they knew that the occupant of the Quiet Box before Vanessa had taken residence there had been a demonic dragon named Navarog. Every tidbit that Kendra offered the Sphinx about what she and her family knew could potentially give him an advantage. “No reason.”

He considered her in silence. “Not important,” he finally decided. “How has Torina treated you?”

“She did my hair today. I think she has a crush on you.”

“Did she show you her aquarium?”

“That was actually really cool.”

“Agreed. How is Seth?”

“You tell me,” Kendra said. “Hasn’t the Kendra clone been reporting?”

“Remarkable fruit, the stingbulb. Almost everyone who knows of stingbulbs believes them to be extinct. But having lived many years and visited many places, I know where one stingbulb tree still grows. The tree does not bear many fruit in a year. They must be used within a narrow window of time or they are rendered useless.”

“Is the phony Rex gone?”

“The forms the stingbulbs adopt survive only for a few days. He served his purpose.”

Kendra looked away from the Sphinx’s gaze. “What about the real Rex?”

“I honestly like you, Kendra. Unfortunately, we are on different sides of a heated struggle. You would be surprised if you knew all those who side with me on this issue. The conflict boils down to this: you and those you have aligned yourself with believe that magical creatures should be held captive at all costs, while I believe they should be free. Rex was an unfortunate casualty of that disagreement. There have been many before him, on both sides. He will certainly not be the last.”

“Am I the next?” Kendra wondered.

“I don’t think so,” the Sphinx said. “I hope not. I need to perform an experiment. And I require information from you. Help me find answers to my questions and you will go home. Immediately and unharmed. Some profess to see courage in enduring hardship for a cause. This only makes sense when victory is possible. I have the means to involuntarily extract the required information from you. I see wisdom in graciously accepting the inevitable. Kendra, where is the artifact that was hidden at Lost Mesa?”

His sultry voice invoked a sort of trance, and Kendra found herself on the verge of answering the question. Gripping the arms of her chair, she kept her mouth clamped shut.

“Kendra, I am convinced that you either have the Chronometer or know where it is.”

Kendra closed her eyes. His stare was too penetrating, as if his eyes could bore inside her mind and uncover the truth. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“You need to share every lead you have regarding the missing artifacts. Give me the information I require, and you will soon go free. Refuse to share the information, and, believe me, Kendra, I will take it.”

Kendra opened her eyes. “There is nothing to take. There was no artifact at Lost Mesa. When I got back to Fablehaven, a demon was trying to destroy the preserve, so we killed him. End of story. Try and take what you want. I have nothing to give.”

The Sphinx watched her closely. A small smile produced a pair of dimples. “You have more to give than you know, Kendra. Allow me to introduce two of my associates.”

The door opened. A chubby man with pink skin and a black pompadour entered the room. An ancient brown lady with wiry gray hair rested her pruned hand on his elbow. Her shabby, homespun shawl contrasted with his pinstriped suit.

“Kendra, I would like you to meet Darius and Nanora,” the Sphinx said.

“Charmed,” Darius sniffed, looking Kendra up and down disapprovingly. Nanora stared silently. Was she drooling? “I understand you are reluctant to share what you know about the artifacts.”

“There is nothing to share.”

“Let me be the judge of that,” Darius said. It seemed like he was trying hard to appear debonair. He laid a thumb beside his temple. Nanora raised her arthritic hands, twisting her fingers into a complex pattern and peering through a gap with one eye. Darius scowled and took a step closer. Nanora took a step back.

Apparently they were trying to read her mind. With all the force she could muster, Kendra mentally transmitted the message, “You are both idiots.”

Darius glanced at the Sphinx, who nodded slightly. “Keep still, Kendra,” the Sphinx said.

“Don’t think about the artifacts,” Darius cooed, leaning forward and placing the tip of one finger against Kendra’s forehead. His eyes squeezed shut. Kendra stared at the thick gold ring on his pudgy pinky. Nanora tottered closer, her gaping mouth revealing a squishy lack of teeth.

“Too bright,” Nanora rasped. Her mouth sounded full of saliva.

Darius stepped away, looking perplexed. “Nothing. You’re right. She would be an interesting candidate.”

“I’m unsurprised,” the Sphinx said. “Have Mr. Lich bring the object.”

“If you want, we could try—”

The Sphinx cut him off by raising one hand.

“Right,” Darius said, withdrawing from the room.

“You have an unsearchable mind, Kendra,” the Sphinx said. “Psychics are not my only recourse to unlock your secrets, just the least tedious.”

“At least they came in on cue without you calling for them,” Kendra said. “That part was sort of impressive.”

Darius returned accompanied by Mr. Lich and a figure in a mask. Mr. Lich reverently carried a small red pillow. A silken square of pink cloth concealed an object on the pillow. The Sphinx gestured at a low table. Darius pulled it between Kendra and the Sphinx; then Mr. Lich set the pillow down.

The Sphinx reached out and removed the handkerchief. Upon the pillow sat a spherical crystal with countless facets. “Behold the Oculus.”

“Looks expensive,” Kendra said.

“Kneel beside the table,” the Sphinx instructed, “and lay a hand on the sphere.”

“Do you need it recharged? Is it going to suck out my secrets?”

Pointing at the crystal, Mr. Lich let out a brief grunt. The tall Asian man towered over Kendra, his long face humorless. Even back when she had thought the Sphinx was an ally, Mr. Lich had made her nervous.

The Sphinx held up a hand. “What Mr. Lich is trying to say is that if you refuse to comply, we will force you to touch the crystal. That would not be as safe for you as voluntary compliance.”

“What is it?” Kendra asked.

“The Oculus. The Infinite Lens. The All-Seeing Eye. The prototype all seeing stones and scrying tools are hopelessly patterned after. It is the artifact from the Brazilian preserve.”

“You found another one!” Kendra cried.

“When we first spoke, I discussed the topic of patience. I have exercised great patience for many centuries—learning, preparing, infiltrating. But patience proves futile without the will to take decisive action when the opportune moment arrives. My long-awaited window of opportunity has come at last. I will possess all of the artifacts sooner than you can guess.”

“I won’t charge it for you.”

The Sphinx laughed softly. “The Oculus does not require energy from you. The artifact is functional. We want to see whether you can survive using it.”

Kendra looked around the room at the many faces regarding her. “What do you mean?”

“This is the artifact of sight, Kendra. With it, you can see anywhere, everything.”

“So why don’t you use it to find the remaining artifacts yourself?”

“Most minds cannot handle the vast sensory input available through the Oculus. It has already put four of our best people into catatonic stupors. Given how your status as fairykind shields your mind from certain magic, we want to see if you fare any better than our colleagues.”

“I refuse,” Kendra said.

“If we force your hand onto the sphere, Kendra, it will surely overpower your mind. But if you participate voluntarily, and I guide you, there is a

chance you will survive.”

“If you fry my brain, you’ll never learn what I know about the artifacts.”

“We already know so much,” the Sphinx said. “We received an extensive e-mail from the stingbulb facsimile we created of you. She felt suspicious she had been followed on her way back from the mailbox, so she risked electronic surveillance and sent the e-mail as a backup. She explained that your grandfather has the Chronometer at Fablehaven and that Patton Burgess left clues regarding some of the remaining artifacts. We know those clues wait in a hidden room beyond the Hall of Dread in the Fablehaven dungeon. We already have a plan in motion to recover the information. Our facsimile could not recall exactly how to access the room. They never remember everything. I’d love that information, if you have it—the password or trigger—but we’ll get into the room with or without you. I’d love your help translating the journal, but we’ll find someone who reads the required tongue with or without you. What I really want is to see if you can survive the Oculus. It is arguably the most powerful of the five artifacts. Mastering it is my highest priority. I am optimistic that you can survive.”

Kendra had no idea what to say.

“Consider this, Kendra,” the Sphinx continued. “If you succeed in mastering the Oculus, you can look anywhere, discern anything, and we will be none the wiser. You might find knowledge that will help you escape us, or beat us to the next artifact. There are plenty of self-interested reasons for you to look. The possibilities are endless.”

“Then why give me a chance?” Kendra asked. “So you can torture the information out of me later?”

“Right now, a man in this town is at the local post office watching box 101 in hopes of intercepting a murderer. This man is here on behalf of your grandparents, hoping to catch the people who killed their granddaughter. I know what the man looks like. I want you to use the Oculus to describe him to me in detail. That is the first test. Will you try voluntarily?”

“You wish,” Kendra spat.

The Sphinx glanced at Mr. Lich. The tall henchman grabbed Kendra’s arm just below the elbow, dragged her out of her chair, and lowered her unwilling hand toward the Oculus.

“Wait,” Kendra yelled. “I’ll do it! Don’t force me! I’ll do it.”

“Now?” the Sphinx asked.

“Now.”

The Sphinx nodded and Mr. Lich released her. Kendra knelt beside the table, considering the intricate facets of the crystal globe. “You will want to close your eyes,” the Sphinx instructed. “The Oculus will become your organ of sight. Many visions will compete for your attention. Your task will be to ignore the massive interference and focus your gaze on the post office. Find the man. It will be visually disorienting. If you lose control, you have permission to remove your hand from the crystal. Describe what you see, and I will help talk you through it.”

“And if it blows my mind and I go insane?” Kendra asked.

“Another casualty of our conflict. I wish you well. Relax and focus.”

Kendra took a deep breath. Unable to dream up another option, she extended a trembling hand toward the crystal. Tiny rainbows winked inside the glimmering sphere. When her fingers were almost there, she closed her eyes.

The instant her fingers came into contact with the cool surface, it looked like her eyes had opened, even though she could clearly feel that they were still closed. She stared at the Sphinx. Then she realized that she could also see Mr. Lich standing behind her, as if she had a second pair of eyes in the back of her head. No, more than that. She could see forward and backward, up and down, left and right, all at the same time. There were no blind spots.

“I can see in all directions,” Kendra said.

“Good,” the Sphinx encouraged. “Keep looking and your vision will broaden.”

He was right! Now not only could she see in all directions, she could also see herself, as if she had eyes outside of her body. She could see the Sphinx from the front, back, top, and sides. She could see the room from hundreds of different angles, not fragmented or compartmentalized, but part of a single seamless mind-warping image. Trying to ponder the perspective made her feel dizzy.

“Now I can see the room from every direction,” Kendra said.

“You can also see beyond the room,” the Sphinx said.

Kendra tried to move her vision out into the hallway, and the view expanded suddenly, hitting her with a sensation like vertigo. She could now see every room in the house from multiple vantages. It was like her mind was hooked up to thousands of security cameras, but instead of looking from one

screen to the next, she was seeing through all of the cameras simultaneously. There was the leopard shark prowling the library. There was Torina fussing over an elaborate lunch in the kitchen. There was Cody playing chess with Haden. There were imps scurrying through the walls of the house like rats. It was hard to focus on anything specific, because she perceived too much. “I see Torina in the kitchen. I see the whole house.”

“Move your vision outside. Examine the town. Find the post office. Find the man.”

As her vision expanded beyond the walls of the house, the feeling inside Kendra was similar to taking the first drop on a roller coaster, except she was falling in all directions at once. Her viewpoint extended so that she was looking at the town from high above, peering down on tiny rooftops, while also staring up into the cloudy sky. And gazing down busy streets. And inside houses and shops. She saw into dank sewers, dusty attics, dim garages, and cluttered closets. All at once, she observed every person in town from every angle. Every room in every building. The exterior and interior of every car. And the brain-tingling vision kept stretching outward, unstoppable now. She looked down on land masses and cloud formations from space. She saw sprawling cities and everyone in them. She observed every cubicle in every skyscraper. She penetrated caves and forests and oceans. She saw cows, deer, birds, snakes, insects. Gophers burrowed in the ground. Dragons perched on lofty crags. She saw inside hospitals and circus tents and prisons. She saw the barren surface of the moon.

Kendra was no longer aware of her body, the crystal, or the Sphinx. She had been rendered powerless by the flood of sensory input, everything viewed at once, all of it in motion. There was too much—it was impossible to even begin to try to process this staggering view of everything. In this moment she was witnessing so much more than she had experienced over the entire course of her life. She couldn’t bring anything into focus. She couldn’t even think clearly enough to try. Conscious thought had ended, drowned by incomprehensible overstimulation.

Then she noticed something so new and brilliant that it distracted her from everything else. A beautiful face suffused with light. A physical embodiment of purity. The face gazed at Kendra. Not merely in her direction—Kendra somehow knew that, unlike anyone else within her endless view, the radiant woman could see her.

Release the crystal.

The thought came to her mind in a familiar way. Not with words for her ears. It was communication through thought and feeling, mind to mind. Kendra realized that she was seeing the Fairy Queen.

Release the crystal.

What crystal? Then Kendra remembered that she had a body. She was in a room with the Sphinx conducting an experiment. She still saw everything from every angle, but the vision became distant. She concentrated on the brilliant, beautiful face. Faintly, using forgotten senses, she could hear a voice calling her name, and she could feel her fingers touching something.

Release the crystal.

Kendra pulled her hand away from the cool, glassy surface. The vision ended as though somebody had pulled a plug. Kendra fell back on her elbows, blinking, astonished by how limited her sight seemed. She actually had to turn her head to take in the surprised faces around her.

The Sphinx crouched over her, grinning, his teeth white. "Welcome back, Kendra," he said. "You know me, correct?"

"Never again," Kendra gasped.

Everyone in the room murmured. They sounded amazed.

"I thought that perhaps you would see nothing. That your nature as fairykind would totally shield your mind from the vision. But you saw everything and made it out."

"Barely," Kendra said. "I lost all sense of where I was, who I was. There was too much."

"You seemed to slip away once you looked beyond the house," the Sphinx coaxed.

"It was like trying to drink from a tsunami," Kendra said. "How long was I gone?"

"Ten minutes," the Sphinx said. "You were convulsing gently, like the others. We had lost hope that you would return on your own. What brought you back? Once the seizures struck, I expected you to end your days in a vegetative state."

Kendra did not want to tell him about the Fairy Queen. Her realm had to stay hidden. "My Grandma saw me. Grandma Sorenson. She saw me seeing her and told me to release the crystal."

The Sphinx studied Kendra. "I had no idea Ruth was clairvoyant."

Kendra shrugged. “Bottom line? You want me to touch that thing again, you will have to force my hand onto it, and please don’t pretend you’re doing anything besides erasing my mind. There was no way I could control what I saw. No way to focus. I was nothing.”

“You did well, Kendra,” the Sphinx said. “If not an outright success, the experiment was instructive. I am convinced the Oculus is beyond your capacity to wield. Having witnessed the others who have tried, I feel there was no way you could have imitated their state of agitation so precisely. We could all tell when the Oculus overpowered you. It was earlier than with any of the others.”

Kendra shifted her gaze to the Oculus, glittering innocently on the pillow, like nothing more than a sparkly bauble from a museum collection. Yet never again would she see it as a glimmering work of craftsmanship. The Oculus was a gateway to insanity.

The Sphinx locked eyes with the others in the room one by one. “We are essentially done here. Tomorrow we will move out. Kendra, you may return to your room. Thank you for your cooperation. Get some rest. Plan on departing with us at daybreak.”

Chapter 7



Sabotage

As the hammock swayed back and forth, Seth stared up at the naked branches overhead, stark against the hard blue sky. A satyr reclined on a similar hammock to his right, softly playing a flute fashioned from reeds, shirtless despite the cold. A second satyr with redder fur and longer horns lay on a third hammock to the other side, a long striped scarf dangling from his neck to the ground.

“You’re right,” Seth admitted. “This is the most comfortable bed in the universe.”

“Did you doubt us?” Newel blurted, adjusting his woolen scarf. “And we’re in view of the yard, so Stan won’t be able to come down on you.”

“You’ve fed me and made me really comfortable,” Seth said. “I’m guessing you want to ask me something.”

“Ulterior motives?” Newel gasped. “I’m shocked and appalled! Can you only conceive of us helping a longtime friend relax if we were buttering him up for a proposition?”

Doren stopped piping. “We’re out of batteries again.”

“Thought so,” Seth said. “Haven’t you guys heard of conservation? I gave you a mountain of batteries last time.”

Newel folded his arms across his hairy chest. “Have you ever used batteries to power a television? Even a small one? They don’t last.”

“Plus we watch it nonstop until we run out,” Doren added, earning a glare from his comrade.

“This could be another *golden* opportunity for you,” Newel enticed.

“I had to bring back the gold I earned last time,” Seth said. “They won’t let me keep it. And they’re right. It isn’t yours to give me. We’re stealing from the preserve.”

“Stealing?” Newel sputtered. “Seth, hunting for treasure is not stealing. You think trolls like Nero got their hoards through legitimate channels? You think wealth does any good piled in crypts or caves? If currency isn’t exchanged, the economy stagnates. We’re heroes, Seth. We’re keeping the gold in circulation for the benefit of the global marketplace.”

“And so we can watch more TV,” Doren clarified.

“I really don’t feel good about taking any more gold,” Seth said. “Removing treasure from Fablehaven is like robbing a museum.”

“What about something other than gold?” Newel suggested. “We have loads of wine. We make it ourselves. Top-notch stuff, worth a hefty sum. If you sold it, you’d make money, and you wouldn’t be stealing.”

“I’m not going to become a wine dealer,” Seth said. “I’m barely thirteen.”

“What if we recovered treasure without an owner?” Doren said. “Not stolen. Salvaged.”

Newel tapped the side of his nose. “Now you’re thinking, Doren. Seth, we’ve been doing some fishing in the lake of tar by where Kurisock lived. Ever since Lena got rid of him, his domain has become neutral territory.”

“Wasn’t like he left a will,” Doren joked.

“We’ve found some interesting objects. Stuff has collected in the sludge over the years. Some of it worthless, some of it surprising.”

“Any bones?” Seth asked.

“Bones, weapons, armor, trinkets, equipment,” Newel listed. “We’ve been stashing away the interesting stuff. No actual gold yet, but we’ve only been trawling the tar at our leisure. If you’ll accept treasures from its depths, we’ll spend more time there.”

“I’ll have to check what Grandpa thinks,” Seth said.

“Stan?” Newel cried, exasperated. “Since when are you Stan’s lackey? He’ll put a damper on our dealings no matter what! He’s against us

watching TV in the first place!”

“What happened to you, Seth?” Doren asked. “You don’t quite seem like yourself.”

“It’s hard to explain,” Seth said.

“Doren, you missed your vocation!” Newel exclaimed. “You should have been a therapist. There it was right in front of us but we missed it. Something is troubling the boy. What is it, Seth? What’s taken the wind out of your sails?”

“The Society killed Kendra,” he said reluctantly.

Both of the satyrs fell silent, their expressions melancholy.

“It wasn’t very long ago. I can hardly think about anything else. We don’t even really understand what happened. I have to figure it out.”

“Sorry to hear it, Seth,” Doren said gently.

“Don’t mention it to Verl,” Newel cautioned. “He might dive into a chasm. Kendra’s all he can talk about these days. The poor guy is hopelessly smitten. I keep reminding him that she’s Stan’s granddaughter. He doesn’t care that she’s too young. Says he’ll wait. I tell him satyrs don’t tie themselves down to one maiden. He says he’s not tying himself down. He says she captured him against his will, and he’s forever her prisoner. Those exact words.”

Seth chuckled.

“The phase will pass,” Doren said. “Verl is a nut.”

“We’ll give you some time,” Newel relented. “We can talk business when you’re feeling more like yourself again.”

“Guys, I know how much those batteries mean to you. Maybe I could just go and get a bunch of them and bring them to you without any—”

Doren sat up swiftly, setting his hammock rocking. “Something is coming.”

“Something big,” Newel confirmed, cupping a hand to his ear.

“Coming fast. But Seth was sharing an idea. About batteries?”

Seth propped himself up on his elbows. He could now barely hear the distant thump of heavy footfalls. “Hugo?” Seth guessed.

“Must be,” Newel said. “But why is he coming so fast?”

“Who knows?” Doren replied. “The big guy has been acting strange lately.”

Hugo bounded into view, a humanoid conglomeration of rock, soil, and clay. The last time Seth had seen him, the golem had been enlarged and outfitted for battle by the fairies. Now he looked like his old self, except perhaps a bit taller and thicker.

Hugo took a final tremendous leap, landing solidly near the hammocks, the impact making everything tremble. “Hugo . . . miss . . . Seth,” the golem declared in a voice like a rockslide. The words were enunciated more clearly than Seth had ever heard the golem manage.

“Hi, Hugo!” Seth said, rolling out of the hammock. “It’s good to see you too! You’re talking so well!”

The golem gave a craggy smile.

“Looks like our party has officially been crashed,” Newel lamented. Hugo stared at Seth.

“Want to play?” Seth asked.

“Yes,” Hugo said.

“You know a fun game?” Newel murmured softly to Seth. “Pulling treasure out of the tar pit.”

“Newel, that’s really far from the yard,” Seth whispered.

“Keep . . . Seth . . . safe,” the golem rumbled.

“Right,” Newel said. “Just an idle thought. I was brainstorming. You two run along.”

“We’ll have another hammock party soon,” Doren promised.

“Okay, sure, guys,” Seth said. “What do you want to do, Hugo?” The simple question was something of a test. The golem was still getting used to having a will of his own. He typically struggled to come up with an activity without some suggestions.

“Come,” Hugo said, extending a stony arm.

Seth grabbed on, and Hugo hoisted him onto his shoulder. Seth liked the satyrs, but he felt relieved to escape their company. The conversation had become too serious once the subject of Kendra came up. He wished he could make a general announcement to everyone he had ever known that his sister was dead and that he needed some time to cope with it in his own way. Recounting the tragedy to new people inflamed the pain too much. Maybe while hanging out with Hugo he could finally ignore the loss for a while.

The golem tromped over to the unseasonably green lawn of the yard and approached a large tree in the far corner. Seth recognized it as the former site of the tree house before he had infuriated the fairies and they had torn it down with him inside. The rubble had been cleared away long ago, but now Seth saw that a new tree house had been constructed, bigger and sturdier than the previous one, buttressed by a pair of heavy stilts.

“Make,” Hugo said, pointing at the tree house.

“You rebuilt it?” Seth asked. How could those big hands manipulate tools with the skill necessary to construct something like a tree house?

“Seth . . . see,” Hugo said, lifting Seth and setting him on the narrow wooden ledge outside a door in the side of the tree house.

Seth went inside. There were few furnishings, but the room was spacious. The floor felt solid, and the walls were thick. An old iron stove sat in the middle of the floor, with a pipe that extended through the roof. Since the golem was much too big to enter, Seth didn’t stay inside very long. He uncoiled the rope ladder by the door and climbed down.

“Hugo, that is the awesomest hideout ever!”

“Happy,” Hugo said.

Seth hugged the earthy creature, his arms barely reaching halfway around Hugo’s waist. The golem patted his shoulder.

Seth stepped back. “Did you do that on your own?”

“Hugo . . . idea. Stan . . . help.”

“Let’s go over to the house. I want to thank Grandpa too.”

Hugo picked up Seth and trotted to the house, setting him down near the deck. Seth charged inside. “Hugo is talking so well!” he called, not seeing anyone from where he stood by the back door. “He showed me the tree house! Guys?”

He heard a faint banging. The sound seemed to come from the basement. Was everyone down in the dungeon?

When Seth opened the door to the basement, the banging became much louder. Somebody was hitting the door beyond the bottom of the stairs. He heard a female voice shouting, muffled by the heavy door into the dungeon. “Dale! Stan! Hello! Ruth! Tanu! Help! Someone? Hello!”

Seth charged down the stairs. “Vanessa?”

“Seth? Get your grandparents. Hurry!”

“What are you doing out of the Quiet Box?”

“No time to explain. You have a spy among you. Hurry, bring them here quickly!”

Seth turned and ran up the stairs, his head spinning. What could possibly explain Vanessa’s being outside the Quiet Box? Was she no longer being kept there? Had his grandparents lied? Could she have been the person controlling Kendra? That was ludicrous, right?

He dashed through the kitchen, reached the entry hall, and raced up to the second floor. “Grandpa! Grandma! Hello?”

Still no answer.

He ran through his grandparents’ room and pulled open a door in their bathroom. Instead of a bathroom closet, a steel door awaited, with a large combination wheel. Seth dialed in the numbers he had memorized the previous summer, yanked a lever, and the heavy door clacked open.

“Hello?” Seth shouted up the stairs to the secret side of the attic.

“Seth?” called Grandpa.

“Vanessa is out of the Quiet Box,” Seth announced. “She wants to talk to you.”

He heard footsteps. Grandpa, Grandma, and Tanu rushed down the stairs.

“What were you doing?” Seth asked.

“Having a meeting,” Grandma said. “Where is she?”

“At the door to the dungeon,” Seth said. “She’s banging on it and calling for you guys.” The three adults charged past Seth. Grandma held a crossbow. Tanu scabbled in a pouch for potions. “Where is everybody else?”

“Dale went to the stables to check on the animals,” Tanu said.

“Maddox went into the dungeon to help Coulter search for the hidden chamber in the Hall of Dread.”

Tanu took a detour to his room to grab a flashlight and handcuffs. Seth trailed after his grandparents as they descended the stairs to the entry hall, and then down to the basement. Tanu caught up as they arrived at the bottom of the stairs.

Grandpa approached the door to the dungeon. “What are you doing out of the Quiet Box?” he called through it.

“Open the door, Stan,” Vanessa answered. “We need to talk.”

“How do I know every prisoner in the dungeon isn’t at your side, ready to storm past us?”

“Because I called you,” Vanessa replied. “If this were a trap, I would have used surprise to my advantage.”

“You have to do better than that,” Grandma said. “Where is Coulter?”

“In the Quiet Box.”

Grandpa and Grandma shared a concerned glance.

“What about Maddox?” Tanu asked.

“He’s the problem,” Vanessa said. “Look, I have a key, Stan. I’m contacting you this way only to reduce the shock and avoid a fight. I’m on your side.”

A key rattled in the lock and the door opened. Vanessa stood alone beyond the doorway, holding a flashlight. A dark corridor lined with cell doors extended behind her. Even wearing one of Grandma’s housecoats, she was strikingly attractive with her long black hair, dark eyes, and smooth olive complexion. “Maddox released me,” she said. “He wanted me to help him subdue the rest of you and access a secret room beyond the Hall of Dread.”

“What?” Grandpa cried.

“He’s not really Maddox, Stan,” Vanessa said. “I put him to sleep with a bite. Come with me.”

The three adults followed the narcoblix down the dreary corridor. Seth brought up the rear, relieved that nobody had forbidden him from tagging along.

“What do you mean it wasn’t Maddox?” Grandma asked. “Who was it?”

“A stingbulb,” Vanessa said.

“There are no more stingbulbs,” Tanu protested. “They’ve been extinct for centuries.”

Vanessa glanced back at him. “The Sphinx has access to stingbulbs. I knew that even before this phony version of Maddox confirmed it.”

“He confessed?” Grandma asked.

“He assumed I was on his side,” Vanessa said. “He was enlisting my help.”

The corridor ended, branching left or right. Vanessa turned right.

“The Quiet Box is the other way,” Grandpa pointed out.

“Maddox is this way,” Vanessa said. “I extracted as much information as I could before incapacitating him outside the Hall of Dread.”

“Does this mean the real Maddox is dead?” Tanu asked.

“He was alive when they made the copy,” Vanessa said. “Stingbulbs can only replicate the living. But Maddox was in bad shape, as was reflected in the copy. The stingbulb maintained that Maddox was alive the last he saw.”

“What exactly is a stingbulb?” Seth asked.

“A species of magical fruit that can extract a sample of living tissue and then grow into an imitation of that organism,” Vanessa explained. “The copy is almost exact, even duplicating most memories.”

Seth furrowed his brow. “So they could impersonate somebody pretty good. But they might be a little off.”

“Right,” Vanessa said.

“What if that explains what happened to Kendra?” Seth gushed. “Maybe she was replaced by a stingbulb!”

Grandpa stopped walking, and the others paused along with him. He slowly turned to face Seth, two fingertips resting on his lips, his expression unreadable. “That could be,” he murmured. “That fits really well.”

“She could still be alive,” Grandma gasped.

Seth made a choked little sob as he tried to fight back the tears of hope and relief that sprang unbidden to his eyes.

“What happened to Kendra?” Vanessa inquired.

“We thought she was dead,” Grandpa said. “We caught her trying to leak secrets to the Society, and when Warren confronted her about it, she poisoned herself. Our best guess was that she was under the influence of some kind of mind control.”

“You’re right,” Vanessa said. “Sounds like a stingbulb. The Sphinx would be in no hurry to harm Kendra. He knows how valuable she could be. Come.”

They started walking again, and turned a corner.

“What do we do?” Seth asked.

“We’ll get this info to Trask,” Grandpa said. “Vanessa, if the Sphinx sent the stingbulb to free you, why tell us?”

“The Sphinx only sought to free me once I regained strategic value,” she said coldly. “He didn’t think the stingbulb could access the hidden room unaided, so suddenly Vanessa Santoro deserved to be rescued. I should have secured that loyalty long ago. For years, I functioned as one of his top operatives, risking my neck time and again, succeeding in mission after mission. He discarded me at the first moment I might have become an inconvenience. The stingbulb had an entire speech memorized, explaining how my incarceration was always planned to be temporary, a tactical necessity. In his pride, the Sphinx thinks I’ll come whimpering back at the first opportunity. He is in for a surprise. I no longer trust his character and, by extension, I no longer believe in his mission. I won’t rest until I take him down.”

Up ahead, the flashlights illuminated a form sprawled on the floor of the hallway. The group jogged forward, staring down at Maddox.

“Can you revive him?” Grandma asked.

Vanessa crouched over Maddox, her hands probing his head. He flinched, crying out. She stepped back and he sat up, blinking into the flashlight beams. His eyes flicked to Vanessa, his expression guarded.

“What is this?” he asked, rubbing his head. “Stan? What happened?”

“We have reason to believe you’re not Maddox,” Grandpa said.

Maddox chuckled incredulously. “Not Maddox? You’re kidding. Who am I, then?”

“A stingbulb,” Grandma said.

Maddox glanced at Vanessa. “Is that what she told you? Stan, don’t be so hasty to trust a liar like her. Coulter thought it might be smart to consult Vanessa about what happened to Kendra. You know, see if she knew anybody in the Society who lives in Monmouth. We thought we could handle her together, but she shot out of the Quiet Box like a tornado and overpowered us. That’s all I remember.”

“Monmouth, Illinois?” Vanessa verified. “Is that where they took Kendra? Stan, that must be Torina Barker. She’s a lectoblix who works closely with the Sphinx.”

“Do you know where she lives?” Grandma asked urgently.

“I’ve never seen her lair,” Vanessa said. “I just know of her.”

“Stan, give me the cell phone,” Grandma said. “The reception down here is lousy. I had better go call Trask.”

“Wait, you believe *her*?” Maddox spluttered. “You think I’m some kind of talking fruit?”

Grandma accepted the cell phone and started down the hall. Grandpa glowered at Maddox. “Yes, I do. And you had better start doing some serious talking. What’s the news from Brazil? What’s really happening at Rio Branco?”

Maddox chuckled silently, eyes down, face flushing. “You’re taking her word over mine,” he mumbled to himself. He raised his head. “Stan, I know you’re torn up because of Kendra, but I can’t help you. I’m Maddox. Remember that night in Sri Lanka? You won that ring-tailed sparkler off me with a full house?”

“We’ll go release Coulter from the Quiet Box,” Grandpa said. “If his story fails to match yours, I’ll make you very sorry for wasting more time.”

“Don’t bother,” the stingbulb spat, glaring at Vanessa. “There will be consequences,” he threatened, holding her gaze.

“I’ve never been a big fan of rotten fruit,” Vanessa commented calmly.

“Your mission is over,” Grandpa stated. “What can you share with us?”

“There isn’t much to say,” the stingbulb replied.

“Search your memories,” Grandpa invited. “You’re aware of some wonders that Tanu can work with potions. Or, beyond the door behind you, I could introduce you to a wraith. Ever meet a wraith, friend?”

“You misunderstand me,” the stingbulb replied. “I know very little. Do you suppose they would risk sending me here with my head full of sensitive information? I have a small amount of knowledge specific to my mission, nothing more. The Society is aware of the secret room at the end of the Hall of Dread. They want me to recover coded messages from Patton Burgess about where certain artifacts might be hidden. They explained where Vanessa was imprisoned and how the Quiet Box worked. They told me that I should be able to rely on her for assistance. I came into being inside the main house at Rio Branco, beside the washtub that brought me here. The memories I have from Maddox at Rio Branco are mostly of hiding in a cave, much as I described, until he was captured. They have him in custody.

With my consent, they added to my injuries so I would look authentic. I know nothing else.”

“That could be true,” Vanessa said. “They wouldn’t want to risk a stingbulb divulging their schemes.”

Tanu rolled the stingbulb onto his belly, crouched over him, and cuffed his hands behind his back. When Tanu stepped away, the stingbulb did not move.

“Do they have the artifact?” Grandpa asked.

“I have no idea,” the stingbulb said. “But I told them where it was hidden. Maddox knew that much.”

“What now?” Grandpa asked Vanessa.

“We could stash him in the Quiet Box,” Vanessa proposed. “Get Coulter out of there.”

“I was afraid you might say that,” Grandpa said. “Having bitten most of us, you can control us in our sleep. The Quiet Box is the only place we can hold you to curb that power.”

“Haven’t I earned any credibility?” Vanessa asked.

“Without a doubt,” Grandpa said. “But you could still be setting us up for a greater betrayal in the future. We can never let you see the information beyond the Hall of Dread.”

“I hear you,” Vanessa said. “What do I care about some stingbulb? Turning him in could be a ruse to earn your trust. Except, if I’d meant to betray you, that is not how I would have done it. I would have followed the script the stingbulb brought me. It was a golden opportunity. Coulter was already out of play. With keys to the dungeon and help from the stingbulb, it wouldn’t have been difficult to use the element of surprise to capture the rest of you. Then I could have proceeded to seek out the desired information at my own pace.”

“And she wouldn’t have told us about the lectoblix in Monmouth,” Seth added.

“You don’t need to place full trust in me,” Vanessa said, hands on her hips. “Keep your secrets. Just let me assist you. I know things. And I have bitten many people in my time, including several inside of the Society. Let me use my abilities, and I’ll help you recover Kendra.”

“You make a compelling argument,” Grandpa sighed. “Tanu?”

“Ruth won’t like it,” Tanu said. “But Vanessa is right that turning in the stingbulb was unwise unless she’s on our side. Simply knowing that the Sphinx has stingbulbs is invaluable intelligence.”

“Seth?” Grandpa asked.

Seth was so flattered that Grandpa was asking his opinion on the matter that it took a moment to collect his thoughts. “I think we should stick the stingbulb in the Quiet Box and have Vanessa spy for us.”

Vanessa arched an eyebrow. “Stan?”

“Tanu has it right about Ruth,” Grandpa said. “She won’t want us to give you an inch. We’ll have to keep you down here in a cell, at least at first. We’ll try to make it comfortable. Vanessa, let me be clear. If you take control of any of us in our sleep, I will consider it irrefutable evidence of your allegiance with our enemies, punishable by death.”

“Understood,” she said evenly.

Grandpa nodded. “We could use your help. As soon as possible, I want you searching for sleeping members of the Society who can help us locate Kendra.” Grandpa bent down and helped the stingbulb to his feet. “Let’s go release Coulter.”

Chapter 8



Knapsack

The room was dark, but, as always, Kendra could see. Unable to sleep, she stared at the ceiling, watching a tiny spider progress across the featureless white expanse. She wondered what the room looked like to the small arachnid, inching along upside down. Knowing that spiders had many eyes, she felt new empathy for how they viewed the world.

It still made her dizzy to recall her encounter with the Oculus. Half a day later, she found that she could not re-create the experience in her mind. The vision had been too disorienting, too distinct from the way she had always seen and the way she saw now. She could only hazily recollect the sensation of observing the world from billions of perspectives.

What if the Sphinx or someone else in the Society mastered the use of the Oculus? It would mean no more secrets. The Society would be able to see everyone, everything, everywhere.

The thought made her shiver.

Tomorrow she would leave with the Sphinx and his freaky entourage. Where would they take her? Would the journey offer any opportunities for escape? Could she possibly get away with the Oculus? What a coup that would be!

The door to her room eased open. She had not heard the lock disengage, but caught the motion out of the corner of her eye. Her body went rigid. A hand reached inside and placed something on the floor.

“Hello?” Kendra called softly. “Who’s there?”

The door closed.

Kendra swung her legs out of bed and crossed to the door. She opened it, peering up and down the dim hall, but saw no one. Had her door been unlocked all night? Had the stealthy visitor unlocked it silently?

On the floor just inside her door sat a tan leather knapsack. A piece of paper leaned against it. Kendra picked up the paper and read these words:

You must escape tonight. The knapsack contains an extra-dimensional storage compartment. You can easily fit inside. Once you’re inside, the knapsack can be flattened, jostled, or dropped and you will feel none of it. You’ll find a stingbulb in the front pocket. Prick yourself, wait for the duplicate to take form, and then issue instructions. Leave the decoy behind, and get as far from here as you can. Hurry!

The note was unsigned. Kendra was glad that she could read it without turning on a light. No need to draw attention to her room now that escape was suddenly an option. Her heart pounded. She opened her door, wandered over to the top of the stairs, and listened. The house was quiet. If she didn’t disturb anyone, she should have at least a few hours to herself.

She returned to her room and examined the knapsack. Could this be some kind of trick? Was the Sphinx playing mind games? Or was the note legitimate? Maybe somebody really was lending her aid. What need would the Sphinx or Torina have for mind games? She was their prisoner. Subtlety was no longer required. If the note was genuine, she should move quickly.

Kendra opened the small flap that covered the front pocket of the leather knapsack. Thrusting her hand inside, she felt a stinging prick that reminded her of when she had reached into the mystery box at the rec center. Instead of pulling away, she closed her fingers around the fruit and removed it from the pouch.

The stingbulb was a dull, purplish color, with an irregular shape and a rough, fibrous texture. She was no expert, but the fruit seemed authentic. The sting had felt right. She placed the fruit by the wall near the window and returned to the knapsack.

Would she really fit inside? Kendra unbuckled the big flap that covered the top, pulled it open, and looked inside. Instead of seeing the inside of a knapsack, she was peering through an opening down into a room with a dingy slate floor and cracked adobe walls. Weathered crates and barrels were stacked along two of the walls. Iron rungs descended the wall near the opening, granting easy access to the unlikely space.

Kendra gaped at the room in amazement. Were there no limits to the wonders possible through magic? She tried to guess who might have given her such an incredible gift. Nobody came to mind. What could the Sphinx gain by giving her false hope? What if she really had a secret ally?

Kendra glanced at the fruit. How long would the transformation take? She certainly did not want a second Kendra wandering around without instructions. The process seemed to be advancing slowly so far. Surely she had enough time to slip down and investigate the room.

Kendra poked her head into the knapsack. What cargo did the barrels contain? Might she find other useful materials inside? Pulling the mouth of the knapsack open wide, Kendra slithered through the opening and climbed down the ladder.

An unlit lantern waited on the floor at the bottom. Kendra ignored it—her enchanted vision would suffice. The room was about ten feet tall, fifteen feet across, and twenty feet long. She noticed small vents on three of the walls near the ceiling. She approached the goods stacked against one wall. Everything looked timeworn and cobwebby. Random items were scattered among the heaped containers: a folded rug, an outdated tennis racket, the mounted head of an antelope, a clear jar of marbles, a few fishing poles, torn work gloves, several filthy rolls of wrapping paper, a damaged wicker chair, some framed pictures, rotting coils of rope, unused candles, and a battered chalkboard.

Nothing looked useful. Kendra tried to open a crate, but the top felt nailed down. She found a rusty rake and used it to pry the top off. Inside she found bolts of gray cloth.

She tried a barrel, but stopped attempting to pry it open once she caught a whiff of the contents. Whatever food had been in there had spoiled long ago.

Kendra set the rake aside and stepped back. This felt like rummaging through a long-abandoned garage. She supposed if useful items had been

included within the knapsack, the note would have mentioned them.

Returning to the ladder, Kendra climbed up and shimmied through the mouth of the knapsack back into the dim bedroom. She checked on the stingbulb and found that it was now the size of a football and had taken on a more elongated shape.

Kendra changed her clothes, trying to select an inconspicuous outfit that could withstand the cold. She settled on the clothes she had worn to talk to the Sphinx, plus the jacket she had been wearing when she was abducted. She bundled the rest of her clothes and chucked them into the knapsack.

Sitting cross-legged near the knapsack, Kendra reread the note. Obviously she would enter the knapsack and have the stingbulb duplicate slide it through the invisible bars of her window. Once on the snowy ground, she would exit the knapsack and run for it. Where would she go? She supposed she could stash the knapsack under a bush and hide inside it until morning. Could she find a phone and call home? Might be tough in the middle of the night in a small town.

Would the duplicate fool the whisper hound? Torina had talked as though the creature used scent to identify targets, so if the duplicate smelled just like Kendra, the hound should be satisfied. Kendra's scent would never leave the house. Of course, there might still be trouble if the hound could somehow sense her scent outside. Apparently whoever had left the knapsack felt the ruse would work. In her desperate circumstances, it was worth the risk.

Kendra scooted across the floor so she could lean against her bed. The stingbulb expanded so gradually that she could not discern the change unless she looked away for a few minutes and then looked back again.

Should she invite Haden and Cody to run away with her? If they ratted her out, she would lose her only opportunity to escape. The prematurely aged men were bitter about what Torina had done to them, but they seemed resigned to their fate. They might have no interest in breaking out. After all, Torina was providing them with a free retirement home, an option they might not find elsewhere.

But was it fair to deny them the option to decide for themselves? The men might quietly long to rejoin normal society. They could certainly fit inside the capacious knapsack, although Haden might have a tough time

getting down the ladder. They had both treated her well. It would be wrong to simply abandon them.

She didn't need to share the specifics of how she planned to flee. She could wait to tell them how the escape would be accomplished until they agreed to join her. If they chose not to accept the offer, she didn't have to mention the duplicate or the knapsack. They wouldn't even know she had escaped—they would assume she had changed her mind.

The stingbulb continued to slowly grow. Kendra wondered at what point it would begin to look human. So far it looked like a big purple yam. Settling back against the bed, Kendra rested her eyes, assuring herself that she would not doze. How could she sleep with the prospect of a desperate escape looming? But it sure felt nice to close her eyes! Before long, the silent house, the dim room, the eventful day, and the late hour conspired against her, and she slipped off to sleep.

Kendra was aroused by a crunching, cracking sound like green wood splitting. Still an irregular shape, the stingbulb was now larger than Kendra. Fingers had broken through the purplish husk of the fruit and were peeling it away. Kendra crawled over to the oversized fruit and helped widen the hole as quietly as she could manage.

Soon Kendra sat back and watched an identical copy of herself squirm out of the fibrous husk. The duplicate was even wearing the same clothes Kendra had been wearing when she was pricked!

"I'm Kendra," Kendra informed the newcomer.

"I can't see you," the duplicate said.

"Can't you see in the dark?"

The duplicate paused before answering. "Nope. I should be able to. I can remember seeing in the dark. Now I can't."

"I guess my powers aren't transferrable," Kendra mused.

"Apparently not," the duplicate agreed. "What am I to do?"

"I've been imprisoned by an evil lady," Kendra said. "I need you to pose as me."

The duplicate thought about this for a moment. "No problem."

"You know you're a fruit," Kendra said.

"I'm perfectly aware of what I am."

"Where did you grow?" Kendra asked.

“Far from here. I couldn’t think very clearly back then. I love this body!” She flexed her fingers, then took a deep breath. “So many sensations!”

“Can you remember being a fruit?” Kendra wondered.

The duplicate furrowed her brow. “Vaguely. Nothing was as sharp or immediate as it is now. There was an awareness of light and heat, a sense of growing, of being nourished by the mother tree. And later a sense of being separated from the tree. A tenuous connection remained until I exited the husk. By that connection the mother tree nourished me from afar so I could grow into a replica of you.”

“You even have my clothes. How is that possible?”

“Who knows? Magic, I guess. The same way I started thinking like you from the first instant I sampled you.”

“Weird,” Kendra said.

“So all you want me to do is imitate you?”

“I guess I have a few more instructions.”

“I exist to follow them,” the duplicate pledged.

“First, don’t divulge any sensitive information to the Sphinx, Torina, or anyone. Keep the secrets you know at all costs. Second, learn what you can about their plans, and then try to escape and notify me.” She recited Grandpa’s cell phone number. “The Sphinx will take you away from here in the morning.”

“I remember.”

“Keep your eyes and ears open. Take whatever opportunities you can to harm the Society of the Evening Star.”

“I will. You can count on me. Are you going to invite Haden and Cody to join you?”

“What do you think?”

The duplicate shrugged. “Seems like you think you should.”

“Right,” Kendra said. “When I return, after I’m inside the knapsack, I’ll need you to put it through the window bars and toss it to the ground.”

“Gotcha.”

“You’ll only follow my instructions, right?” Kendra verified. “The others would love to find you out and change your allegiance.”

“I’ll only obey you. I’ll do a good job. Unless *you* mess up, the Sphinx will never know I’m an impostor.”

“Unless they try to get you to use my powers,” Kendra said. “You’ll have to make up excuses.”

“Leave it to me.”

“What time is it, anyhow?”

“I can’t see, remember? Isn’t there a clock on the desk?”

“Oh yeah,” Kendra realized. “It’s almost 3:30 a.m. I’d better hurry.” She went to the door. “I’ll be right back.”

Tiptoeing into the hall, Kendra crept over to Haden’s room. She tried the door and found it unlocked. Easing it open, she slipped inside and crossed to the adjustable bed where Haden snored softly. She shook his bony shoulder. “Haden, wake up,” she hissed.

Haden bunched up his covers and rolled away from her. She gave him another shake. Huffing and sniffing, Haden sat up. “What is it?” he asked.

“It’s Kendra.”

“Kendra? What time is it?” He was gazing in her general direction, but his eyes weren’t quite looking into hers, a reminder that although she could see, he could not.

“Late. Haden, I think I have a way to sneak out of here. I’m wondering if you want to come with me.”

He considered the proposition for a moment. “You’re serious.”

“Yes. I discovered a sure way to escape. Something safe and reliable.”

“When?”

“Now or never.”

He cleared his throat. “I’d better stay. I would just slow you down.”

“You really wouldn’t slow me down. Don’t stay behind for my sake.”

He scratched the side of his nose. “I never expected an opportunity like this.” He patted his chest, frowning. “All things considered, I think I’d better stay. I’m not sure where else I’d go, what else I’d do. I guess I won’t be able to complain about being held captive anymore.”

“You’re sure?” Kendra checked.

“Yes, I’m sure. I wish you the best. Do you need my help?”

“Just for you to keep quiet about this,” Kendra said.

“My lips are sealed. Good luck.”

“Thanks, Haden.”

“Did you invite Cody?”

“Not yet.”

He looked troubled. “Okay. Okay. Even if he goes, I had better stay. That is my final word.”

“Who knows,” Kendra said, backing toward the door, “maybe it won’t work out. But I think I have a solid plan.”

“From what I hear, either way you’ll be moving on tomorrow.”

“Which is why I have to duck out tonight.”

“Good luck.”

“You too.”

Kendra exited and closed his door, then slipped down the hall to Cody’s room. She quietly eased the door open.

“Who’s there?” Cody called, alarmed.

“It’s just Kendra.”

“Kendra?” Cody repeated, his voice only somewhat quieter.

Kendra shushed him gently. “Not so loud. I don’t want to get busted. I have to ask you something that couldn’t wait until morning.”

“Sure, come in,” he whispered. “Sorry. You startled me.”

“I have a sure way out of here. I’m leaving tonight. You could come if you’d like. Should be easy.”

Sitting up, Cody switched on a reading light. He shielded his eyes until they adjusted. “I know you’re worried about leaving with the Sphinx tomorrow. But there is no way out of this place. Trying to bust out will only make matters worse in the morning.”

“It isn’t wishful thinking,” Kendra insisted. “I’ve had some outside help, and I now have a guaranteed way to escape. I’m talking immediately. You won’t slow me down and it shouldn’t be too tough. Do you want to come or not?”

“Have you asked Haden?”

“He turned me down.”

Cody picked up a mostly empty glass of water from the low table beside his bed. He took a sip and set it down. “I suppose if the getaway is as

sure as you make it sound, I wouldn't mind leaving this place behind. If I manage to find a comfortable place for Haden on the outside, I could always come back for him."

"So you'll come?" Kendra said.

"If I agree that your method of escape looks sensible, yes, I'll join you."

"Get dressed and come to my room. Be quick and quiet."

Cody slid his legs out from under the covers. They looked white and thin. "I'll be close behind you," he assured her.

Kendra jogged down the hall. The disappearance of Cody would raise questions. There was no stingbulb to replace him. They would certainly interrogate Haden, since he and Cody were so close. Could it lead them to suspect the authenticity of the Kendra duplicate? Possibly, but if Cody wanted to come, leaving him behind was not an option.

Returning to her room, Kendra found her duplicate sitting on the bed. The husk from the overgrown fruit was gone. "What did you do with the husk?" Kendra asked.

"I cleaned it up and dropped it into the knapsack," the duplicate replied. "Are the old guys coming?"

"Cody," Kendra said. "His disappearance will raise questions. You'll have to be ready to act oblivious."

"I'll make you proud," the duplicate said. "They won't suspect."

Kendra felt confident that she could rely on the duplicate. It was like relying on herself. "Thanks, I'm sure you'll do great."

Kendra sat down on the bed next to her duplicate. She had to wait longer than she liked for Cody to show up, and was just getting ready to return to his room when he entered quietly. Diffused light from his room illuminated him faintly. He wore a dark green topcoat and a matching homburg hat with a brownish band and an upturned brim.

"You look sharp," Kendra remarked.

"Torina got me the outfit," Cody said. "You're right about Haden. I went by his room and gave it a shot, but he's set on staying. How do we escape?"

"We climb into this knapsack," Kendra said.

“The knapsack?” Cody said incredulously. “I’m sorry, Kendra, I can’t see a thing in here.”

Kendra clicked on a light.

“Two of you?” Cody gasped.

“Long story,” Kendra said. She lifted the flap of the knapsack. “This backpack has a magical compartment. Climb down the ladder. I’ll take care of the rest.”

“Now I’ve seen everything,” the old man muttered, peeking into the knapsack.

It took some twisting and some steadying from Kendra, but eventually Cody got his feet onto the rungs and started down. The generous mouth of the knapsack stretched as his shoulders squeezed through. Had Cody been a heavyset man, he might not have fit very easily.

“Just chuck the bag out the window,” Kendra reminded the duplicate. “I’ll call up from the bottom when I’m ready.”

“I’ll wait for your signal,” the duplicate confirmed.

“Bye,” Kendra said. “Thanks.”

“I exist to execute your will. Thanks for the intriguing mission.”

Kendra descended through the mouth of the knapsack into the unlit room below. When she reached the bottom, she gazed up at the duplicate peering down at her. Kendra gave a thumbs-up. “We’re ready.”

The mouth of the knapsack closed. Kendra waited. There was no sense of motion.

“What’s happening?” Cody asked. “I can’t see my hand in front of my face in here.”

“She’ll throw the knapsack out the window.”

“Out the window? We’re three stories up!”

“We won’t feel it in here.” She hoped it was true.

From up above, Kendra heard the window slide open. A moment later, she heard the knapsack hit the ground. The room didn’t tilt or tremble.

Kendra retrieved the damaged wicker chair from among the goods heaped against the wall. “You can sit here,” she offered.

The wicker creaked as Cody took a seat. Despite the numerous broken, missing, and protruding fibers, the brittle chair looked like it would hold

him fine. Kendra rushed over to the rungs in the wall and climbed up to the closed mouth of the bag. Reaching up, she pushed open the flap.

“Where are you going?” Cody inquired.

“I’m going to take the knapsack someplace safe,” Kendra said. “Sit tight.”

“You’re the boss.”

Kendra climbed up through the opening, into the side yard of the big house. Above her, the bedroom window she had fallen from was dark. The house remained quiet. There was no sign of pursuit from the whisper hound. Kendra closed the knapsack, picked it up, and hurried away across the crunchy snow. Fortunately the snow looked pretty chewed up, so leaving footprints probably wouldn’t be a problem. Just to be sure, she dragged her feet so that whatever footprints she did leave would look misshapen.

She reached a sidewalk and started down the road. Slipping on a patch of ice, she fell hard, banging her elbow. She remained on the ground for a moment, breathing icy air, feeling the cold from the concrete seeping through her clothes, before rising carefully and continuing. She had seen enough of the neighborhood to know it consisted of large, old houses on good-sized lots. Her first goal was to put some distance between herself and her enemies. She turned down a couple of streets, heading for what she thought was the center of town. Not much after four in the morning, the chilly streets were quiet. No light seeped down through the cloudy sky.

As she progressed, the houses were getting smaller and closer together. Most needed some upkeep. A few were really run-down, with weedy yards, cluttered porches, and sagging roofs. From a pen at the side of one house, a big dog barked, prompting Kendra to walk even faster.

The house she had escaped from was well out of view. She kept glancing over her shoulder, unable to believe she had made a clean getaway. How far did she need to get before she stashed the knapsack and hid inside until morning?

Up ahead, a car came around a corner and drove toward her. The headlights flashed onto her, and Kendra knew she would look even more suspicious if she tried to hide. If she stayed calm, the car would almost certainly just drive on by. Except that the car was slowing. Was it a Good Samaritan wanting to make sure that this teenage girl walking alone at night

was all right? Or could it be some psycho who really liked the idea of girls on their own in the dark? Or could somebody from the house have noticed already that Cody was missing?

As the car pulled to a stop near her, Kendra made a break for it, running for the gate into the backyard of the nearest house.

“Kendra,” a voice called from behind in a hushed shout.

Kendra glanced over her shoulder and glimpsed a black man getting out of the silver sedan. She crashed into the gate, rattling the entire wooden fence, but couldn’t figure out how to open it. She grabbed the top, splinters pressing into her palms, and boosted herself up.

Strong hands seized her sides, yanking her off the fence. As her feet hit the ground, a hand covered her mouth. The other arm pinned her arms down and held her close. “I’m a friend of your grandfather’s,” the man whispered. “I’m a Knight of the Dawn.”

A light turned on inside the house. Kendra had rammed the fence pretty loudly.

“Come on,” he said, guiding her toward the sedan. “You’re safe now.”

“How do I know I can trust you?” Kendra asked, coming with him half-willingly.

“You don’t,” he said. “The name is Trask. I’ve been driving around town all night. So have Warren, Elise, and Dougan. You know them, right?”

He opened the back door and Kendra ducked into the sedan. What else was she supposed to do? The stranger was fast and strong. If she tried to run again, he would catch her even more easily this time. She desperately wanted to believe him. Trask slid in behind the wheel. The car was still running. Judging by the leather seats and the fancy instrument panel, the sedan seemed expensive.

“How did you find me?” Kendra asked.

Trask pulled forward, accelerating smoothly. Kendra glimpsed a squinting male face in the lighted window of the house, his thinning hair standing up in messy clumps. “Stan Sorenson got a tip that you might be wandering the streets of Monmouth tonight. And here you are.”

“Somebody helped me get away.”

He nodded. “Fits the tip.”

“You’ve been looking for me?” Kendra asked.

“I’m a detective. I was called in to investigate your murder. We didn’t suspect you were alive until earlier today.”

“Where will you take me now?”

He took out a sleek cell phone. “We’ll rendezvous with Warren and the others, then get you straight to Fablehaven.”



Hall of Dread

Hike,” Hugo rumbled, backing away from the line of scrimmage.

Seth and Doren began their routes, struggling to keep their footing in the deepening snow. Newel defended Doren well, staying with him when he cut left. Verl shadowed Seth, playing him too closely. When Seth faked a cut, Verl bought it, so Seth went long.

Hugo was the all-time perfect quarterback. The golem adhered religiously to a six-second time limit for releasing the ball, negating the need for a rush. There were no constraints to how far he could throw, the passes were always accurate, and he showed no favoritism.

Seth looked up and back. Blinding swirls of snow swept through the air, obscuring his view. He kept his legs pumping hard. Verl trailed two steps behind him. Seth could no longer see Hugo or the other satyrs. How far had he run? Fifty yards? Sixty?

A dark shape appeared amid the whirling flakes, hissing through the air. Seth extended his arms. Although the football hit him in stride, it was like trying to catch a meteor. Only Hugo could throw a long bomb with so little arc on the ball!

Seth lost his footing and fell in a spray of snow but managed to hang onto the football, trapping it against his chest. He lay for a moment in the furrow he had plowed through the snow, feeling an icy prickle on the back

of his neck, hesitant to get up because he knew that snow had collected inside his collar and would disperse chillingly down his back.

“What happened?” Newel called.

“He caught it,” Verl replied. “Touchdown.”

“Again?” Newel complained. “I’m taking Seth next time.”

“Please do,” Doren said excitedly. “I want Verl covering me.”

“This game is rigged!” Newel protested.

Verl brushed away some of the snow from the back of Seth’s neck and gave him a hand up. The good-natured satyr had woolly white legs with brown spots, stubby horns, and a more childish face than Newel or Doren. He wore a thick brown turtleneck, while the other satyrs played bare-chested.

“Thanks,” Seth said.

“I can’t believe you held on to that one,” Verl said. He had dropped several similar passes.

“Me neither,” Seth admitted. “Hugo throws hard.”

“I guess losers walk,” Verl sighed, trotting away to get ready for the next kickoff.

“Seth!” Grandma shouted from the porch. “We have a car pulling into the driveway.”

“Kendra!” he exclaimed, dropping the football. “I have to go, guys.”

Verl came hustling back, smoothing his hands down the front of his half-soaked turtleneck. “How do I look?” he asked anxiously.

“Like a prince,” Seth said. “Remember, no guts, no glory.” He had informed Verl that Kendra would be arriving today, and had encouraged his hopes of winning her affection. Ever since learning that his sister had been recovered, Seth had felt much more like himself.

“I don’t know,” Verl whimpered, eyeing the woods. “Newel and Doren warned that Kendra is way too young. They said Stan would skin me alive if he knew about my ardent admiration.”

“Just be a gentleman,” Seth said. “This is the moment you’ve been waiting for.”

“I’d rather do this on my terms,” Verl hedged, backing away. “Perhaps in a hot-air balloon. With a picnic lunch. And a top hat.”

“Suit yourself,” Seth said, jogging toward the porch. He had convinced Grandpa to grant the satyrs permission to enter the yard in order to play snow football with him. He had needed something to occupy his mind while waiting for his sister to arrive. The snowstorm had slowed her arrival by more than an hour.

“You look like you’ve been making snow angels,” Grandma said.

When he reached the covered porch, Seth flapped his arms and stamped his boots, shedding clumps of snow. “Verl was guarding me, so I got the ball a lot,” Seth said. “Verl isn’t much of a tackler, but Newel hits hard. He made me fumble twice.”

“You shouldn’t roughhouse with satyrs,” Grandma chided.

“The snow breaks the falls, and the jacket cushions everything,” Seth assured her. “Doren and I were up 49–35.”

Grandma helped him brush himself off. As Seth entered the house, he removed his boots and jacket. He heard the front door open and raced to the entry hall.

Kendra and Warren were coming through the door. A red seam slanted across Kendra’s cheek—evidence that she had dozed in the car. Eyes teary, Seth ran to her and gave her a big hug.

“Whoa,” Kendra said, hugging him in return, taken aback by the enthusiastic affection.

“I’m so glad you’re all right,” Seth said, blinking away the embarrassing tears. “We buried you.”

“I heard. Feels weird to know I have my own tombstone.”

“I’d keep it in my room if it was mine,” Seth said. “Maybe make it my headboard. Can you picture it? ‘Here lies Seth Sorenson.’”

“I hear you guys have a stingbulb copy of Maddox,” Kendra said, changing the subject.

“Yeah, he quit talking once we found him out. Vanessa says if we let him out of the Quiet Box, he’ll die pretty quickly. His kind don’t last long.”

“How weird is that? Vanessa out of the Quiet Box!”

“She helped us find you,” Seth said. “She used her powers to get info that somebody would help you escape last night. That was why everybody was patrolling the streets all night.”

“Wait a minute,” Kendra said. “Vanessa gave them the tip I’d be escaping? Who told her?”

“She won’t say much. She would only reveal that the person who supplied the information was quietly on our side and had to remain unknown. All we know for sure is that Vanessa traveled into a sleeper somewhere and got the info. Must have been somebody who knew you’d be getting that knapsack.”

“Trask found me. I didn’t know him, so I was freaked. Warren said they weren’t sure exactly where I was being held.”

“Vanessa claimed not to know the precise location,” Seth explained. “She knew Torina was in Monmouth, and she had a tip that a traitor was going to help you escape. She wouldn’t share who supplied the tip. Can I check out your knapsack?”

“How much do you know about the knapsack?”

“Quite a bit. Your escape was all we could talk about this morning!”

Kendra took the knapsack off her shoulder.

“You fit in there with an old guy?” Seth asked.

“Cody is actually thirty-two. But he looks at least seventy. Torina drained away his youth. She’s a lectoblix. I think he wants some revenge. He stayed behind with Trask.” She opened the main flap of the knapsack and Seth peeked inside.

“No way! How do you always end up with the coolest stuff? This would be the ultimate emergency kit!”

“I’m surprised that anyone would part with such a valuable object,” Coulter said, coming up behind them. “The art of creating extra-dimensional storage has been lost. The knapsack is a rare and valuable item. Somebody went well out of their way to free you.”

“Hi, Coulter,” Kendra said.

He hugged her. “We’ll have to examine all the contents, just in case your unknown benefactor had a secret motive of smuggling unwanted guests into Fablehaven. You don’t know who gave it to you, correct?”

“No idea.”

Grandma, Grandpa, Dale, and Tanu had held back while Kendra spoke with Seth, but now they swarmed in, welcoming her and expressing their

relief at her safe return. Seth backed away, waiting for the flood of good wishes to abate.

Grandma ushered Kendra to the kitchen, offering her a variety of food choices. All Kendra wanted was hot chocolate, so Dale placed a pan of milk on the stove.

“What are we going to do with Vanessa?” Kendra asked, now seated at the table.

“Don’t get me started,” Grandma griped. “I’m sure she had reasons of her own for helping us. That woman cannot be trusted. She has lied to us so sincerely and betrayed us so deeply that I can’t believe Stan is permitting her any degree of freedom. She should go right back into the Quiet Box.”

“She protected us from the impostor to her extreme disadvantage,” Grandpa reminded his wife. “And she helped us recover Kendra. If we’re careful, we may be able to use her.”

“She’s already concealing information from us,” Grandma said. “Who knows who she spoke with while in that trance of hers, or what she may have revealed? Go ahead, Stan, keep using her. Boys love to play with fire. Just don’t come crying when you get burned. We’ll see who ends up using who.”

“Vanessa has good reason for hating the Sphinx,” Warren observed.

“How convenient for her,” Grandma replied.

“I have some important information,” Kendra announced, staring at her hands. “Stuff I didn’t want to say in front of Trask or Dougan or Elise. Stuff I didn’t want to discuss over the phone.”

“You were holding out on me?” Warren said. “That was a long, boring drive!”

“I thought I should wait until we were all together at Fablehaven,” Kendra apologized. “I met with the Sphinx. He has the artifact from Brazil. It’s called the Oculus.”

Grandpa winced. “I was afraid the presence of the Maddox stingbulb meant the Society had already captured the artifact.”

“Are they able to use it?” Coulter asked tentatively.

“I don’t think so,” Kendra said. “They made me try.”

Grandpa banged a fist down on the counter, his face reddening. “The Oculus is the most dangerous of all the artifacts,” he growled. “What do

you mean, they made you try it?”

“They forced me to put my hand on it,” Kendra said. “At first I could see in all directions, like I had extra eyes. Then it was like I had eyes all over the room, showing me dozens of perspectives at once. Then I had eyes all over the house, then the town, then the world.”

“What did you see?” Seth asked eagerly.

“Everything and nothing,” Kendra said, her voice haunted. “It was too much. I couldn’t really focus on anything. I forgot where I was, who I was.”

“How did the vision end?” Grandma asked.

“I couldn’t think clearly enough to take my hand off the crystal,” Kendra explained. “I saw into the place where the Fairy Queen lives. I managed to focus on her. She commanded me to take my hand off the Oculus. With her help, I escaped.”

“You could have lost your mind,” Grandpa seethed.

“I don’t think any of them have mastered it yet,” Kendra said. “If they do, we’ll have no secrets. The Sphinx seems determined.”

“Does this mean we need to enter the chamber beyond the Hall of Dread?” Tanu asked.

“Absolutely,” Grandpa said. “The Society is gaining too great an advantage. We must work under the assumption that they will soon be empowered to see anywhere. We need to learn all we can to even the odds.”

“Can’t we use the Chronometer somehow?” Seth asked. “Wouldn’t time travel come in handy?”

“I’ve been studying the device,” Coulter reported. “I’ve made a little headway, but the Chronometer is both complex and dangerous.”

“There is little available knowledge on the subject,” Grandma added. “We don’t have an instruction manual.”

“They have an artifact that heals any wound, and another that could let them see anywhere,” Seth said. “They’ll use the Oculus to find the others. We know about the Chronometer. What do the other two artifacts do?”

“One grants power over space,” Coulter said. “The other offers immortality.”

“If they collect all five, they can open the demon prison,” Kendra said.

“Zzyzx,” Seth breathed.

“Which would mean the end of the world as we know it,” Grandpa said. “The Society of the Evening Star would fulfill their self-proclaimed mission and usher in the night.”

Grandma poured warm milk into a mug, added chocolate powder, and stirred. She placed the mug in front of Kendra.

“Thanks,” Kendra said. “Warren mentioned that you guys brought the Journal of Secrets.”

“It’s in the attic,” Seth said. “On our side.”

“It has the passwords for opening the secret room,” Kendra said. “I’ll need an umite wax candle.”

“I stocked up,” Grandpa said. “We have plenty.”

Kendra took a sip from the mug. “We might as well do it now.”

“You should rest first,” Grandma urged.

Kendra shook her head. “I slept in the car. I doubt the bad guys are resting.”

* * *

The dismal dungeon corridor stretched to the left and right, lined with cell doors on both sides. But none were comparable to the door before Seth, composed of blood-red wood bound with black iron. Coulter stood on one side, Grandpa and Kendra on the other. After considerable begging, Seth had been permitted to tag along.

Coulter held a flaming torch. Grandpa carried a key and a mirror. Kendra clung to the Journal of Secrets. Seth had a flashlight.

“Stay away from the doors in the hall,” Grandpa reminded them. “Each door has a peephole. Resist any urge to peek. You do not want to gaze into the eyes of a phantom. Do not touch any of the doors. Violate this rule and you will be removed from the Hall of Dread immediately, never to return.” He was looking at Seth. So were Coulter and Kendra.

“What?” Seth said.

“You often ask for chances to prove yourself,” Grandpa said. “Don’t blow it.”

“You’ll barely know I’m here,” Seth promised.

“Many of these creatures can radiate fear and other disturbing emotions,” Coulter warned. “The special cells that hold them help dampen the effects. Speak up if the sensations get overwhelming. Kendra, watch out for feelings of depression, desperation, or terror. Seth, I’ll be interested to see how well your immunity to magical fear holds up in here.”

Grandpa inserted a key into the door. He placed a palm against the red wood and muttered a few unintelligible words as he turned the key. The door swung inward.

Coulter entered the dark hallway first, using his torch to ignite others hanging on the walls. The wavering firelight cast an ominous glow over the stone walls and floor. As Seth followed Grandpa inside, he noticed that the air was palpably colder than elsewhere in the dungeon. His breath plumed in front of his face.

The hall was not long—the torchlight already glimmered against the far wall. There were eight doors on either side of the corridor, equally spaced, each crafted from solid iron and embossed with archaic symbols and pictograms. Every door had a keyhole and a closed peephole.

“You’re right,” Kendra said, her voice hushed. “This place feels wrong.”

“You can *feel* the darkness,” Coulter whispered. “You all right, Seth?”

“Just a little cold.” Aside from the inherent creepiness of the heavy doors bathed in torchlight, and the unsettling guesses of what might be imprisoned behind them, he sensed no sinister emotions.

Grandpa led the way toward the end of the hall. Coulter hung back at the rear. As Seth passed the second set of doors, he began to hear faint, spidery whispering. He glanced back at Coulter. “Do you hear that?”

“The silence can play tricks on your ears,” Coulter replied.

“No. Don’t you hear voices whispering gibberish?”

Coulter paused. “All I hear is the torch crackling. It’s quiet as a tomb. Are you squirreling around with me? We’re falling behind.”

They picked up their pace, catching up to Kendra. Seth concentrated on the babbling whispers. As he focused, he began to catch words.

“Alone . . . thirsty . . . pain . . . hunger . . . agony . . . mercy . . . thirst.”

The words were tangled, many voices overlapping. When his concentration lapsed, the sounds reverted to gibbering nonsense.

Seth glanced back at Coulter, who motioned for him to keep walking. Why couldn't the older man hear the voices? The eerie babbling wasn't just in his head. He could hear the jumbled whispers as distinctly as his footsteps.

Soon they reached the final set of doors at the end of the hall. The wall ahead of them was a blank expanse of stone blocks interrupted by three brackets holding torches. Seth saw no evidence of a door.

Kendra opened the Journal of Secrets, and Grandpa lit an umite candle. Coulter watched over her shoulder.

"It says to light the torches on the left and right. Then place one hand on the center sconce, and the other on the block with the silver vein in it."

Coulter brought his torch close to the wall. He and Grandpa started to examine blocks.

"Do you hear the voices whispering?" Seth asked Kendra.

She punched him on the arm. "Cut it out. You might not feel the fear, but I'm kind of freaked right now."

"I'm not kidding," Seth said.

"Save it."

Seth stepped away from her. The whispering sounded clearer than ever. He began picking out forlorn phrases. "I hear you," Seth whispered in his quietest voice, barely more than mouthing the words.

The overlapping whispers ceased. A chill ran down his spine, making the hairs on the back of his neck bristle. The tingle was not a reaction to magical fear. It came because of a certainty that the voices had clammed up in response to his words. During the menacing silence, Seth felt sure that all of the beings in the Hall of Dread were aware of him.

"Help me, Great One, please, please, help me," a single voice hissed, breaking the silence. The silky whisper was coming from the cell to his left.

Seth clenched his jaw. Grandpa and Coulter were debating about which of three blocks had the most obvious silver streaks. Kendra had her head bowed and her eyes closed. No one else seemed to have noticed the slithery voice.

"Who are you?" Seth whispered.

"Free me and I will serve you for all time," the voice vowed.

Seth stared at the door. He wanted to see who was addressing him. But Grandpa would skin him alive if he peeked.

“Yes, yes, look upon me, grant me mercy, pardon me, Wise One, and I will serve you well.”

Grandpa had one hand on a block and the other on a scone. Kendra stood beside him, telling him what to say.

The ghastly voice became more intense. “Behold me, Mighty One, pity me, speak to me, answer me.”

“Seth!” Coulter said, approaching with the torch and snapping his fingers. “What’s your interest in that door?”

Seth wrenched his gaze away from the iron door. “I hear a voice.”

Grandpa turned away from the wall. “A voice? The fiend in that cell doesn’t speak.”

“It speaks to me,” Seth said. “It wants me to free it. It says it will serve me.”

“He said he was hearing whispers as we entered,” Coulter said. “I didn’t take him seriously.”

“You were really hearing voices?” Kendra said.

The voice from the cell continued to implore him. “Help me, Great One, free me.”

“You guys really hear nothing?” Seth checked.

“I’m not sure what this means,” Grandpa said, studying Seth intently, “except that you had better leave this place immediately.”

Seth nodded. “I think you’re right.”

Grandpa blinked. He shot Coulter a worried glance. “Take him upstairs.”

“Right.” Coulter took hold of Seth’s elbow and guided him back toward the blood-red door.

“I will wait,” the voice from the cell promised. “Please.”

Seth pressed his hands over his ears as he exited. He began to hear faint, pleading voices from other cells, so he started humming to himself until he was back in the regular part of the dungeon.

As they walked toward the stairs to the kitchen, Seth uncovered his ears. “What was going on back there? What’s the matter with me?”

Coulter shook his head. "I keep remembering how you were the only one who could see us when we were shades, back when the plague was overcoming Fablehaven."

"Graulas said that was because of removing the nail to defeat the revenant. I thought once the nail was destroyed and the plague reversed, there wouldn't be any more shadow creatures left to see."

Coulter stopped walking. The torch threw strange highlights and shadows across his features. "Whatever explains your condition, if I were in your shoes, I would steer clear of shadowy creatures."

"Makes sense," Seth said, trying to keep his voice steady.

* * *

Standing beside Grandpa, Kendra stared at the door through which Coulter and Seth had departed. She felt deeply worried for her brother, but it was hard to tell how much of that concern was a reaction to the dark emotions stirred by the atmosphere of the hall.

"Have you heard of anything like this?" Kendra finally asked.

Grandpa looked at her, his expression suggesting he had momentarily forgotten she was with him. "No. I'm not sure what it means. I know I don't like it. You didn't hear anything, did you?"

"Not a word," Kendra said. "I *feel* plenty. I feel scared and sad and alone. I have to keep reminding myself the emotions are false."

"We should retrieve the information we need and get out." Grandpa placed one hand on the scone and the other on the stone block he had decided contained the clearest vein of silver. "What do I say?"

Kendra read from the journal. "'Nobody deserves these secrets.'"

Grandpa solemnly repeated the words.

The entire center portion of the wall dissolved in a cloud of dust.

"Look at that," Grandpa murmured.

"'Those who came before me were wiser than I am,'" Kendra read, coughing softly.

Again Grandpa repeated the words.

"That second part disarms the traps," Kendra explained, closing the journal.

Grandpa took a torch from the wall and led the way through the mist of dust. Kendra placed a hand over her nose and lips as she followed, squinting to keep the gritty particles out of her eyes.

After about fifteen feet, the dust cloud ended abruptly. A hall stretched ahead of them. To the left and right stood a final set of iron doors. Kendra tried not to envision what might lurk inside those secret cells.

Grandpa led the way down the hall, eventually descending a flight of two dozen stairs. At the bottom of the stairwell, they passed through an archway into a spacious room. The smooth floor, walls, and ceiling were composed of white marble swirled with gray. A stone fountain dominated the center of the chamber. No water flowed, but the basin was full. Diverse objects lined the walls: full suits of armor, upright sarcophagi, ornate jade sculptures, grotesque masks, laden bookshelves, colorful marionettes, statues from various cultures, archaic maps, painted fans, framed scrolls, antique carousel animals, elaborate urns, bouquets of glass flowers, the skull of a triceratops, and a heavy golden gong.

“Many of these items would be priceless museum pieces,” Grandpa remarked, surveying the room, torch held aloft.

“Did Patton bring all of this here?” Kendra wondered.

“He and others before him,” Grandpa said. “I’m most curious about the books.” He approached the nearest bookshelf. “Lots of German and Latin. No English. Some languages I don’t recognize. Some might be fairy dialects.”

“I don’t see any words I recognize,” Kendra said.

Grandpa turned, eyes scanning the room. “The message from Patton is on the ceiling?”

“I’m supposed to use the mirror to read it.”

Footsteps resounded from outside the room, slapping down the stairs. Coulter trotted into view, bearing a torch and Seth’s flashlight. “Would you look at this,” he murmured, shining the flashlight beam around the room.

“We’re looking for a message on the ceiling,” Kendra informed him. “Probably a fairy language written backwards.”

“Watch for elaborate patterns,” Grandpa instructed.

The three of them separated and roamed the room, eyes on the ceiling. Kendra held the flashlight, the others carried torches. With her eyes upward,

she stumbled against the edge of the fountain, nearly tumbling into the glassy water of the basin. After almost taking a plunge, she proceeded with greater caution.

Patches of unusual markings decorated several portions of the ceiling. Each time one of them found a suspicious cluster of designs, Kendra stood below the markings and viewed them in the mirror from various angles. After several disappointing attempts, Coulter spotted a particularly elaborate pattern of symbols above the gong. When Kendra viewed the symbols in the mirror, she beheld a lengthy message seemingly inscribed in plain English.

“I’ve got something,” Kendra said.

“What does it say?” Grandpa asked.

Kendra read silently at first.

The Oculus is located at the Rio Branco preserve in Brazil. The caretakers have the key to the vault, which is located near a point called Três Cabeças, where three huge boulders overlook the main river. You will have to climb to reach the entrance.

She recited the words to the others.

“We’re a little late on that one,” Coulter complained.

“There’s more,” Kendra said.

“Read on,” Grandpa prompted.

The Translocator can be found at Obsidian Waste in Australia. The caretakers know the location of the vault. Since the vault is virtually impregnable without the key, I took extra measures to make this artifact more difficult to recover. I hid the key to the vault at Wyrmoost, one of the three dragon sanctuaries closed to human interference. I have a false grave there. Below the headstone you will find a clue to the location. Wyrmoost is inaccessible without a key to the main gate, and is protected by the most potent distracter spell I have ever encountered.

The key to the gate at Wyrmoost is the first horn of a unicorn. I know of only one such horn, and I presented it to the centaurs of Fablehaven.

They guard it as their most prized talisman.

“Is that all?” Grandpa asked after Kendra finished relaying the words.

“Yes,” Kendra said.

“Sounds like the best way to keep the Translocator hidden might be to leave it alone,” Coulter grumbled.

“You’re probably right,” Grandpa acknowledged. “Patton created some serious obstacles.”

“What is the Translocator?” Kendra asked.

“The artifact with power over space,” Coulter replied. “Most likely some sort of teleportation device.”

“Read the inscription again,” Grandpa said.

Kendra complied.

Grandpa and Coulter stood in silent contemplation after she finished.

“What does he mean about Wyrmoost being closed to humans?” Kendra asked.

“Four of the dragon sanctuaries are open to human visitors,” Grandpa said. “Few know about them, and fewer would actually take the opportunity to enter one, but those few are generally welcome. The other three sanctuaries are considerably less hospitable.”

“But the three worst ones can’t be totally closed to humans,” Kendra said. “Patton went there.”

“In theory, humans could visit if they managed to get past the gate and secure permission from the caretaker,” Coulter said. “I can’t imagine what unspeakable dangers would await. Dragon sanctuaries make Fablehaven look like a petting zoo.”

“Then I’m with Coulter,” Kendra said. “Even if we recovered the artifact, how could we hope to hide it in a better place?”

“We couldn’t,” Grandpa said. “We now have our information. Let’s go check on your brother.”

Chapter 10



Hotel

Snowflakes flung by shifting gusts silently assailed the attic window. Powdery drifts covered the lower panes. Seth paced the room, bouncing a rubber ball, unable to stop wondering about the ghostly prisoners who spoke only to him. It was tough to decide whether he should be afraid or intrigued.

Seth heard footsteps coming up the stairs. The bedroom door opened and Grandpa entered.

“Did you learn anything about the artifacts?” Seth asked.

“Yes. One message concerned the Oculus. The other discussed an artifact that remains hidden. How are you feeling?”

Seth bounced the ball. “Fine. Weird. I don’t know.”

“Let’s sit down.” Grandpa took a seat on one of the beds. Seth plopped down on the other. “What happened in the dungeon clearly rattled you.”

Seth bounced the ball, tossing it forward with a spin that brought it back to him. “You could say that.”

“Hearing spectral voices strikes me as an experience that would normally excite you.” Grandpa stared at him searchingly.

“It does. I mean, it’s really cool that I could hear them. They offered to serve me, and part of me would love to have a zombie servant. Who wouldn’t? But it felt wrong. Too creepy. Grandpa, what if destroying the revenant made me evil? I don’t fear deadly creatures. I can see invisible shadow people. I hear whispers from your freakiest prisoners.”

“Recognizing dark elements imperceptible to others doesn’t make you evil,” Grandpa said firmly. “Neither does having courage. We all possess different gifts and abilities. How we use those gifts determines who we are.”

“I didn’t feel any fear,” Seth said. “Not the paralyzing kind. The voices were freaky, but I could get used to it. That’s what scares me. The voice kept flattering me, calling me wise and powerful. I don’t want phantoms to admire me! I’m sure it was setting me up for some nasty trick. I don’t know if I can trust myself, Grandpa. I wanted to peek in the cell. If you guys weren’t there, I probably would have!”

“You’ve always been more curious than most,” Grandpa said. “Curiosity doesn’t make you evil. Neither do flattering words from sinister entities. The wraith hoped to use you to get free. Nothing more. The fiend would have said anything to convince you.”

“The worst part is, I really am curious. Sick as it sounds, I’d love to go hear more of what the wraith has to say. Not because I intend to let it out. It’s just interesting. See why I can’t trust myself? I’d go down there because I’m interested, and then that thing would probably find a way to trick me or hypnotize me, and pretty soon Fablehaven would be under attack from evil wraiths.”

“But here you are instead, anticipating the possible dangers,” Grandpa said. “You’re doing what any sane and responsible person should do. Just don’t succumb to your curiosity.”

“Why exactly can I hear them?”

“I honestly don’t know. But I do know that there is a difference between hearing and listening. You can’t always help what you hear. But you can control what holds your interest, what you choose to dwell on.”

Seth tossed the ball up and caught it. “I guess that makes sense. The whole thing still creeps me out.”

“Now that we’re aware of this ability, we’ll keep you away from similar circumstances. In fact, that is part of the reason I came to speak to you. Do you know what day tomorrow is?”

“I was wondering when you’d bring this up. Tomorrow is the winter solstice.”

Grandpa held up a hand. Seth tossed him the rubber ball, and he started bouncing it. “I didn’t want to mention it too early and get everybody flustered. Things have been hectic enough without fretting about tonight being a festival night.”

“Don’t we have to make preparations? Carve pumpkins and all that?”

“The jack-o’-lanterns are an extra precaution, and not a very convenient one in this weather. I was thinking more along the lines of having your grandmother take you and Kendra to a hotel for the night.”

Seth motioned for the ball, and Grandpa bounced it to him. “Isn’t it dangerous to leave the preserve? The Society could come after us.”

“We’ve weighed the pros and cons. I don’t relish the idea of putting you beyond the protections offered by Fablehaven, but festival nights seem to be getting increasingly violent. If the Society intends to hit us where we live, it will probably happen tonight, when sinister creatures are free to cross boundaries and enter the yard. The voices you heard in the Hall of Dread have made the decision easy. Too many apparitions and shades roam the preserve on festival nights. I won’t have you here if their voices can reach you. We’ll send along Warren and Tanu to make sure you stay safe. You’ll pay cash. It’ll be just one night.”

Seth nodded. He bounced the ball off the wall, missed the catch, and watched it roll away across the floor. “I can live with that. I’m not up for a whole night with monsters whispering crazy stuff to me. Speaking of Tanu and Warren, where are those guys?”

“While we were pursuing the messages from Patton, they were interrogating Vanessa with your grandmother.”

“About what?”

“We’re trying to decide what to do with her. She has shared some information about possible traitors within the Knights. Nobody you know. She still claims to have some enormous secret that she won’t share unless we release her.”

“We can’t let her go,” Seth said. “Grandma is right that she could be playing us.”

“True. At the same time, if she truly has abandoned the Sphinx, Vanessa could be a valuable ally. She has already volunteered a great deal of information. I can hardly blame her for keeping some leverage available while we hold her prisoner.”

“Do we ever go on the offensive?” Seth asked. “We should hunt down the Sphinx and take the artifacts back.”

“We’re trying. Trask has kept the house where Kendra was held under constant surveillance. Kendra’s friend Cody supplied all the details he

needed. We believe that the Sphinx remains inside. A strike force will mount a raid tonight. I wish I felt more optimistic. The Sphinx is slippery.”

Seth got up from the bed. “When do we leave for the hotel?”

“Vanessa keeps asking to talk to Kendra, and your sister has shown interest. Your grandmother will oversee the conversation. After they chat, we’ll get you guys ready.”

* * *

Kendra knew that her old friend waited behind the cell door. She had wanted to speak with Vanessa ever since the woman had been locked in the Quiet Box months ago. Most of the others had spoken with Vanessa already and had relayed information from those conversations. But Kendra hadn’t been around when they took place. Her last direct communication from Vanessa had been a note scrawled on the floor of a cell.

“You don’t have to do this,” Grandma said.

“I want to speak with her,” Kendra affirmed. “I’m just a little nervous.”

“You’re sure?”

She wasn’t. But she nodded anyhow.

Holding her crossbow ready, Grandma inserted a key and opened the cell door. Vanessa was reclining on her cot, dressed in a stylish outfit. A battery-powered lantern rested on a table cluttered by novels. A mirror hung above a dresser topped with various cosmetic supplies. An obvious effort had been made to provide some comfort.

“Hello, Kendra,” Vanessa said, rising.

“Hey,” Kendra replied.

“I’m sorry.”

“You should be.”

Vanessa looked grave. “I owe you a great deal.”

“You nearly killed us.”

“Kendra, you deserve a colossal apology. You healed me. I was burned beyond repair, minutes from death. After the betrayal I committed, nobody could have blamed you for letting me perish. Including me. For years I faithfully worked for the Sphinx. How was I repaid? The villain stabbed me in the back the instant I became inconvenient. In contrast, I deceived you, betrayed you, and put your loved ones in danger. Yet you showed me mercy. I

want you to know that my loyalty is not completely blind, nor is my reason utterly bankrupt. I'll never betray you again."

Kendra shifted uncomfortably. "Thanks, Vanessa. I'm sure you can see why your apology might be hard to believe. But I appreciate it, and I hope it's true."

"I'd be a fool to blame you for doubting me. I'll patiently prove my sincerity."

Grandma snorted bitterly. "Or patiently bide your time until the opportunity for another truly crippling betrayal arrives."

"Which is why I can't begrudge your decision to keep me in this cell for the moment," Vanessa conceded. "I could be more effective roaming free, but I can see that it would place too great a strain on your trust. Rightfully so."

"You wanted to see me to apologize?" Kendra asked. The conversation was harder than she had expected. She simultaneously liked and hated Vanessa too much. She wanted to leave.

"Chiefly," Vanessa said. "I also want to share some information with you."

"They said you're withholding some secrets."

"My biggest secret must not yet be divulged," Vanessa said. "Good people on your side of this conflict would be endangered if this truth became too public. For the moment, my keeping it will benefit your cause. The day may come when that changes. Conveniently, this final secret also provides me with a little leverage to perhaps get out of incarceration at some point. I'm on your side now, but I have no desire to end my days in a cage."

"They said you helped me escape," Kendra said.

"I seized control of a sleeper and learned that the Sphinx had you in his custody. I also learned about a plan to free you. The Knights have spies as well. I discovered where you were being held and alerted Stan. I didn't personally facilitate your release. Who accompanied the Sphinx?"

Kendra told Vanessa about Torina and Mr. Lich, then described the other people she had seen with the Sphinx as best she could.

Vanessa nodded. "I'm not surprised they tried to use psychics to test the Oculus. Let me guess. They also tried to read your mind."

"Yes."

"And they failed?"

"They seemed really puzzled."

“I bit you, Kendra, but I could never take control of you. Your mind is shielded. None of those enemies are of serious interest except for the Sphinx and Mr. Lich. Despite her delusions, Torina is really just a minor player. I’m curious about the person in the mask. Could it have been the prisoner from the Quiet Box?”

“It could have been anyone,” Grandma said.

“I have a warning for both of you,” Vanessa said. “The Sphinx is a supremely patient man. He would not have dropped all pretenses like this unless he saw a clear path to his destination. Count on the fact that he has a plan to secure all of the artifacts. Beware. He is very good at anticipating contingencies. As you move to stop him, you may find yourselves playing into his hands.”

“We’re aware of the dangers,” Grandma assured her.

“Let me fill you in on some history. For centuries, the leader of the Society of the Evening Star has been a brilliant mastermind named Rhodes. Over the years, rumors abounded as to his actual identity. A cunning blix lord. A wizard. A demon. At times, the Society thought he had died or lost interest, but he always resurfaced. He was patient. And immensely secretive. None of us ever stood in his presence.

“Over the past decade, Rhodes became more active than ever. As did our great archenemy, the Sphinx. With my talent, I am always uncovering information. Not long before I was assigned to recover the artifact from Fablehaven, bits and pieces began to add up, and I found myself among a small group of Society members who suspected that the Sphinx and Rhodes might be the same person.

“Having now confirmed that the Sphinx and Rhodes are indeed one and the same, and that he was working for the benefit of the Society, the members of the Society will be enthused as never before. Many members have grown dormant over the years, but this news will swell the ranks of the active. Clearly, after centuries of waiting, the end is near.”

“I’ve never heard of Rhodes,” Grandma said.

“Like I said, he was very secretive,” Vanessa replied. “Much more so than even the Sphinx. We could only utter his name under certain conditions.”

“Torina called him the Sphinx,” Kendra mentioned.

“I’m not surprised,” Vanessa said. “We used to call Rhodes the Lodestar. But he will now be using his surprise identity as the Sphinx to build morale.

Ruth, Kendra, he has spent centuries researching how the artifacts work so that when he found them he would be ready. Count on the fact that he will move swiftly to recover the other artifacts, and shortly thereafter he will unlock the demon prison.”

“Thank you for the warning,” Grandma said. “Is that all?”

“I just want to make sure you understand that I intend to use my abilities to spy on the Society,” Vanessa said. “I’ll share information as I learn it. I won’t take control of any of you while you sleep. If I do, you would be welcome to kill me.”

“What if you share secrets with our enemies while you’re off inhabiting sleepers?” Grandma challenged.

“First, don’t give me secrets to share. Second, you desperately need information—the threat posed by the Sphinx is both real and immediate. Third, to a minor extent, yes, you need to trust me a little. I won’t disappoint you.”

“You’ve already sold Stan,” Grandma sighed. “You know my suspicions about your pretenses at reform. I would love to be proven wrong.” Grandma opened the cell door.

“Wait,” Kendra said. “Do you know who placed the knapsack in my room?”

Vanessa regarded her thoughtfully. “I have some suspicions. But they are part of the secret I must keep. Take heart knowing that we have secret allies.”

“Come on, Kendra,” Grandma huffed. “We’ll find few answers here. Don’t waste your breath with more questions.”

“Good-bye for now,” Vanessa said.

“See you,” Kendra replied.

* * *

Snow no longer descended from the murky sky, and snowplows had mostly cleared the roads, but Grandma pulled into the parking lot of the Courtesy Inn cautiously. Even at moderate speeds, the SUV had slid several times on the icy streets.

The Courtesy Inn was a large wooden lodge with a mostly vacant, halfway cleared parking lot. Grandma piloted the SUV into a stall. Tanu went inside to check in and scope out the place while the others waited in the car.

Seth wished Grandma would turn down the heater, but the vents kept gushing warm air.

“I’m going to die of heatstroke in the snow,” he mumbled. It was his third complaint about the temperature. Grandma ignored him. He briefly considered taking off his shirt in protest.

“It is a little warm,” Warren remarked.

“This vehicle is not a democracy,” Grandma replied.

A few minutes later, Tanu returned with two keycards. They collected their bags and entered the inn. Flames danced in the lobby fireplace, and the air carried the odor of lemon-scented cleansers. They rode up an elevator to the second floor and marched down a carpeted hall to a pair of neighboring doors.

Warren entered first, checking the room thoroughly while the others lingered in the hallway. After what seemed like a long wait, Warren exited and unlocked the second room. Grandma, Tanu, Kendra, and Seth went into the first room.

“I’ll take the rollaway,” Tanu offered.

“I’m smaller,” Kendra said.

“I’m security,” Tanu countered. “Don’t argue.”

The plan was for Grandma, Kendra, and Tanu to sleep in here while Seth and Warren took the adjoining room. Seth unwrapped the tiny bar of soap beside the sink. There came a brisk knock on the door that internally connected the two rooms.

Seth hustled over. “What’s the password?”

“Passwords are for sissies,” Warren’s muffled voice responded.

“Works for me,” Seth said, unlocking the door and opening it.

“The rooms look clean,” Warren pronounced. “Hopefully we’ll have a long, dull night.”

Seth grabbed his suitcase and took it into his room. It was a mirror image of the first room, minus the rollaway. As he heaved his suitcase onto the bed, he caught a flicker of motion in the far corner by the window.

He turned, staring at the empty corner. Was the window open? Had the curtain blown sideways? Everyone else was in the other room.

Staring hard, he abruptly caught another flicker, a hand flashing briefly into view along with part of a leg. The body parts appeared out of nowhere

and disappeared just as quickly. Seth cried out and stumbled away from the corner.

Warren raced into the room. He stopped short, looking around. “Was that a drill?”

Seth narrowed his eyes, staring hard. “I think there’s something in the corner.”

“That corner?” Warren asked.

A full body pulsed temporarily into view—a tall, thin goblin with a knobby head, a shriveled nose, and jutting tusks. His skin was all shiny pinks and oranges, like burn scars. “See!” Seth yelled, jumping back again.

“I didn’t see anything,” Warren said, producing a pair of knives, one longer than the other.

Tanu stood in the doorway, a blowgun in his hand. “I don’t see anything either.”

“Either there is a goblin standing in that corner, or I’m going nuts,” Seth insisted, voice quavering. The goblin was not currently visible.

Holding both knives ready, Warren advanced toward the corner. The goblin flashed back into view, irregular nostrils flaring, glaring at Seth. “I see him again,” Seth announced, pointing.

Warren hurled the smaller knife at the corner. Twisting, the goblin sprang sideways, barely dodging the blade. The knife lodged in the wall. Wrenching the knife free, the goblin charged Warren.

“The knife vanished!” Warren said.

“Here he comes!” Seth warned. The goblin no longer pulsed in and out of view. Seth saw the creature clearly.

Tanu came up beside Seth. “Where is he?”

Warren backed away, blindly swinging his long knife. The goblin avoided the desperate swipes and slashed Warren across the chest. Warren lunged forward, but the goblin sidestepped the knife thrust and used Warren’s momentum to hurl him to the floor.

“There,” Seth said, pointing.

Tanu exhaled powerfully.

The goblin paused, staring at the small feathered dart protruding from his wrist. He staggered, swayed, steadied himself, then toppled to the floor, landing hard.

“Is that Vanessa’s blowgun?” Seth asked.

“Yeah,” Tanu said. “I sweetened the sleep potion on the darts to a nearly lethal dosage.”

Seth gestured at the fallen goblin. “Can you see him now?”

“Nope.”

Warren staggered to his feet, probing the bloody stripe across his chest.

“Deep?” Tanu asked.

“I have leather armor under my shirt,” Warren said. “The freak still gave me a good scratch. I keep my knives sharp.” Warren crouched, recovering his throwing knife from where it had fallen.

Vicious snarling erupted out in the hallway. Tanu tossed Seth a potion. He pulled out two more potions and stepped into the adjoining room. “Go gaseous!” he instructed Grandma and Kendra.

Seth had used the gaseous potion over the summer. It would transform him into a vaporous version of himself. As a gas, nothing that he knew of would be able to harm him, but he would also lose the ability to assist Warren and Tanu.

Instead of drinking the potion, he knelt beside the goblin. What was making it invisible to the others? Seth guessed it had to be some sort of magical item, like Coulter’s glove. The goblin wore simple clothes: a black silk shirt, loose black shorts, and sandals. Tucked in his belt were a pair of long, sharp knitting needles and a strangle cord. A conspicuous silver bracelet adorned one sinewy forearm.

Seth tore the bracelet free and put it on. The goblin remained visible, as did his own body. In the past, when Seth had worn Coulter’s magic glove and held still, his body had become transparent, even to himself. But since his eyes somehow saw through the goblin’s trick, he had no way to gauge whether he had cloaked himself from view or merely stolen a gaudy piece of jewelry.

Warren and Tanu had charged into the hallway, and Seth heard more snarling. He raced out of the room and gawked at the scene down the hall where Tanu and Warren were confronting a gray wolf nearly the size of a horse. The overgrown canine already had three feathered darts visible in its fur, along with Warren’s throwing knife. The ferocious wolf snapped repeatedly at Warren, who was barely holding the animal at bay by gradually retreating and slashing its muzzle with his long knife. Tanu fired another dart from the blowgun, then dropped the weapon to scramble through his potion bag.

Grandma emerged from her room, crossbow in one hand, the potion Tanu had given her in the other. Seth grinned. Apparently he wasn't the only person unwilling to go gaseous and miss the action. Grandma stared right through Seth at the combat with the wolf, then raised her weapon, taking careful aim. Seth lurched aside. Behind Grandma, the window at the end of the hall exploded in a shower of jagged shards as a muscular, winged creature crashed through it.



Grandma whirled as the horned gargoyle, body scratched and bleeding, scrambled to its feet and raced down the hall, trident in hand, wings folded. She held the crossbow level and let a quarrel fly. When the projectile disappeared into the creature's head, the gargoyle lurched backward and collapsed to the floor as if he had bashed his face against an invisible beam.

Seth turned around to see the wolf backing away from Warren, legs wobbly, muzzle torn and wet. Tanu held a potion near his lips. Warren brandished the long knife. The wolf's legs buckled and it slumped heavily to the floor, a motionless heap of fur and blood.

The bracelet on Seth's arm felt steadily warmer. He removed it just as it was becoming unbearable to touch. Tossing the bracelet aside, he saw it disappear in a flash before hitting the floor.

"Seth?" Grandma exclaimed. "Where did you come from?"

"The goblin had some kind of invisibility bracelet. It got hot and disintegrated."

"It may have run out of energy," Grandma said. "Or it may have been protected by a self-destruct spell in case it was stolen."

Warren and Tanu conferred briefly. Warren trotted down the hall toward the lobby, while Tanu came toward Grandma and Seth. "Thanks for dropping the gargoyle, Ruth," Tanu said. "It must have tracked us from the air when we left Fablehaven. We aren't safe here. We should collect our things. Warren is going to make sure the coast is clear."

A wispy, ethereal version of Kendra drifted out of her room. She gazed at the fallen gargoyle and wolf.

"Don't worry, Kendra," Seth said, swiping a hand through her insubstantial body. "I'll grab your suitcase."

Chapter 11



Gate-Crasher

Kendra awoke tucked between crisp sheets. She had a kink in her neck from sleeping on too many pillows. With the shades drawn, the hotel room was mostly dark, but she could hear the shower running. She sat up to check the clock. The display read 8:23 a.m.

Stretching, she groaned. They had driven for more than an hour the previous night before choosing a new hotel. Tanu and Warren had dragged the bulky wolf and gargoyle outside and left them in the garbage bin.

The wiry goblin was currently bound and gagged in the other room with Seth and Warren. Tanu had left them with extra sleeping potion to administer to the grotesque prisoner. Their rooms did not adjoin this time, although they shared the same hallway.

Kendra heard the shower stop running. She fought free from her tight sheets and slid out of bed.

“Awake?” Grandma inquired from the neighboring bed.

“Yeah. You too?”

“I’ve been up for some time, resting in the dark. Something about hotel rooms has always made me lazy.”

Kendra pulled the shades open, flooding the room with cloud-dimmed light. “Any word from Grandpa?”

“He phoned earlier. The raid on the Sphinx failed. The house was vacant except for a series of traps and a few old men.”

“They found Haden?”

“Yes,” Grandma said. “Don’t fret about your friends. The Knights have a substantial fund set aside for victims of circumstances like these.”

“So the Sphinx and Torina and all of them got away?”

“Vanished without a trace.”

“Did they take the stingbulb?” Kendra wondered.

“No phony Kendras were found, so probably.”

“How was Midwinter Eve?”

“According to your grandfather, boisterous but safe. Considering what happened, we may have been wiser to sit tight at Fablehaven and endure the commotion. Of course, most decisions are simpler in hindsight.”

Tanu came out from the bathroom in a T-shirt and shorts, his hair damp. “We lived to see a new day,” he said with a broad smile.

“Good work,” Grandma said. “Stan thinks we may as well head home.”

“Warren and I monitored the hotel and the surrounding grounds all night,” Tanu said. “Everything stayed quiet. Seth’s ability to see the goblin assassin really foiled their plot. The wolf and the gargoyle were only there as backup.”

“You think we’re under the radar?” Grandma asked.

“Looks like the Society has lost track of us. Still, we’ll all be safer back inside the walls of Fablehaven.”

Grandma got out of bed. “What about the goblin?”

“We loaded him into the back of the SUV, trussed up and heavily drugged. We’ll press him for information once he’s secure in the dungeon.”

“Let’s start collecting our things.”

Kendra went to the bathroom and washed up. By the time she was ready, the bags were packed and waiting. She strolled with Seth to the elevator, rolling her suitcase behind her. Seth looked pensive.

She leaned into him, bumping his shoulder with hers. “So now you’re seeing invisible assassins?”

“I’m relieved it was actually there. I was starting to wonder if maybe I was the only one hearing zombie voices because I was crazy.”

“I wouldn’t write off the crazy theory without further investigation.”

“At least I wasn’t kidnapped by a duplicate of myself.”

“It does sound a little schizoid.” They reached the elevator. Kendra pressed the down arrow button.

“Why do you get to push the button?” Seth complained.

“What are you, like three years old?”

“I’m the official button pusher. I like when they light up.”

“You’re a goofball.”

The elevator doors opened. The car was empty. Warren hustled to catch up.

“Is it really empty?” Kendra asked, moving from side to side to examine the vacant space from various angles.

“Very funny,” Seth replied. “I think so.”

Warren joined them in the elevator. Seth pushed the L button. Then he pushed 5, 4, 3, and 2. “Race you down,” he said, dashing out of the elevator before the doors closed, leaving his suitcase behind.

“I think he’s going to beat us,” Warren said, leaning against the wall.

“If he doesn’t get kidnapped on his way down the stairs.”

“Tanu is already down there. Ruth will be along in a minute.”

The doors opened to a similar view on every floor. On the second floor somebody actually got on. When the doors opened in the lobby, Seth stood there waiting, trying to look bored.

“I got to push the most buttons,” he gloated while reclaiming his suitcase.

“Plus you earned fifty idiot points,” Kendra said. “A new record.”

“What you call idiot points, I call awesome dollars.”

Tanu had brought the SUV to the front doors of the hotel. Sparse snowflakes fluttered down from light gray clouds. Warren loaded their bags, and Kendra climbed inside. Grandma followed shortly, and insisted on driving since Tanu hadn’t slept.

The ride back to Fablehaven was boring. The roads were clear, but Grandma drove cautiously. To make matters worse, they had to listen to Seth complain about the heater for the second half of the drive. Eventually Grandma turned it down.

Finally they left the road and started along the driveway. Kendra had her head down when Grandma exclaimed, “What is that?”

Kendra raised her head and saw a car smashed against the Fablehaven front gate, the hood badly crumpled, fumes flowing from the exhaust pipe into the winter air. She didn’t recognize the vehicle.

“Stop the car,” Warren barked. “Get Stan on the line.”

Grandma slammed on the brakes and the SUV skidded to a halt. They could hear the horn of the crushed car blaring endlessly.

“This has to be a trap,” Tanu muttered, opening his potion pouch.

The cell phone rang before Grandma could dial. She answered. “We’re here, we see it . . . how long ago? . . . okay, we’ll wait.”

Grandma hung up and shifted the SUV into reverse. “The car just slammed into the gate a moment ago. Stan wants us to get back on the road until he figures out what is going on.”

The passenger door of the damaged car opened and a girl tumbled out. She crawled awkwardly to the gate, using the wrought-iron bars to pull herself up. The girl looked exactly like Kendra.

“Oh my gosh!” Kendra exclaimed. “Stop, Grandma. It’s my stingbulb!”

Grandma hit the brakes, making their heads tip back. “Your stingbulb?”

“The one I made when I escaped. I told her to try to get information, escape, and come to Fablehaven. I gave her the address.”

“Still probably a trap,” Tanu warned.

“Let me check it out,” Warren offered, opening the door and leaping from the SUV. Knife in hand, he dashed toward the smashed car. Kendra scanned the leafless, snowy woods at either side of the cleared driveway, but noticed no evidence of other people or creatures.

“The car is totaled, but the gate isn’t even dented,” Seth observed. “How’d that happen?”

“The gate is much stronger than it looks,” Grandma said. “Don’t forget where we are. Appearances can be deceiving at Fablehaven.”

Warren reached the crippled car. Knife ready, he stealthily peeked in the windows. The girl at the gate turned to face him, her face a mask of terror. Blood oozed from a wound on her forehead. She raised her hands protectively and sank to the ground.

Warren lowered his arm with the knife and held up an empty palm. As he spoke to the girl, her expression softened. Soon she was craning her neck to see the SUV, hope in her eyes.

Kendra scooted out the door. Grandma and Tanu followed, calling her back, but she didn't heed them. When she locked eyes with her duplicate, the beleaguered girl's face instantly brightened. Kendra ran to her, crunching over the cold gravel.

"You came," Kendra said when she got close. She had to speak loudly to be heard over the damaged car's incessant horn.

"You told me to," the duplicate answered, slumping back against the gate. "My left leg is broken. Same with my left wrist."

"Why did you bash the gate?" Kendra asked. Grandma, Tanu, and Seth caught up, listening.

"I was afraid. I have urgent information. I didn't know how close behind they were. The gate looked flimsy."

"You really messed yourself up," Kendra said.

"Most of these injuries are from before. The gash on my head reopened when I crashed."

Kendra scrutinized her duplicate. "You came here alone, of your own free will, right? This isn't a trap?"

"I can't be certain if they're chasing me or not. I don't think so. I've traveled a long distance."

Grandpa, Dale, and Coulter were approaching from the far side of the gate. Dale and Coulter rode on ATVs. Hugo carried Grandpa.

"Let me share my news," the duplicate said. "I'll feel better once it isn't just in my head anymore. The Sphinx used the Oculus. He had trouble, but he survived."

"What does he know?" Grandma asked.

The duplicate blinked at Grandma. "It's so strange to see you outside of my memories. Um, he was trying to find the location of the key to an artifact called the Translocator. He had previously purchased information from a member of the family that manages the Obsidian Waste preserve in Australia. Apparently Patton took the key from the preserve and hid it."

"Did the Sphinx find out where?" Kendra asked.

Dale unlocked the gate. The duplicate had been supporting her weight against it. Wincing, she leaned forward so Dale could pull it open. “Yes. The key is at a dragon sanctuary called Wyrmoost, north of Montana. He plans to send in somebody named Navarog to retrieve it.”

Grandma raised a hand to her lips. “The demon prince. The dark dragon.”

“The person you guys let out of the Quiet Box,” the duplicate said. “Anyhow, using the Oculus exhausted the Sphinx. If he wasn’t weak and in a rush, I doubt I would have escaped.”

“How did you get away?” Grandma asked.

“I jumped out of a moving car,” the duplicate responded. “But let me tell it in order. The Sphinx used the Oculus at Torina’s house the morning after Kendra escaped. They had no idea we’d switched places. Nobody even noticed that Cody was missing. The Sphinx was excited because he thought he’d had a breakthrough on how to use the Oculus without losing his mind. He postponed their departure so he could try. They had me in the room while he did it.

“He succeeded, although it seemed touch and go at the end. Once free of the Oculus, he was groggy but excited, and started making plans about recovering the key from Wyrmoost. They took me from the room before I heard very much. I only know the details I told you.

“About an hour after the Sphinx came out of his trance, somebody noticed that the house was under surveillance. The Sphinx was furious. They took me through an underground tunnel to a different house at least a block away. They had cars waiting, and we got out of town quickly.

“Right after our first stop for gas, I faked like I was feeling carsick and begged them to roll down the window. My hands were tied. The window came down as we were accelerating along the on-ramp, and I immediately dove through the opening. We were going fast. I broke my leg and wrist and picked up some nasty road rash. A bunch of motorists behind us pulled over, so the Sphinx kept right on going.”

“What did you tell people?” Seth asked.

The duplicate grinned. “Hey, Seth. I told this big, nice trucker that my uncle had tried to kidnap me. Wasn’t hard to believe. My wrists were still tied.”

“Where did they take you?” Kendra asked.

“Back to the gas station. I pretended to call my family. I couldn’t remember Grandpa’s cell-phone number. People were talking about taking me to a hospital. I saw an old lady pull up to the gas station alone. She came inside and went straight to the bathroom. I pretended that I needed to use it too and hobbled in after her. I cornered the old lady in her stall and told her that the trucker was an abusive man who had picked me up hitchhiking. I stressed that I needed to get away from him. I asked her to pretend to be my great-aunt and take me to the hospital. She agreed.”

“So you faked like the lady was your relative!” Seth said.

“They bought it enough to let us leave,” the duplicate said. “The lady didn’t know how badly I was hurt, although she could see where I was scraped up and bleeding. I told her that the hospital was just an excuse to get away from the trucker, then asked if she could take me to her house so I could use her phone. I lucked out. She was local, and she didn’t have a cell phone.

“After we got to her place, I pretended to call Grandpa again. I told her he was coming to pick me up, but he lived over two hours away. She invited me to eat with her. She was really kind. I noticed that she had a computer, so I asked if I could check my e-mail. Fortunately, the street and number of the Fablehaven driveway lingered in my brain. When I logged on, I printed up driving directions to this address. While she was fixing dinner, I wrote a note. I explained that I was stuck in a life-or-death emergency, and promised to return the car along with a bunch of reward money. I took a single credit card from her purse, snagged her keys, slipped out the door, and stole her car.”

“Let me guess,” Seth said. “That’s the car.”

The duplicate nodded. “Her address is on the driving directions in the passenger seat. Maybe you guys can fulfill my promise to her. Either way, I had to get here.”

“You’ve been through quite an ordeal,” Grandma said. “You’re lucky you weren’t apprehended by the police, let alone the Society. You used the credit card to buy gas?”

The duplicate nodded. “It didn’t work the last time I tried. The tank is almost empty.”

“We’ll see that the woman gets a new car and a generous reward,” Grandpa promised. “For now, we had best get you into the house. Tanu will

see to your injuries.”

Tanu scooped up the duplicate. She grimaced, then settled into his arms. He carried her gingerly.

“Good job,” Kendra said to the duplicate.

“I’m relieved I found you. Getting here felt like a long shot.”

The endless honking stopped abruptly. Dale and Warren had pried open the hood and stood hunched over the crippled engine.

“She seems just like you,” Grandma murmured to Kendra as Tanu moved away. “It’s uncanny.”

“And she won’t last more than another day or two,” Kendra said. “The second dead Kendra this week.”

* * *

Seth sat on a sofa in the living room, tapping his knees as if playing the bongos. Grandpa had called an emergency council. They were all waiting for Tanu to come down from examining the stingbulb. Everybody was quiet and thoughtful.

Seth frowned as he looked around the room. With the Sphinx coming ever closer to his goal, were these the people to stop him? More than half of them looked too old or too young. Sure, they had weathered some attacks from the Sphinx, but generally he kept getting what he wanted. And nobody had launched any sort of successful counterattack against him. Seth felt certain the time had come to go on the offensive.

Tanu came down the stairs and entered the room.

“How is she?” Grandma asked.

“Her wrist is badly sprained. The leg is broken, but could be worse. A minor fracture. She also picked up plenty of road rash and a fairly severe concussion. Who knows how she managed to drive so far? She definitely has a lot of heart. I gave her some substances that will dull the pain and speed her recovery.”

“Not that she’ll live to enjoy a recovery,” Kendra muttered.

“She’s aware of her tiny lifespan,” Tanu said. “She kept asking to speak to you, Kendra. She hopes there is some other way she can serve you before she dies.”

“We could pack her in the Quiet Box,” Seth said. “I’d rather preserve her in limbo than the evil Maddox. You never know when a duplicate Kendra might come in handy down the road.”

“Wouldn’t that be torturous for her?” Kendra asked.

“Seems like she’s content as long as she has a purpose,” Tanu said.

“Wouldn’t hurt to make her the offer,” Grandma suggested. “See what she thinks.”

“We’ll explore those possibilities with the duplicate after the meeting,” Grandpa said.

“I have an unpleasant question,” Warren said. “Could the Kendra stingbulb have been corrupted? Or could it be a different stingbulb than the one Kendra left behind at the house in Monmouth?”

“Stan and I have thought this through,” Grandma said. “The Sphinx has clearly learned about the key at Wyrmoost. He didn’t glean the info from Kendra or a stingbulb, because Kendra didn’t learn that information until after she escaped. We see no strategic value he might gain in letting us know what he has discovered. In fact, the Sphinx would want to keep that discovery a secret in order to pursue the key at Wyrmoost uncontested. We’ll keep an eye on the replicated Kendra, but Stan and I feel comfortable trusting her report.”

“Wait a minute,” Seth said, eyes widening. “What if the Kendra we rescued is just another replica? What if this isn’t actually Kendra! She could have led the bad guys to our hotel room! We may not have seen the real Kendra yet! She might still be their prisoner.”

Everyone turned to Kendra. “It’s really me,” Kendra assured them. “Isn’t there some sort of test? Some way to differentiate for sure?”

“She could read the message Patton left in the hidden chamber,” Grandma said. “That ability could not have been replicated by a stingbulb. Only potent fairy magic could bestow the capacity to read those words.”

Grandpa nodded. “Agreed. But I appreciate your vigilance, Seth. We must remain wary. Question everything. Take nothing for granted. I want to turn our attention to the matter of the Sphinx and the Translocator.”

Grandpa summarized what he, Kendra, and Coulter had learned about the location of the Translocator and where Patton had hidden the necessary keys.

“What are the chances of the Sphinx acquiring the first horn of a unicorn?” Grandma mused.

“What were the chances of him finding stingbulbs?” Coulter replied.

“How rare are unicorn horns?” Seth asked.

“Unicorns are among the least encountered of all magical creatures,” Grandpa said. “We believe they still exist, but there is no certainty on the matter. They are elusive creatures of extraordinary purity, and their horns exhibit potent magical properties. Long ago, they were hunted to near extinction by greedy wizards. During the lifespan of a unicorn, each grows three horns. They shed the first two as they mature, sort of like humans losing baby teeth. The horn here at Fablehaven is the only first horn I know to exist anywhere.”

“But that doesn’t mean the Sphinx will fail to find another one elsewhere,” Coulter emphasized.

“We would be unwise to count on him failing,” Warren agreed, “especially if he’s gaining mastery over the Oculus. Somehow, somewhere, he’ll find one.”

“For all we know, he may already have one,” Grandma said bleakly.

“If this is our worry,” Grandpa said, “I see no other option than to try to beat the Sphinx to the key at Wyrmoost. We have all witnessed the Sphinx’s resourcefulness. Knowing the location of the key to the Australian vault, he will find a way to get Navarog into the dragon sanctuary. And once he recovers the vault key, his acquisition of the Translocator will not be far behind.”

“But can we protect the vault key better than the dragons of Wyrmoost?” Tanu asked.

“At least we can keep the vault key in motion,” Grandpa replied. “We can use it or transfer it. Since the Sphinx knows the current location, it is only a matter of time before he claims it.”

“Then our first task is to retrieve the horn from the centaurs,” Grandma said.

Dale whistled. “Good luck with that one. That horn is their most prized possession. They revere Patton for giving it to them. It provides the energy that turned Grunhold into a safe haven during the shadow plague.”

“Could we convince them we only mean to borrow it?” Grandpa proposed. “We could return the horn after the mission.”

“Unless we’re all eaten by dragons,” Coulter mentioned.

“It will be tough to convince them,” Grandma said.

“That’s an understatement,” Dale asserted.

“Why not steal it?” Seth suggested.

The others laughed darkly.

“Unpleasant as it sounds,” Warren said, “it may come to that. Anybody know much about where they keep it?”

“The centaurs have a proud, private society,” Grandpa said. “But as caretaker, I technically have a right to visit them without fear of harm once a year. Otherwise they have the right to slay any who venture onto their allotted land. I have only exercised the right twice. Theirs is not pleasant company.”

“We would want to get as close to the horn as we can,” Grandma said. “Analyze the lay of the land, so we can plan a raid if necessary. Then we can make a case for borrowing it.”

“If they refuse to lend us the horn, the visit doubles as a reconnaissance mission,” Warren finished.

“I’ll send them word of our visit right away,” Grandpa said. “We’ll go tomorrow.”

“I’m coming,” Seth declared.

“The centaurs have no fondness for you,” Grandpa reminded him. “Your impertinence led to Broadhoof’s humiliation at Patton’s hands. We’ll want you as far from their domain as possible.”

“They will blame us all for the death of Broadhoof,” Grandma said.

“Which is why we should bring Kendra,” Grandpa said. “Broadhoof helped her defeat the plague. Her purpose there will be to honor the centaurs for Broadhoof’s sacrifice. If she can do so with sincerity, it may help our cause. We can’t expect to dodge the issue.”

“I’d be happy to apologize,” Kendra said. “I feel terrible that he died, and he really did help save us all.”

“You’ll have to be careful,” Grandma said. “They won’t want your pity. Their pride will reject any such offering. But if you show sincere

gratitude for his sacrifice, acknowledging his role in saving Fablehaven, it might make some headway.”

“Would it be safe for Kendra?” Coulter asked. “Won’t the centaurs blame her more than anyone for his death? She was riding him at the time.”

“They may,” Grandpa said. “But under the protection of my annual visitation rights, they will not be able to harm her. Furthermore, they will hesitate to openly blame a young girl for his demise. Being slain by a mighty demon has a much more heroic ring to it.”

“Who else should accompany you?” Tanu asked.

“Most of you,” Grandpa replied. “I’ll want as many pairs of eyes assessing the situation as possible.”

“Except mine,” Seth muttered.

“We mustn’t leave Seth and the house unguarded,” Coulter said.

“Unguarded?” Seth complained. “Are you trying to destroy my self-esteem?”

“Dale has crossed paths with the centaurs more than most of us,” Grandpa said. “Ruth is a talented negotiator. Warren, Tanu, and Coulter are all seasoned adventurers with experience recovering guarded items. Plus Coulter has specific expertise involving magical items.”

“I can hold down the fort,” Seth assured them stoutly.

“I’ll stay behind,” Warren, Tanu, and Coulter offered in unison.

“Warren will remain at the house with Seth,” Grandpa stated. “Seth, the decision to leave you with extra protection has nothing to do with our estimation of your valor, and everything to do with your age.”

“Maybe I could join you guys in disguise,” Seth proposed.

“We can’t take this mission lightly,” Grandma said. “We must keep this visit as civil as possible. If we fail to recover the horn, the Sphinx will recover the key unchallenged. Your history with the centaurs is tainted, Seth. They may be able to get over the heroic death of Broadhoof. But centaurs never forget an insult.”

“I hate how my past actions keep messing up my future options,” Seth muttered.

“Then you’ve started down the road to wisdom,” Grandpa replied.

Chapter 12



Grunhold

Seth tromped across the yard wearing insulated boots. No snow remained on the lush green lawn or in the vibrant flower beds. The fairies had melted it away. Beyond the yard, the rising wind had shaken much of the snow from the naked tree branches, leaving the ground below blanketed by whiteness. A gray expanse of featureless clouds dulled the sky from horizon to horizon.

Last night they had transferred the stingbulb Kendra into the Quiet Box, removing the fake Maddox, who would soon expire in his dungeon cell. The stingbulb Kendra had been excited at the prospect of using the Quiet Box to prolong her life. Seth found it very weird that he had now met three separate versions of his sister.

At the edge of the yard, Seth set off into the trees, feet punching through the icy glaze atop the snow and then sinking at least ten inches into fluffy powder. Where the snow had drifted, it rose above the tops of his boots.

“Ahoy, Seth!” Doren called from where he reclined on a hammock.

Newel slid off his hammock, hoofed goat legs sinking in a deep drift. “You got our message?”

“I saw it from my window.” Somebody had stomped the words “hammocks today” in the snow beyond the perimeter of the yard outside the

attic window.

“We noticed you weren’t among the group that left earlier,” Doren said. “Where were they heading?”

“To the centaurs.”

“Lucky day for you!” Newel said. “They’ll get nothing but high heads and dirty looks from that lot.”

“I wanted to go. I know centaurs can be jerks, but they’re just so cool.”

“Don’t believe the cool part for a second,” Doren said. “The extra set of legs turns them into pompous nimrods.”

“You’ll fare much better in our company,” Newel avowed. “Two hooves are glorious. Four are overkill.”

“I’m glad to see you guys,” Seth said, smiling for the first time that day.

“Your hammock is waiting,” Newel offered. “Make yourself comfortable. We’ve been thinking about our prior discussion, and we have a new proposition for you.”

“I think you’ll like this one,” Doren said.

Seth sat down on his hammock, kicked his boots together to knock the snow off, then swung his legs up. “I’m listening.”

“We’ve been trawling the tar pit some more,” Newel began.

“We know you feel uncomfortable about removing valuables from Fablehaven,” Doren said.

“But what if we found something you could use here?” Newel proposed. He rummaged in a large, coarse gunnysack and removed a metal breastplate, smoky gray, with a rich sheen.

“Whoa,” Seth said, sitting up.

“I know,” Doren said. “How cool is that?”

“Seth, this spell-forged breastplate is composed of adamant,” Newel explained, turning it over in his hands. “The lightest, strongest magical alloy ever devised. In bygone days, wars were waged to obtain armor of this quality. A wealthy lord would have gladly emptied his treasury in exchange for a piece like this.”

Doren motioned toward the armor. “These days, an article like this is considerably rarer. The breastplate is absolutely priceless.”

“What do you want for it?” Seth asked, trying to sound nonchalant.

Newel and Doren exchanged a glance. Doren nodded and Newel spoke. "We were thinking 96 size C batteries."

Seth had to resist an urge to laugh. Would they really part with precious armor for batteries? "Let me see it."

Newel handed the breastplate to Seth. It felt almost as light as plastic, but when he tried to bend it, the metal was unyielding.

"What do you think?" Doren asked.

"Feels kind of flimsy," Seth said. Wearing his best bargaining face, he examined the armor suspiciously.

"Flimsy?" Newel exclaimed. "Hugo couldn't scratch it with a sledgehammer. The light weight is part of the value. Without restricting your freedom of movement, that breastplate will turn any blade, stop any arrow."

"Why do I need armor?" Seth said, deliberately giving them a hard time. "I'm not a knight. This may have been the ultimate prize back in the olden days, but guys, any object is only as valuable as a buyer is willing to pay."

Newel and Doren leaned together and conferred quietly.

"Seventy-two batteries is our final offer," Newel declared.

Seth shrugged. "Look, I've known you guys for a while now. And I like you. But I don't know. I bet Nero would give you some gold for this."

"Didn't you get the news flash?" Newel said, grinding his teeth. "Gold no longer buys batteries."

"We really need batteries," Doren begged. "We're missing so many shows."

Seth worked hard to resist a smile. The satyrs were desperate. They were normally much savvier negotiators. "I'll have to sleep on it."

"He's toying with us," Doren accused, eyes narrow. "He's enjoying this. Who wants to be a knight more than Seth Sorenson?"

"You're onto him," Newel agreed, holding out a hand to Seth. "Give it back."

Seth burst into laughter. "You guys need to lighten up."

"We were trying to have a serious conversation," Newel said stiffly, beckoning for the armor with his fingers. "You're right, Seth. Value is

subjective. Since nobody wants it, we'll just go chuck the armor back in the tar pit."

Seth cleared his throat and assumed a serious expression. "Upon further reflection, I've decided to accept your offer."

"Ouch, too bad," Doren lamented. "The sale just ended."

Newel yanked the breastplate out of Seth's grasp. "The price just shot up to 120 batteries. Surely much more than a disinterested onlooker like yourself would be willing to provide."

"Okay, look," Seth said, trying not to sound nervous. "The breastplate is really sweet. And it could come in handy. I shouldn't have teased you. I know your lack of batteries stresses you out. I was just bored, so I was trying to be a tough negotiator."

"You're our only battery supplier," Newel said. "We've been racking our brains over this. You can't tease us like that. Not about batteries."

"The more TV we get, the more we need," Doren explained.

Seth raised his eyebrows. "Maybe you guys are spending too much time in front of the tube. It's making you grouchy. Grandpa might be right. Maybe you should take some time off and learn to appreciate nature."

"We've spent the last four thousand years appreciating nature," Newel groaned. "We get it. Plants are pretty and smell nice. For us, the new and exotic frontier is season finale cliff-hangers."

"It's your life," Seth said. "Look, of course I want the armor. But the Society is after us like never before, so it may take a couple of weeks before I can make it to a store. If you give me the priceless breastplate, I'll score you guys 120 C batteries as soon as possible."

"Done," Newel said, tossing the breastplate back to Seth.

"We fitted it with straps so you can wear it home," Doren said.

"Can I come out now?" a voice inquired from behind Seth.

"Sure," Newel replied.

"Verl?" Seth said, twisting in his hammock.

The cow-spotted satyr skipped into view, holding a large rectangular object bundled in brown paper. "I need your help."

"Where were you?" Seth asked.

"Crouching behind a snowdrift. Newel said I had to keep out of sight until they concluded business with you. What are batteries, by the way?"

“Tiny cylinders of power,” Doren said. “Don’t strain your brain.”

“Right,” Verl said, peeling back the brown paper to reveal the object in his hands. It was a canvas with a large image of Kendra’s face rendered in charcoal.

“Wow,” Seth said. “That looks pretty realistic. You drew it?”

“Along with many others,” Verl admitted timidly. “At first I produced pictures of us together: on a carousel, rowing in a canal, waltzing at a ball. Doren warned me I was trying too hard. I finally settled on this striking vision of my muse. What better way to declare my affection than to simply revel in her beauty? Would you be so kind as to deliver it?”

“No problem,” Seth said, grinning.

“I blush to think of her beholding my work,” Verl confessed, handing over the canvas.

“So do we,” Newel assured him.

“She’ll love it,” Seth said, trying to accept the canvas. Verl would not let go.

“You sure, Verl?” Doren taunted. “Pretty mushy stuff. Stan won’t like it.”

Verl released his hold on the picture. “Yes, I’m sure. Take it to Kendra with my highest regards.”

Seth felt and heard a rumbling that built into words. *Come to me, Seth.*

Seth stared at Newel and Doren. “Did you guys hear that?”

“What?” Doren asked. “Verl guaranteeing his humiliation? Loud and clear!”

“A voice calling my name,” Seth said.

Visit me tonight. There is little time. The voice was like distant thunder.

“Nothing?” Seth asked.

The satyrs shook their heads.

The faint rumbling faded.

Newel tapped Seth on the arm with his fist. “Feeling all right there, buddy?”

Seth forced a smile. “I’m okay. I keep hearing things lately. Maybe I should get back to the yard.” He slid out of the hammock.

“Keep the breastplate,” Newel said. “Just don’t forget that you owe us —”

“—one hundred and twenty size C batteries,” Seth finished.

* * *

Four stoic centaurs waited at the border of their domain, muscular torsos bare except for wolf skins draped across their powerful shoulders. Kendra recognized two of them. The silver one with the enormous bow was Cloudwing. The other was Stormbrow, whom Kendra had mostly seen as a dark centaur. The coat of his horse body was white dappled with gray. He had a high forehead and long, lank hair. One of the unfamiliar centaurs had a golden hide and was not as excessively muscled as the others. The final centaur had chestnut fur and curly auburn hair.

Hugo brought the cart to a stop in front of the centaurs. Grandpa had already explained that Hugo would not be able to enter the centaurs’ realm.

“Greetings, Stan Sorenson,” proclaimed Cloudwing in a clear, musical baritone.

“Good day, Cloudwing,” Grandpa said. “Stormbrow. Quickstride. Bloodthorn. I take it you received my message.”

“Yesterday the golem bore us tidings of your advent,” Cloudwing replied. “You brought many companions.”

“We need to counsel with Graymane,” Grandpa said.

Cloudwing dipped his head. “Such is your right once per annum.”

“You have the girl with you,” Stormbrow accused, his voice deep and harsh.

“She accompanies us to offer appreciation for Broadhoof’s noble sacrifice,” Grandpa said.

“Her gratitude is not required,” Stormbrow grated.

“Nevertheless, here we are,” Grandpa replied, climbing down from the wagon.

“Stay aboard the cart,” Cloudwing instructed. “We will tow you onward.”

The golden centaur and the reddish centaur came forward and took hold of the handles Hugo had used to pull the wagon. Grandpa had

explained that if they didn't solicit help, the centaurs might offer this service in order to shorten the duration of their visit.

They were currently on the far side of Fablehaven's marshlands. The road they had traveled had skirted the fens for the latter portion of the journey. Behind them, vapor hung above the foul, unfrozen water, where slime, moss, and tall weedy plants thrived in defiance of winter.

With no further words, the centaurs broke into a canter, towing the cart along at great speed. Kendra reviewed the instructions Grandpa had given. Unless engaged in conversation, centaurs considered eye contact a challenge. She was supposed to keep quiet unless Grandpa identified specific opportunities for her to speak. They were all under orders to accept insults graciously and without rebuttal. Given his knack for infuriating centaurs, she was relieved that her brother had stayed home.

The centaurs hauled them through an extensive vineyard and a sweet-smelling orchard populated by diverse fruit trees. Fairies flitted among the vegetation, driving back the snow and keeping the plants unseasonably fruitful. Only at the main house and near the Fairy Queen's shrine had Kendra ever seen so many. She also spotted female centaurs in the midst of the trees, effortlessly balancing huge baskets laden with fruit. Wrapped in furs, the women possessed a hard, cold beauty.

Beyond the orchard, they passed into a snowy grove of tall evergreens. Occasionally Kendra glimpsed pavilions through the trees. When the cart emerged from the grove, a tremendous block of stone loomed before them. Three times as tall as it was wide, the megalith towered thirty feet high. Off to either side, Kendra saw other monolithic standing stones, curving out of sight to form a ring around a broad hill.

"We will proceed on foot," Cloudwing announced. "Welcome to Grunhold." The centaurs who had been towing them released their hold on the wagon.

Kendra clambered down along with the others and followed the four centaurs around the megalith and up the gentle slope. Their path wound around hedges and earthworks, beneath arched trellises, up ramps, and over small, decorative bridges. As in the vineyard and the orchard, colorful fairies filled the air, keeping the vegetation in bloom. Among the terraced gardens, Kendra observed standing stones of varied shape and size, smaller cousins of the megaliths encircling the base of the hill. Here and there male

and female centaurs roamed or conversed, showing little interest in the visitors. Occasionally Kendra noticed yawning entrances recessed into the hillside. Kendra wondered how far the shadowy tunnels extended.

As they neared the top of the hill, Kendra stared up at the primitive dolmen on the summit. Five massive upright stones served as columns to support an immense slab of rock, together forming a crude shelter. It looked as though an army of giants would have been required to place the enormous slab atop the other stones. Beneath the massive capstone waited a brooding centaur the color of a storm cloud. His long gray hair matched his bushy beard and the fur of his equine body. His eyebrows were the same darker gray of his tail. Although his face looked older than the other centaurs, it was not wrinkled. His torso may have carried more fat than the others, but none were more heavily muscled.

“Greetings, Stan Sorenson,” Graymane intoned as they approached. “What brings you and yours to Grunhold?”

“Greetings, Graymane,” Grandpa answered formally. “We are here to honor the nobility of Broadhoof and to ask a favor.”

“Come forward,” Graymane invited, backing away.

There was ample room inside the dolmen for the five centaurs and the six human visitors. The shelter had no furniture, so they stood facing one another, the centaurs on one side, the humans on the other. Kendra glanced up nervously at the enormous slab above them. If it fell, they would all be squished flat as tortillas.

“I am not acquainted with all of those in your party,” Graymane said.

“You remember my wife, Ruth, and my assistant Dale,” Grandpa said. “This is Tanugatoa, a renowned potion master. Coulter, a lifelong friend and an expert in magical relics. And my granddaughter, Kendra.”

“The selfsame Kendra who sat astride Broadhoof as he perished?” Graymane asked, glancing at Cloudwing.

“The same,” Grandpa replied. “Broadhoof bore her and the fairy stone into Kurisock’s realm. Without his bravery, Fablehaven would have fallen into darkness.”

“We feel his loss,” Graymane said. “Broadhoof was like a son to me. Tell me, Kendra, how he died.”

Kendra glanced at Grandpa, who gave a brief nod. Her gaze shifted to Graymane, her neck craning back. He stared down at her gravely. Her

mouth felt dry. Trying to suppress her nerves, she reminded herself that the centaurs could not harm them. This was an official, protected visit. All she had to do was relate the truth in a gracious way.

“We were riding for the black tree with the nail in it. The only way to stop the plague was to destroy the nail. The stone the Fairy Queen had given me could counteract the plague. I had used the stone to heal people and creatures who were infected by the plague. She told me that uniting the stone with the nail would destroy both objects.

“All around us dark creatures attacked. Ephira, the hamadryad who belonged to the tree with the nail, had originated the plague along with Kurisock. She attacked Broadhoof to protect the tree. Her touch could darken any creature. Just ask Stormbrow. But because Broadhoof was in contact with me, and I had the stone, when Ephira touched him, he found himself trapped between two powers. The stone prevented him from turning dark, but the strain killed him.

“Broadhoof managed to get us near enough to the tree that we ultimately succeeded. Uniting the stone and the nail cost my friend Lena her life. Without the help of Broadhoof, we would have been doomed. I’m so sorry he died. I had no idea that getting stuck between the power of the stone and the nail would kill him. I mourn for him. He was a true hero.”

Kendra noticed that a cluster of fairies had gathered near the dolmen as she spoke. She tried to ignore them so she could concentrate on Graymane’s response.

“I have already heard this account from others who were present. I appreciate your forthright retelling of the events, and join you in mourning.” His eyes turned to Grandpa. “Was the loss of one of our finest worth rescuing the preserve? I think not. But for our present purposes, I will agree that Broadhoof died a hero, and leave it at that. You mentioned a favor?”

“We were hoping to see the first horn you keep in your possession,” Grandpa said.

Graymane traded startled looks with Cloudwing and Stormbrow. His dark tail swished. “None are permitted to lay eyes on the Soul of Grunhold.”

“My ancestor presented you with the first horn as a favor,” Grandma reminded him.

Graymane stamped a hoof. "I am aware of the origin of our talisman. It was freely given. If we are to discuss past favors suddenly requiring compensation, I might submit the death of Broadhoof as an ample display of gratitude."

"I do not mean to suggest that we have a claim on the horn," Grandma said. "I hoped merely to point out that it is not inherently for the exclusive use of centaurs. Humans have successfully watched over the Soul of Grunhold in the past."

"To what end would you make this observation?" Graymane asked.

"Dark times have befallen the world," Grandma said with severity. "Sinister forces are gathering talismans to open the great prison Zzyzx and unleash the demons of old."

"Dire tidings, indeed," Graymane acknowledged. "Yet how is it our concern?"

"We require the horn to access a key that will enable us to safeguard one of the talismans," Grandpa said. "If we can protect the talismanic artifacts, we can prevent the prison from opening."

Graymane shared quiet words with Cloudwing on his right, then Stormbrow on his left. "You would remove the Soul of Grunhold from Fablehaven?"

"We would return it within days," Grandma said. "We ask no aid except to briefly borrow the horn."

Graymane slowly shook his head. "Should the demon horde escape Zzyzx, the Soul of Grunhold would be our only defense. We cannot accept the risk. You ask too much."

"If the demons escape Zzyzx, Grunhold will become a small island in a sea of evil," Grandpa stressed. "Under assault from the demon horde, the horn will fail and Grunhold will fall. If, however, we prevent the demons from escaping Zzyzx, Grunhold may well endure forever."

"We cannot send our prized talisman into peril," Graymane replied. "When you removed the power from the shrine of the Fairy Queen, you destroyed it, leaving her sanctuary irreparably desecrated. My decision stands. Find another method to accomplish your aims. We will not lend you or anyone the Soul of Grunhold."

"Could we at least look upon the horn?" Grandpa asked. "Another way to protect the talismans that unlock Zzyzx would be to ensure that our

enemies will not be able to steal the horn from you. Such assurance is vital.”

Graymane smirked dourly. “You might also appreciate the chance to scout for ways to pilfer the horn yourself.”

“The horn must not be stolen,” Grandma affirmed. “We have no desire to rob you.”

“As you should know, the Soul of Grunhold *cannot* be stolen,” Graymane said. “The first horn of a unicorn can only be found or given. The object radiates such purity that even the most jaded scoundrel would be overwhelmed with enough guilt and remorse at the thought of stealing it to render him incapable of carrying out the robbery.” The imposing centaur gave Grandma a pointed look. “Even if the thief had convinced himself he only meant to borrow it.”

“What if our powerful enemies found a way to circumvent such remorse?” Grandpa inquired. “With your assent, I could station guards.”

“We have guards of our own, the finest inhabiting this preserve,” Graymane stated. “Furthermore, the Soul of Grunhold lies deep inside the hill, at the heart of a Tauran maze.”

“A maze of invisible walls?” Coulter exclaimed.

Graymane nodded. “The same as my kind used anciently. Fatal spells lace the unseen barriers. The intruder who touches any wall will be instantly struck down.”

“Such contact will also raise an alarm,” Stormbrow added.

“Our enemies have proven themselves unbelievably resourceful,” Grandpa worried.

“You still doubt?” Graymane scoffed. “At the heart of the unsolvable maze awaits Udnar the mountain troll as a final redundancy.”

“A mountain troll?” Dale exclaimed. “How did you win his loyalty?”

“We reached an arrangement,” Graymane replied flatly. “It involves copious quantities of food and drink.”

“What about the entrance to the maze?” Grandma asked.

Graymane fell silent, scrutinizing the humans one by one. “The entrance to the great hollow below the hill is sealed. I will refrain from relating the specifics to prevent any of you from imprudently coming to harm.”

“We wouldn’t dare make an attempt for the horn,” Grandpa assured him. “As you say, it would be impossible. You give us reason to hope our enemies would be equally daunted. Perhaps we can locate a first horn through other channels.”

“Wisely spoken,” Graymane said. “Do not forget, any attempt to steal the Soul of Grunhold would mean war with the centaurs. We have our allotted realm, but by treaty we remain free to roam most of the length and breadth of Fablehaven, with the exception of a few private domains. War with the centaurs would mean the end of your preserve.”

“Which is why we traveled here to solicit the favor according to protocol,” Grandma placated.

“It disappoints us that you refuse to lend us the horn,” Grandpa admitted. “Much evil abroad and at home may flow from that decision. Yet we acknowledge it as your decision to make.”

“Then our parley is at an end,” Graymane announced. “Return to your domain in peace.”

“We have it on good authority that our enemies are interested in the horn,” Grandma said. “Stay vigilant.”

Graymane turned his back on them.

“We require no such advice from humans,” Cloudwing clarified. “Permit us to escort you to the borders of our realm.”

“Very well,” Grandpa said, his voice formal. “Farewell, Graymane.”

Kendra followed the others out of the massive stone shelter. She noticed that a cluster of fairies continued to hover nearby, gazing at her curiously. When she showed them prolonged attention, several of the fairies fluttered away, probably in an attempt to appear disinterested. One of the fairies who remained looked familiar. Tinier than most fairies, she had fiery wings shaped like flower petals.

“I know you,” Kendra said.

The other fairies who had remained turned to jealously regard the small red fairy. “Yes,” the fairy chirped, darting closer to Kendra. Rolling their eyes, the other fairies dispersed.

“You were one of the three who helped us when we defeated the shadow plague.”

“Correct. I overheard your conversation with Graymane.”

“Didn’t go so well.” Kendra noticed Stormbrow watching her surreptitiously. She doubted whether he could understand the fairy, but Kendra spoke in plain English. She lowered her voice and resolved to choose her words carefully.

“The centaurs will never part with the horn,” the fairy informed her.

“Can you help us get it?” Kendra whispered, hanging back from the others, eyes on the centaurs.

The tiny fairy gave a light, tinkling laugh. “Not likely. But I do know where you can find the entrance to the maze.”

“Please tell me.”

“Gladly. By the way, if I refused, you could command me to reveal what I know. Just a little tip for the future. Many fairies are unhelpful. The entrance lies beneath the southernmost warding stone.”

“The gigantic one?” Kendra asked, nodding her head toward the tremendous megaliths at the base of the hill.

“Yes,” the fairy answered.

“They look too big to move,” Kendra whispered.

“Much too big,” the fairy agreed, “and bound in place by spells. But two hours before dawn, the stones march. They trade places. Takes them an hour. For that hour of the night, while the stones are marching, the entrance to the maze lies wide open. It is the only time the centaurs can enter.”

“Those humongous stones move by themselves?”

“All twenty of them. It’s quite a sight.”

“Do many centaurs go into the maze?”

“Not often.”

“Can you tell me anything else?”

“I’ve learned to pick up phrases in the Tauran language. I listen in on their conversations for practice. Only a few centaurs know how to navigate the maze. They only go in to bring food for the troll. They love the horn and would kill to protect it. Don’t go after it, Kendra.”

“Thanks,” Kendra said earnestly. “We better not talk too long. The centaurs are already suspicious.”

“My pleasure.” The tiny fairy zipped away.

Kendra walked with the others back to the cart. She sat in silence as they passed through the evergreen grove, the orchard, and the vineyard.

When they reached the edge of the dreary, steaming marsh, the centaurs handed the wagon back to Hugo, who stood waiting exactly where they had left him.

Once they were well along the path, Kendra scooted near Grandpa. “Are we safe to talk about what happened?” she asked.

Grandpa looked around. “I think so, if we keep our voices down.”

“I know where the maze begins.”

“What?” Grandpa looked startled. “How?”

“A fairy told me. The entrance is hidden beneath the southernmost warding stone. That is what the fairy called the giant stones at the bottom of the hill. Two hours before dawn the stones move around, leaving the entrance accessible for about an hour.”

“Well done, Kendra,” Grandpa said. “Unfortunately, I’m not sure it changes our circumstances much. Few creatures have more raw power than mountain trolls. None of us can navigate a Tauran maze. And even without the obstacles, the horn can’t be stolen in the first place. If they don’t give it to us, we can’t take it. Am I wrong?”

Everyone was now huddled close around the conversation.

“I have no idea how we could borrow the horn without permission,” Tanu said.

“Nor do I,” Dale concurred.

“Our best bet is to start searching elsewhere,” Coulter suggested. “Somewhere in the wide world there must be another first horn.”

“We’ll be racing the Sphinx,” Grandma said. “And he has the Oculus.”

Grandpa frowned. “That may be so. But a glimmer of hope is better than none at all.”



Shadow Charmer

The alarm on Seth's wristwatch roused him from sleep. He fumbled with the tiny buttons until the beeping stopped. Leaning up on one elbow, he watched the motionless lump on Kendra's bed. The alarm did not seem to have disturbed her.

Even so, he waited. Kendra could be crafty. She seemed to have a sixth sense when it came to preventing mischief. Minutes passed, but Seth stayed in bed. It gave his mind time to fully awaken.

Earlier that day, after the others had returned from their mission among the centaurs, they had related to Seth and Warren all they had discovered. The decision had been made to start hunting for a unicorn's first horn outside of Fablehaven.

Quietly, Seth had begun to make his own plans.

He had spent the afternoon wondering about the voice he had heard while conversing with the satyrs. At first he had assumed the speaker was some random ghost wandering the woods. Later, a more convincing possibility came to mind. He now felt confident that the voice belonged to the demon Graulas.

After that realization, the plan began to fall into place. Graulas must have been impressed that Seth had helped overthrow the shadow plague,

just as the demon had been astonished with how he had defeated the revenant. Seth felt sure that the demon was summoning him.

Since Graulas was calling to him, it must mean the demon had useful information. The possibilities were exhilarating. Perhaps Graulas could explain why Seth was hearing ghostly voices. After all, dark mysteries were his specialty. And hopefully Graulas could provide pointers on how they could swipe the horn from the centaurs after all. A visit to the demon might be all it would take for Seth to save the day.

His grandparents were always encouraging him to learn from his mistakes. And Seth had learned enough about his grandparents to know they would never permit him to visit the demon. They were relentlessly overprotective. If he brought it up, they would be on guard and do everything in their power to stop him. So Seth decided he would keep his plan to himself, leaving a note under the bed in case things went wrong and he never returned.

Could this be a trap? Yes. But if Graulas had wanted to kill him, the demon could have done so the last time Seth had visited. Could visiting Graulas place anyone besides himself in jeopardy? No, he couldn't see how. What if he was mistaken and Graulas had not been summoning him? What if the mysterious voice had an entirely different origin? If he dropped by uninvited, might the demon kill him for intruding? Maybe. But the Sphinx was on his way to collecting his third artifact, and Seth's friends and family were grasping at straws. Somebody had to make an aggressive move. Seth gritted his teeth. When all hope was gone, wasn't it his job to fix things? Of course it was.

Rolling out of bed, Seth strapped on his adamant breastplate and pulled a camouflage shirt over it. He put on jeans, laced up his boots, and grabbed his coat, gloves, and hat. Then he retrieved his emergency kit from under the bed. The kit contained odds and ends that might come in handy to someone alone in the woods on an adventure. In addition to standard equipment like a flashlight, a compass, a pocketknife, a magnifying glass, a whistle, a mirror, and various snacks, Seth had retained the gaseous potion from the hotel. In the commotion, Tanu had forgotten to ask for it back.

Seth stuffed his pillows under his covers, then crept to the door and down the stairs, listening behind for sounds of Kendra stirring and ahead for evidence of anyone else up and about. The house remained quiet, and he

silently made his way to the garage, found a mountain bike, and wheeled it outside. He wished he had the guts to borrow an ATV, but worried that the noise would awaken somebody and end his excursion before it began. Somewhere in the darkness, Hugo and Mendigo were watching over the yard. Seth hoped he could slip quietly past them. Hopefully they had no direct orders to keep him out of the woods.

The night was well below freezing. Unseen clouds blotted out all light from the heavens. A few softly glowing fairies bobbed among the flowers in the yard, providing the only illumination. Seth mounted the bike and soon discovered that heavy boots were not designed for pedaling. Once he gained some momentum, the endeavor became somewhat easier.

He knew the way to the cave where Graulas lived. From what Seth had seen, Hugo had been keeping the main paths through Fablehaven relatively clear of snow. Hopefully that would hold true on his way to the cave. Otherwise he might have to ditch the bike and walk.

Seth pedaled across the lawn toward the path he needed. Squinting in the darkness, he rode through a flower bed and had to hit the brakes and turn to avoid a row of rosebushes. He decided to walk the bike until he was far enough from the house to use a light.

Just as he was passing out of the yard onto the path, a huge hand gripped his shoulder and hoisted him into the air. The mountain bike clattered to the ground. Seth cried out in startled terror before realizing he had been apprehended by Hugo.

“Late,” the golem rumbled.

“Set me down,” Seth demanded, legs swinging. “You almost scared me to death!”

Hugo placed Seth on his feet.

“Go home,” Hugo said, pointing at the house.

“Are you under orders to send me back?” Seth asked, slipping a hand into his emergency kit.

“Guard,” Hugo said.

“Right. They told you to guard the yard. Not to baby-sit me.”

“Woods bad. Seth alone.”

“Want to come with me?” Seth tried, jittery fingers finding the potion bottle.

“Guard,” Hugo repeated more firmly.

“I get it. You have your orders. But I have mine. I have to run a crucial errand.”

“Stan mad.”

“You mean Grandpa wouldn’t want me running off? Of course not. He thinks I still wear diapers. Which is why I’m doing this in the middle of the night. You have to trust me, Hugo. I know I’ve done some dumb things in the past, but I’ve also saved the day. I have to sneak into the woods for a little while. It isn’t for idiotic reasons, like to get gold. Basically, I’m trying to save the world.”

The golem stood in silence for a moment. “Not safe.”

“It isn’t totally safe,” Seth admitted. “But I’m prepared. See? I even have this potion from Tanu. I’m going someplace I’ve been before. I’ll stay on the path and be careful. If I try to get permission, I’ll fail. They won’t let me. But only I can do this. Sneaking away is my only choice. You have to trust me.”

Hugo turned and looked at the house. Seth could barely see the earthen giant in the darkness. “Hugo come.”

“You’ll come? You don’t have to join me. We don’t want to leave the yard unguarded.”

Hugo pointed across the yard. “Mendigo.”

“Mendigo is on lookout too?” he confirmed.

“Seth go. Hugo come.”

Relief flooded through Seth. This was unexpected good fortune. He wondered if Hugo would still consent once he knew the destination. There was only one way to find out.

“Hugo, take me to the cave where Graulas lives.”

Hugo picked up Seth. “Seth sure?”

“We have to go there. He can give me important info. It could help save everyone. Remember last time? Grandpa didn’t want me to go there, but we ended up getting information that helped us stop the plague.”

Hugo loped away into the woods, moving swiftly. When traveling without the cart, the golem preferred to move cross-country rather than sticking to roads or paths. Ice and snow crunched under the golem’s massive feet. Bare branches whipped past in the darkness, but Hugo altered

how he cradled Seth to keep limbs from scraping him. This was so much better than awkwardly biking along icy trails in the frigid darkness!

Seth had given no real consideration to the possibility of Hugo helping him. He had heard Grandpa give the golem orders to protect the yard, and he had never known the golem to disobey a command. Hugo was becoming more of a free thinker than Seth had realized.

After pounding through the cold night long enough for Seth to start worrying about frostbite, the golem came to a halt and set him down. The night was too dark for Seth to discern any landmarks, but he figured the sudden stop meant they had reached their destination. The golem would not be able to set foot on the land allotted to Graulas. If Seth ran into trouble, he would be on his own.

Seth retrieved the flashlight from his emergency kit. The beam glittered on a snowy slope that led up to a steep hill with a cave in the side. Seth rubbed life back into his partially numb ears, then adjusted his hat and coat to cover his face better.

“Thanks for the lift,” Seth said. “I’ll be back soon.”

“Be safe.”

As Seth tromped through the snow toward the cave, he began to question the sanity of this excursion. He was walking alone at night into the cave of an evil and powerful demon. Hoping to bolster his spirits, he shone the flashlight back at Hugo. Under the single white beam, standing in the snow, the golem looked different, like some strange, primitive statue. Hardly comforting.

Clenching his jaw, Seth increased his pace. If he was going through with this, he might as well get it over with. He marched past the rotten post with the dangling rusted shackles, paused outside the spacious mouth of the cave, almost turned back, and then strode inside.

Seth hurried along the excavated tunnel, winding past a couple of curves before reaching a stuffy room with roots twisting down from the domed ceiling. The first thing that struck him was the unnatural warmth. The second was the smell, sweet and disgusting, like spoiled fruit.

After shining his light across rotting furniture, smashed crates, pale bones, and moldering books, Seth let the beam settle on a massive shape slumped against the wall. He could see and hear the shape taking slow, ragged breaths. The lumpy figure stirred, cobwebs billowing, and sat up.

The flashlight shone on a dusty face dripping with wrinkled lobes of inflamed flesh. A pair of ram horns curled from the sides of the bald head, and a milky film clouded the cold, black eyes. "You . . . came," the demon wheezed in an impossibly deep voice.

"You really did call me," Seth said. "I thought so."

"And you . . . heard me." A fit of coughing seized the moribund demon, sending plumes of dust into the air. When the spasm finished, Graulas spat a shiny wad of greenish gunk into the corner. "Come closer."

Seth approached the huge demon. Even with Graulas seated on the ground, Seth stood no higher than his hunched shoulder. The foul smell intensified as he drew nearer, becoming a rancid medley of decay and infection. Seth fought the urge to puke.

Graulas closed his eyes and tilted his head back, his bulky chest laboring like a huge bellows. Seth heard a wet rattling with each strained inhalation.

"Are you okay?" Seth asked.

The demon tilted his grotesque head back and forth, wattles flopping as he stretched his neck. He spoke slowly. "I am more awake than when we last spoke. But I am still dying. As I mentioned when we met before, death comes slowly for my kind. Months are like minutes. In a way, I envy Kurisock."

"He's really dead?"

"He has passed beyond this sphere of existence. His new abode is less pleasant. No doubt he will be there to greet me." A small spider descended from the tip of one of the ram horns, suspended by a silvery thread.

"Why did you want to see me?" Seth asked.

The demon cleared his throat. "You were foolish to come. If you understood who I was, you would stay far away. Or maybe you were not so foolish, for again I mean to help you. Tell me how your abilities are developing."

"Well, I could hear you when I was in the woods with the satyrs. In the dungeon I could hear what wraiths were whispering. And I saw a goblin the other day even though he was invisible."

The demon raised a thick, gnarled finger and tapped it against a deformed hole in the side of his head. "Whether I like it or not, my

perceptions reach well beyond this hovel. I can observe most of the preserve from here, all save a few shielded locations. One place I could never look was inside the domain of Kurisock. Until he died. Then the curtains came down and I could see. The nail in the revenant left a mark on you when you removed it. When the nail was destroyed, you were nearby, and some of its power fled to you, marking you more deeply.”

“Marking me?”

“The nail left you empowered. Primed for even greater achievements. I understand your need. Your family discussed the object they desire from the centaurs as they traveled unshielded roads. Your grandfather should know better. I could hear every word.”

“They need the unicorn horn from the centaurs,” Seth said. “I was hoping you might know how we could get it.”

Graulas began to cough, a violent progression of heaving and choking that left him slumped to the side, propped up by one elbow. Seth stepped back, wondering if he was about to witness the ancient demon’s strangling on his phlegm. At last, gasping, creamy fluid drooling from the corner of his mouth, Graulas forced himself back into a sitting position.

“The first horn of a unicorn is a powerful object,” Graulas rasped. “It purifies whatever it touches. Cures any sickness. Neutralizes any poison. Eliminates any disease.”

“Do you want me to use it to heal you?”

The demon coughed again. It might have been a chuckle. “Disease has woven itself into my being. The touch of a first horn would probably kill me. I am that corrupt. I have no need of the horn. But I know how you can acquire the Soul of Grunhold. If you want the horn, you must employ your skills as a shadow charmer.”

“What?”

“A shadow charmer enjoys brotherhood with the creatures of the night. His emotions cannot be manipulated. Nothing escapes his gaze. He hears and comprehends the secret languages of darkness.”

“Am I a shadow charmer?” Seth asked hesitantly.

“In all but name. The nail laid a strong foundation. I intend to stabilize those gifts and formally dub you an ally of the night. It will bring your abilities into greater focus.”

“Will it make me evil?” Seth whispered.

“I did not say an ally of *evil*. All power can be used for good or ill. This power is already yours. I will merely help you harness it better. Use it how you like.”

“How will it help me get the horn?” Seth asked.

The demon stared, clouded eyes weighing him. When he spoke, his voice was deliberate. “Who can navigate an invisible maze? The man who can see it. Who can get past a mountain troll? The man who becomes his friend. Who can steal the first horn of a unicorn? The man immune to guilt.”

“You really were listening to Grandpa.”

“It would entertain me to see the centaurs humbled,” Graulas said. “You are the first new shadow charmer in centuries. Perhaps you will be the last. Few remain who could formalize the honor. You already exhibit most of the traits in embryo. Nothing will wash that away. Better to complete what was started. Darkness has touched you, much as light has embraced your sister.”

“This sounds shady,” Seth hedged, backing away. Did he really want favors from a dying demon? Wasn’t the decaying stink of the place a hint that he should go?

Groaning, using a splintered fence post as a crutch, Graulas rose ponderously to his feet, his curled horns nearly touching the ceiling. Gesturing elaborately, as if painting in the air, the demon began chanting in a guttural language. Toward the end of the display, Seth began to understand the words. “. . . consoler of phantoms, comrade of trolls, councilor of demons, hereby and henceforth recognized and acknowledged as a shadow charmer.”

Graulas lowered his arms and sat down hard. Wood splintered beneath him and dust plumed outward.

“You okay?” Seth asked.

The demon coughed mildly. “Yes.”

“Why did you switch to English at the end?”

The corners of the demon’s mouth twitched. “I didn’t. Congratulations.”

Seth covered his eyes for a moment. "I didn't give you permission to do that!" He regarded the demon somberly. "I'm scared that coming here was a huge mistake."

Graulas licked his cracked lips with a bruised tongue. "I can't make you evil any more than you can make me good. You worry that accepting aid from a demon somehow alters your identity. I was once very evil. Deliberately evil. Over time, as I weakened and deteriorated, my lust for power abated. Apathy replaced avarice. You are not speaking to an evil demon. An evil demon would have killed you on sight. You are talking with a rotting shell. My life ended long ago. When I thought I was utterly past feeling, you sparked my interest. I remain sufficiently curious to help you. I have no private agenda. You remain free to use your gifts however you choose."

Seth furrowed his brow. "I guess I don't feel more evil than before."

"Choices determine character. You made no decision to become a shadow charmer. These new abilities have been thrust upon you by circumstances beyond your control. If anything, your status as a shadow charmer should protect you and those you love from evil. You now see and hear more clearly. Your emotions can't be confused by magic. You will encounter opportunities to talk rather than fight."

"Are you speaking English now?"

"Yes." Another wild fit of coughing wracked the demon. When the hacking subsided, Graulas lay sprawled on his side, eyes closed. "I must rest."

"When should I go after the horn?" Seth asked.

"Now," the demon rasped, his voice losing power. "Tonight."

"How do I see the invisible maze?" Seth asked.

Graulas sighed. "The same way you see me. Your abilities have been stabilized."

"I have more questions. What can you tell me about the Sphinx? We know he is the leader of the Society of the Evening Star."

"I have been confined to this preserve for centuries," Graulas groaned groggily. "I lost interest in world politics ages ago. My memories are of ancient India and China. I know little of the Sphinx. When he visited Fablehaven, he seemed like a man. But it is hard to detect an avatar, even for me."

“You detected Navarog.”

“I have met Navarog previously. And his avatar. It makes a difference.”

“I may have to fight Navarog.”

The demon snorted. “Do not fight Navarog.”

“Does he have a weakness?”

Graulas opened his eyes to narrow slits. “Concentrate on the horn. Nero will teach you about shade walking and befriending trolls.”

“Nero?” Seth asked.

A suave voice spoke from behind. “We meet again, Seth Sorenson.”

Seth whirled, shining his light on the troll. He recognized the reptilian features, the bulging round eyes, and the glossy black body with yellow markings. “What are you doing here?”

“A shadow charmer,” Nero simpered in an oily tone. “Who would have suspected? To think, I once saved you from a fall and almost had you as a servant.”

“Don’t you live a long way from here?”

A long, gray tongue flicked out of the troll’s mouth and licked his right eye. “When Master Graulas commands, I obey.”

“You’re here to help me?” Seth asked.

“You need a mentor. Graulas wants me to instruct you in a few matters and accompany you to Grunhold.”

“You can’t enter Grunhold.”

“No. But as a mortal, you can. In fact, as a shadow charmer, you might even survive.”

Seth turned back to Graulas. “Are you still awake?”

The demon smacked his lips. “Awake or asleep, I always listen.”

“You really want me to go to Grunhold tonight?”

“There will be no better opportunity,” the demon growled, rolling over. “Now give me peace, boy.”

Seth faced Nero. “Okay. How do I survive?”

The troll licked his other eye. “As a shadow charmer, you can shade walk. Away from bright light you will be nearly invisible. Very, very dim. When you keep to the shade, even vigilant eyes will pass over you. Particularly if you hold still. This will help you approach the entrance.”

“Will I be able to see in the dark?”

“Turn off your flashlight.”

Seth complied. He could see nothing. “Apparently not.” He switched his light back on.

Nero shrugged. “Your vision may not penetrate darkness, but other talents should emerge over time. No two shadow charmers are identical.”

“What types of talents?”

“I have heard of shadow charmers who could quench flames. Project fear. Lower the temperature in a room.”

Seth smiled. “Can you teach me?”

“These skills will emerge naturally or not at all. Back to the task at hand. Master Graulas tells me that a mountain troll awaits inside Grunhold. Along with a reputation for immense size and strength, their breed has a deserved notoriety for stupidity. The oaf will recognize you as an ally of the night. But he also has a charge to guard the horn. Show no fear. Take his friendship for granted, and you will probably win it. Then you must convince him that you are a trickster, and that stealing the horn is a prank. Mountain trolls love jokes.” The troll held out his webbed hand.

“Is that a banana?” Seth asked.

The troll tossed the fruit over his shoulder and deftly caught it behind his back. “Your prank will be to replace the horn with a banana. The troll should like that.”

Seth laughed. “Are you serious?”

“Entirely.”

“Where did you find a banana?”

“I have suppliers. Some of the satyrs cultivate tropical fruit.”

Seth folded his arms. “Invisible or not, the maze could be trouble, right?”

“The hardest part,” Nero said. “If your instincts fail, the trick with mazes is to always turn left. Only veer right when you can’t turn left. Eventually you will systematically cover all the ground in the maze until you find your destination.”

“The entrance will only be open for an hour.”

“As I already noted, the maze will be the hardest part.”

Seth sat down on a filthy keg. “If I get trapped inside, I’ll have to bide my time until the next night when the entrance opens again. My family will freak. How do we get to Grunhold?”

Nero rubbed his hands together. “The best way is through the marsh. I have a raft. I can land you near the southern side of the circle of stones.”

“I hope I can convince Hugo.”

“I saw you arrive with the golem. If he would bear us to the raft, it would save time. We should make haste—the hour grows late.”



Heart and Soul

Up there on the left,” Nero directed. “Perfect, you can put us down. I’ll take it from here.”

Hugo set Seth on the ground. Seth clicked on his flashlight. The golem held Nero by his ankles. The troll hung upside down, staring into the stony hollows of the golem’s eyes. “No hurt Seth,” Hugo warned, the words coming out like massive boulders grinding against each other.

“You have my word,” Nero pledged, placing a webbed hand over his chest.

The golem turned Nero around and placed him on the ground. He kept hold of one arm. Nero tried to tug away, but Hugo held tight.

“You can release me,” Nero invited.

Leaning forward, the golem pinched Nero’s neck between thumb and forefinger. “No hurt Seth.”

“I’m on his side,” the troll managed in a strangled voice. “I swear it.”

“Let him go, Hugo,” Seth said. The golem released the troll and stood up straight. “If he ends up harming me, you have my permission to squash him.”

“Thanks for the vote of confidence,” Nero gagged bitterly, rubbing his throat.

“Seth no go,” Hugo rumbled.

“I have to try, Hugo. We’ve come this far. I need to finish what I’ve started.”

“We must reach Grunhold before the warding stones start marching,” Nero inserted. “You will need every second.”

Seth gave Hugo a hug. The golem patted his back. “Hugo come.”

Seth shook his head. “You’re too big. You’ll swamp the raft. And you don’t hold together so well in water. Just wait here so you can take me home after we return.” Seth followed Nero toward the raft.

The golem raised a hand in farewell. “Be safe.”

“I’ll be right back,” Seth promised.

Nero pushed the raft into the water and leapt aboard. The rectangular craft was a little bigger than a king-size mattress. Without guardrails, the mooring cleats were the highest part of the vessel, a scant foot or so above the water. Clutching a long pole, the troll gestured for Seth to join him. Seth jumped onto the flat craft. Leaning on the pole, the troll shoved the raft away from the shore. Ripples spread over the dark, fuming water.

“Extinguish the light,” Nero murmured. “From here on, we must avoid attention.”

Seth turned off the flashlight. He could see nothing. He listened to the soft sound of water lapping against the raft. “You can see in the dark?” he whispered.

“I can.”

“Can you see me?”

“Certainly.”

“Shouldn’t I be invisible?”

“Shade walking only works before you’ve been spotted. Once an observer sees you, dimness will no longer hide you.”

Seth thought about that. “What if I snuck up on you later?”

“Then you might be cloaked to my eyes.”

Seth sat down cross-legged. The air in the swamp felt less cold. A heavy, stagnant odor invaded his nostrils. “Why are you helping me?”

“You are an ally of the night,” Nero said. “Graulas is demonic royalty. Long ago he served as the left hand to Gorgrog, the demon king. I owe Graulas a tremendous debt. He gave me my seeing stone.”

“You’ll wait for me while I snag the horn?”

“Whether you return tonight or tomorrow, I’ll be waiting with the raft near the shore where I drop you. Silence. Something approaches.” Seth

listened intently, but could hear nothing. Nero crouched at his side and whispered in his ear. "Lie flat."

Seth sprawled out on his stomach. He could feel the troll lying beside him. A moment later, he heard something sloshing through the water in the distance. It was coming toward them. Seth wished for eyes like his sister so he could pierce the darkness without a light. What could it be? From the sound of it, something big. He held his breath.

The sloshing drew nearer. The rhythm of the splashes suggested a gigantic creature wading through the water. One leg sloshed forward, then the other, then the other, then the other . . .

Nero eased away from Seth. The swamp was totally black. As the sloshing continued toward them, ripples began to make the raft wobble. But then the raft began to glide forward, away from the path of the approaching threat. Seth heard noisy breathing above and behind them.

Unable to see, he closed his eyes and focused on quieting his own breathing. The creature passed directly behind them, never pausing, and soon the sloshing threat was moving away. The sound had completely faded before Nero resumed poling forward in earnest.

"What was that?" Seth whispered.

"Fog giant," Nero replied. "They don't see any better than you in the dark. They roam the marshes erratically. But if they find you, that is the end."

"It came close."

"Much too close. We're fortunate it failed to catch our scent or hear us. The brute must have had a destination in mind."

"The water isn't deep here," Seth said.

"The water is seldom deep in the marsh. Up to the thighs of a fog giant. Keep silent. Before long we will near the shores of the centaurs. If you are apprehended inside of their territory, they will kill you as surely as any giant would."

Seth stopped speaking. The anticipation of his mission helped offset the boredom. He was about to trespass alone into the centaurs' secret stronghold armed only with a banana. If the centaurs caught him, not only would he die but he would provoke a war. The thought was sobering.

Without warning, the raft ran aground, squishing against the muddy, reedy bank. "Here we are," Nero whispered. "Move away from the water. Keep to the shade. Go swiftly. The hour grows late."

“Thanks for the ride,” Seth whispered back. “See you soon.”

Seth sprang from the boat, reeds rustling as he landed. He froze, crouched, listening. When no furious centaurs descended on him, he crept forward, staying low and stepping with care. Up ahead, through the trees, Seth began to discern the wavering glow of firelight. He advanced toward the light.

The foliage at the edge of the swamp soon gave way to evergreens. There was little undergrowth, so Seth scurried from tree to tree until he obtained a view of a large hill. The monstrous silhouette of a colossal stone dominated the foreground. Cressets and torches burned on the hill, shedding warm auras of radiance and backlighting the megalith.

Seth took out his compass. He could barely read it by the wavering light of the distant flames. He found north and promptly determined which of the megaliths was the southernmost. It was the second monolith to the right.

By no means did the torches brighten the entire hill. The jittery flames merely provided periodic illumination. At first the area appeared deserted. Then Seth began to spot centaurs spaced around the base of the hill, lurking in pockets of darkness away from the flaming cressets. He counted three, and assumed there would be more on the far side of the entrance. Rather than cluster around the southernmost stone, the centaurs had opted to spread out, as if simply guarding the hill. Their positions showed no preference to any particular megalith.

Clearly the centaurs didn't want the placement of their sentries to give away the position of the entrance. The deployment could work to his advantage. It gave him some room to work with. The level area between the evergreens at the base of the hill lacked cover. But it was dim. If his ability worked as Nero had described, he should be able to slink forward, then sneak along the bottom of the hill to the southernmost megalith. If not, he would be apprehended the instant he crawled out from behind the trees.

Dropping to his hands and knees, Seth inched forward, eyes on the nearest centaur. The guard stood perhaps a hundred feet away, brawny arms folded. The cover of the trees was soon well behind Seth. At times, the centaur seemed to stare right at him; then the brooding face would turn away. So far, so good.

Seth had no idea how much movement might destroy his dimness and attract attention, so he advanced very slowly. He crawled toward the nearest megalith, stomach tight with worry. Once he was close enough to the huge

stone, it would interrupt all lines of sight from the hill. Too bad the southernmost stone was still over a hundred yards away.

When he reached the megalith, Seth stood up, sweaty despite the cold. He started working his way around the gigantic stone to peek at the hill again. Just as part of the hill was coming into view, the ground began to vibrate.

Seth froze. The vibration grew into a trembling, the trembling into a quaking, and the megalith beside him began to rise. Seth fell flat and crawled on his belly toward the hill. He squirmed to the nearest bush and then held still, ready for a centaur to shout an alarm.

Abruptly the quaking stopped.

Glancing over his shoulder, Seth saw that the bottom of the stone was hovering about five feet in the air. The megalith appeared to have risen about fifteen feet, the lowest ten feet of the stone having been underground. A dark pit yawned where the colossal stone had rested. Slowly, the megalith began to drift sideways.

The clock was ticking.

Seth had one hour to get through the entrance, navigate the maze, befriend the troll, claim the horn, return through the maze, and exit unnoticed.

Rising to his knees, Seth surveyed the vicinity, making certain the centaurs had retained their previous positions and scanning for any sentries he may have missed. He saw no surprises. The nearest centaur was up the slope about thirty feet. From this angle, a torch farther up the hill made his outline obvious.

Seth began crawling along the base of the hill, trying to keep bushes and hedges between himself and the guards. Several times he had to creep across open spaces. He proceeded slowly, and no alarm was raised.

His most nerve-racking moment came as he crept across empty ground not fifteen feet in front of a sentry. He was halfway across the shadowy gap when his knee came down on a dry twig, snapping it clean. Seth halted, head down, muscles locked in panic.

From the corner of his eye he saw the centaur plodding forward to investigate. His only chance was to remain still as a statue and hope he appeared much less visible than he felt. The centaur halted immediately beside him. Had Seth stretched out a hand, he could have touched his hoof. Seth concentrated on breathing softly. Might the centaur smell him? His arms began to feel wobbly from holding the same position.

The centaur finally backed away, returning to his station in the gloom below a tall hedge. Seth slunk forward, careful to move in silence.

At last, heart pounding, Seth came even with the pit belonging to the southernmost megalith. The huge stone had now floated completely out of the way. To reach the pit, once again he would have to traverse an expanse of unshielded ground.

Clenching his tongue gently between his teeth, Seth crawled forward, resisting the temptation to hurry across the bare area. He was well away from any cover when he heard approaching hoofbeats. He slowly turned his head. Several centaurs were approaching from his left, bearing torches and pushing enormous wheelbarrows heaped with food.

Behind him, a centaur whom Seth had failed to notice emerged from hiding. The centaur called out in a series of grunts, gargles, and whinnies. The centaur language sounded more like horse noises than human speech.

The oncoming centaurs responded to the greeting by trumpeting strange replies of their own. They were heading toward the entrance to the maze.

As the centaur behind Seth cantered over to greet his comrades, their eyes were on each other. Seth decided it might be the only decent distraction he would have before they reached him, so he rose, sprinted to the pit in a low crouch, and dove blindly into it.

Fortunately the walls of the pit were not sheer. Seth rolled to the bottom. Relieved once again to hear no cries of alarm, he regained his feet. A rounded entryway dominated one side of the pit. It had no door, so Seth dashed inside.

Below his feet the ground became firm and smooth. The long tunnel sloped steadily downward, plunging into and under the hill. Not wanting to accidentally brush against a wall, Seth switched on his flashlight, cupping a hand over the end to reduce the glare. Before long, he noticed a bluish radiance up ahead and switched off the flashlight.

Seth sprinted along the tunnel until he emerged in a vast cavern. Heavy iron chandeliers hung from the high, vaulted ceiling, casting a diffuse glow across the room. Tall barriers of dark iron reached halfway to the ceiling, barring the way except for five gaps. There was no way to confirm that the iron walls were invisible to others. They sure looked solid to him.

Hooves clattered in the tunnel, and Seth slipped through one of the gaps into the labyrinth, putting a barrier between himself and the entrance to the cavern. He did not proceed far. If he was careful, the presence of the centaurs might work to his advantage. By following them at a distance, he could take

the guesswork out of wandering the maze. He bounced on his toes, flexing his fingers, ready to run in case he had accidentally chosen the correct gap and the centaurs came his way.

Glancing at the ground, he noticed that the iron walls cast no shadows. The mellow light from the chandeliers dispersed evenly, with no interference. And in that moment he realized his problem.

If the walls of the maze were invisible to the centaurs, the iron barriers would do nothing to conceal him from their sight!

From the sound of the approaching hoofbeats, the centaurs were almost through the tunnel. Seth raced out of the maze and hurried to one side of the tunnel mouth, standing as close to the wall as he dared. The light from the chandeliers was mild. Was it dim enough for his shade-walking ability to function? Probably not. His mind scrambled. He had gotten only a quick glimpse of the oncoming centaurs. Their wheelbarrows were big, almost the size of wagons. They were piled high with food. What if he tried to hitch a ride as the first one emerged? If he stayed low and kept in the front of the wheelbarrow, the centaur pushing it might not see him.

The first centaur had almost reached him. He could hear the creak of the first wheelbarrow's wheel and the unhurried clop of hoofbeats. As the wheelbarrow nosed out from the tunnel into the cavern, Seth hopped in front of it, sprang inside, and burrowed down as low as he could. He found his cheek nestled against something soft and covered with coarse hair. It took a moment to realize that it was the ear of a pig. In fact, the entire wheelbarrow was stacked with freshly slaughtered hogs, many of them almost Seth's size!

The dead pigs were piled high enough that Seth could not see the centaur pushing the wheelbarrow. He wriggled down as far as he could. Who knew if this wheelbarrow would remain in the lead, or what might happen after they negotiated the maze? He had to try to bury himself. The pigs were heavy and did not leave much wiggle room, but Seth managed to partially conceal his body.

The wheelbarrow entered the maze, moving ahead smoothly, turning right, then left, then veering slightly back to the right. Seth tried hard to pay attention to each turn. If he managed to avoid discovery, he would have to return through the labyrinth on his own. He wondered how the centaurs moved so surely if they could not see the walls. Either they had memorized the route with startling precision, or they were somehow navigating by secret markers, perhaps on the ground or ceiling. Focusing on the iron walls from

his position in the wheelbarrow, Seth soon became disoriented by the many turns. He found that if he contented himself with watching the walls peripherally and studied the ceiling instead, he retained a better sense of where they were in the room.

They followed a serpentine route through the maze for longer than Seth liked. He tried to keep count of how many times they doubled back, approximating their position by the stationary chandeliers. At length they arrived at an open area toward the middle of the cavern. In the center of the broad space stood a stone about the size of a refrigerator. The mountain troll sat near the stone, a huge, hunched creature bristling with spikes. His back was to the centaurs, but Seth could see his thick limbs and tough hide. Seated, the troll was at least three times taller than Seth. A chain with links as thick as Seth's waist connected the creature to a huge metal ring in the ground.

Suddenly the wheelbarrow was upended, and Seth found himself participating in an avalanche of dead pigs. Lying beneath a heavy pile of swine, he heard other wheelbarrows dumping their contents. The downside of his position was that the pigs were crushing him. The upside was he could still somewhat breathe and he was utterly hidden from view.

He heard the centaurs retreating. No words were exchanged with the titanic troll.

As the hoofbeats faded, heavier footsteps drew near. The chain clanked weightily. Seth had a vivid image of the troll cramming dead pigs into his mouth, and a human boy along with them. Seth tried to squirm, but the weight of the hogs was too great. He was pinned.

"Hello?" Seth called, not raising his voice too much.

The troll stopped moving.

"Hello?" Seth tried again.

Seth heard a couple of nearby footfalls, and the porcine press began to lessen. A moment later, Seth had been uncovered. This was his chance. He had to act friendly. Show no uncertainty. He rose to his knees.

The troll towered over him, yellow eyes glaring down. His flesh was thick and folded like the hide of a rhinoceros. The cruel spikes protruding from his shoulders, forearms, thighs, and shins ranged from the length of a knife to the length of a sword. The brute smelled like a monkey house.

"Hi," Seth said brightly, waving and smiling. "I'm Navarog. How are you?"

The troll snorted and grunted at the same time. The exhalation intensified the funky odor.

Seth stood up shakily. "I'm a shadow charmer. An ally of the night. Trolls are my favorite. You sure are big. Look at those spikes! You must be the strongest troll ever!"

The troll smiled. Four of his bottom teeth jutted up almost to his nose.

"I figured we'd become friends," Seth continued, stepping away from the dead swine. "How do you like it here?"

The troll shrugged. "Why you in food?" The words came out like a controlled belch.

"I'm working on a trick. I'm going to play a joke on the centaurs."

The troll sat down, picked up a hog, and stuffed the entire animal in his mouth. Bones crunched sickeningly as he chewed. "Me like jokes."

"I have a really funny one planned. I missed your name."

The troll swallowed noisily and wiped his lips. "Udnar." He picked up another hog by the rear legs, dangled it above his upturned mouth, then dropped it in. "Pigs good."

"I like pigs too."

Udnar grabbed a third pig and held it out to Seth. "Take."

"I can't," Seth apologized. "I ate one on the way in, so now I'm full. I'm not big like you."

"You take no ask?" the troll accused, voice rising.

"No, um, not one of yours. I brought one from home. A little one. My size."

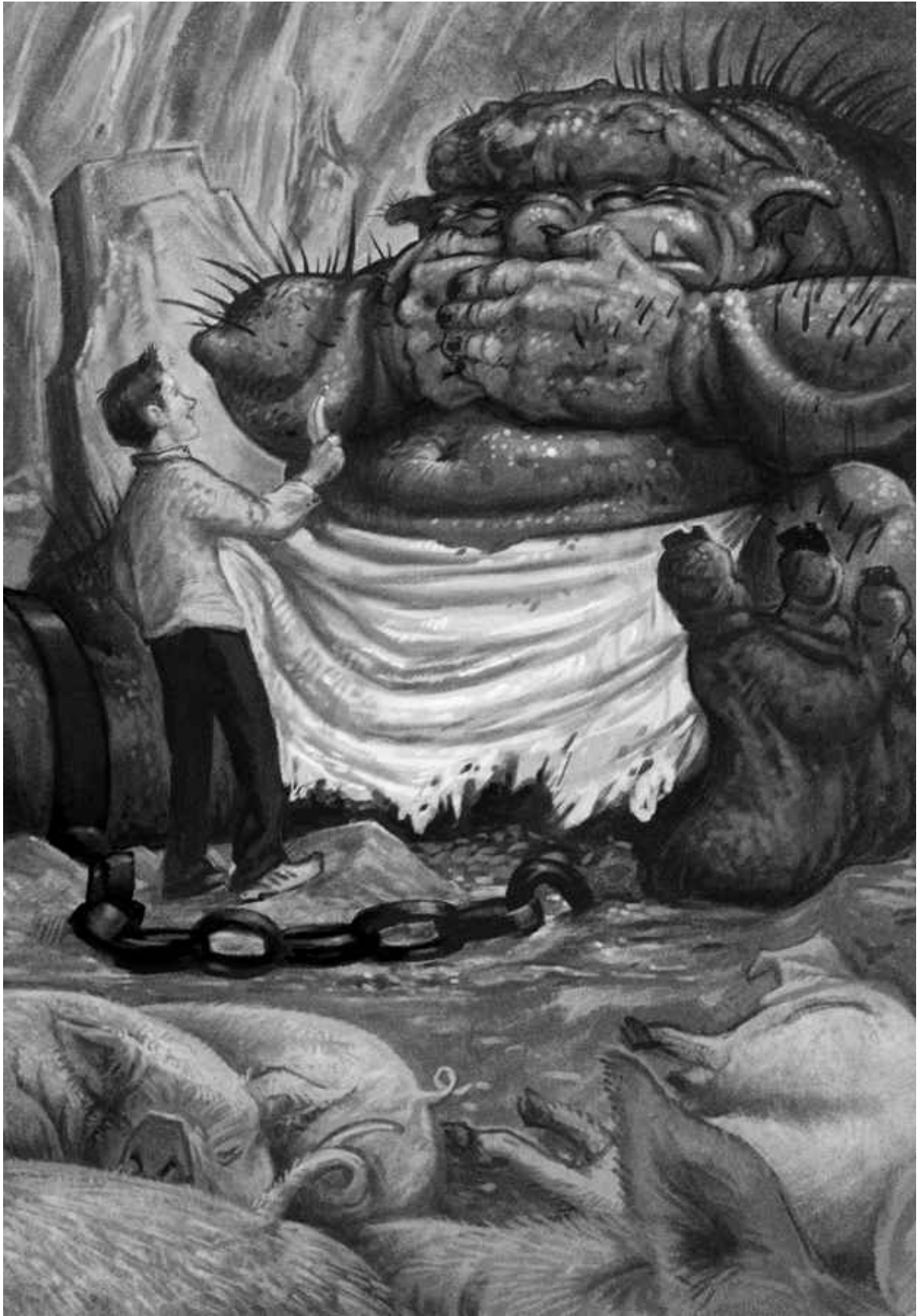
Udnar appeared satisfied. He leaned over to a different pile, snagged a pumpkin the size of a beach ball, and popped it into his mouth. "What joke?"

Seth fished out the banana from his emergency kit. "Know what this is?"

"Banana."

Seth took a steadying breath. He prayed that Nero was right about mountain trolls and pranks. "I'm going to give the centaurs a hilarious surprise. I'm going to switch this banana for the Soul of Grunhold."

The mountain troll stared at him, eyes widening. He placed one huge hand over his mouth. Then the other. The enormous creature started to shake. He closed his eyes, and tears trickled down his cheeks. Dropping his hands, the troll released a blast of sound like a stuttering foghorn.



Seth joined in the laughter. The sight of the troll cracking up was really funny, and the rest was fueled by relief.

Eventually the laughter subsided, leaving the troll panting. “Where put Soul?” Udnar asked.

“I’m going to hide it, just for a little while. A few days. It will be a good prank.”

“You bring back,” the troll checked, his merriment gone.

“I’ll bring it back in a few days,” Seth promised. “I just need to sneak it away long enough for the prank to work.”

“Centaurs mad,” Udnar said seriously.

“Probably. But can you picture their faces when they look for the horn and find a banana?”

Udnar erupted in laughter again, clapping his hands. As his laughter abated, the troll gobbled down another pig. “You funny guy. Talk good Duggish. Udnar miss Duggish.”

“I love Duggish. Best language in the world. So where do you keep the Soul?” Seth was keenly aware that time was slipping away.

The troll jerked a thumb at the stone in the middle of the room. “Soul in heart.”

“The rock is the heart?”

“Heart of Grunhold.”

Seth trotted over to the stone. Udnar began smashing open barrels and guzzling the contents. On the far side of the stone Seth found the horn conspicuously sticking out, the top half fitted in a socket.

Seth pulled the horn from the hole. About eighteen inches long, the straight, tapering horn spiraled to a blunt point. It felt heavier than Seth would have guessed and had the smooth luster of slightly translucent pearl. He found it beautiful, but experienced no rush of guilt upon taking it. “I’ll bring you back,” he promised quietly.

He crammed the banana into the hole. The fruit was a little too wide to fit perfectly. He twisted and pressed until it curved up instead of down.

The troll lumbered over to join him, and collapsed to the ground guffawing at the sight of the banana. Seth moved away from the brute as he thrashed his bulky legs in ecstasy. “So, so, so funny,” Udnar panted, sitting up.

“I need to get going,” Seth announced, striding toward the only gap in the iron barrier.

“Back soon?” the troll asked.

“Count on it,” Seth assured him. “You don’t know any tricks for getting through the maze?”

“No touch walls,” Udnar cautioned.

“I won’t. Once they notice the banana, don’t tell them you helped me. Pretend you don’t know how I did it. That way they’ll just get mad at Navarog the trickster. ’Bye, Udnar. Enjoy your pigs! See you soon!”

“Back soon, Navarog.”

After stowing the horn in his emergency kit, Seth sped up to a jog. He wondered if the centaurs could sense that the Soul had been removed from the Heart. Regardless, time was running out. How long since the giant stones had started marching? Half an hour? More? Less? Why hadn’t he consulted his watch until now?

He had tried to pay attention when they emerged from the maze, and felt confident that his first turn was to the right. At his next intersection he could either go left or straight. Neither iron corridor looked more familiar than the other.

Nero had said that the secret to a maze was to always turn left. But Seth supposed the reverse would work just as well—always turn right. They had spent most of their time winding around on one side of the room, and it looked like left turns would take him away from that side. He decided to take every right turn, but to keep an eye on the ceiling, and break from the pattern if the position of the chandeliers started to look wrong.

Seth broke into a run. Because a lot of this would be trial and error, the faster he covered ground, the more likely he would be to get out in time. When he hit dead ends, he reversed his course instantly. Same when he headed down a corridor that led him to a section of the room he had not travelled in the wheelbarrow. Soon he was panting and sweating. The muscles in his legs began to ache.

Fatigue forced him to slow his pace. He took encouragement whenever a particular intersection or series of switchbacks felt familiar. Most of the time nothing seemed recognizable.

He kept checking his watch. He may have failed to look at the time when he had first entered the cavern, but he knew how long it had been since he

had started back to the entrance. Ten minutes. Fifteen. Twenty. Hope began to fade with every minute that sped by.

As he kept watching the ceiling, Seth finally found himself on the side of the room near the exit. Since he had only been in this area right at the start, he doubled back whenever corridors led him too far away. He abandoned his rule to generally turn right, and soon began to feel he was passing along the same corridors multiple times. A certain intersection with five choices began to look familiar. Upon reaching it again, he felt certain he had tried four of the five branches, so he jogged down the unfamiliar iron hall. After two more turns, he emerged from the maze, the tunnel to the surface gaping before him.

Seth glanced at his watch. More than thirty minutes had passed since he had started back. Breathing hard, Seth dashed up the steady incline of the tunnel until he reached the pit. Overhead, the giant stone was drifting into position, blocking out the light from the hillside torches. The megalith already covered more than three-quarters of the pit.

Observing no centaurs, Seth quietly climbed the side of the pit opposite the hill, hesitating just below the top. If he timed this right, he could use the giant stone to screen him from view. If he timed it wrong, he would be fatally mashed into the dirt.

The colossal stone hovered directly above the pit and began to sink. Moving slowly, Seth climbed out, then held still as the stone settled behind him. Ahead of him were evergreen trees, their needles visible at the edge of the firelight from the hill. Most of the intervening ground was shadowed by the megalith.

Seth crawled slowly forward. If he rushed now, he might get spotted and spoil everything. Little by little, the evergreens drew near. When he paused to glance back, the centaur sentries stood at their shadowy posts, frowning into the night. They appeared to harbor no suspicions that the horn had been removed from its socket.

Once he reached the shelter of the evergreens, Seth arose and ran to the brink of the swamp. He saw neither the troll nor the raft.

“Nero,” he hissed into the darkness. “Nero, I’m back.” He was tempted to sweep his flashlight over the water, but decided not to risk a centaur noticing the shine. “Nero!” Seth cried in a louder whisper.

A voice from the darkness shushed him. He waited in silence until he heard water lapping against the raft. As it drew near, Seth could see the troll.

“Come aboard,” Nero whispered.

Seth obeyed, the raft rocking and sloshing as he landed. Nero used the momentum from the jump to pole away from the shore.

“I can see you,” Seth whispered.

“Dawn begins to color the sky. We must hurry back to the golem. If a fog giant spies us, it will not end well. You achieved your aim?”

“I got the horn,” Seth said. “The centaurs haven’t realized.”

As if in response to his words, they heard the long, low moan of a distant horn. As other horns took up the call, sonorous wails echoed through the swamp. “They know,” Nero spat, licking an eye. He began to pole them forward louder and faster. “You are now a fugitive. The golem must smuggle you to the safety of your yard as soon as possible.”

“Will the centaurs be looking everywhere?” Seth asked.

“Everywhere. Fortunately, they cannot run on water. They’ll have to come around the marshes to get at you. If the golem hurries, you should be fine.”

By the time they reached Hugo, the east was gray and Seth could see quite well. Seth leapt from the raft to the muddy shore. “Thanks, Nero.”

“Away with you,” the troll urged.

“Home, Hugo! Fast as you can! Avoid centaurs at all cost!”

The golem swept Seth into his arms and loped away into the trees.

Chapter 15



Horns

Kendra awoke disquieted. She rolled over and squinted at the gray predawn light filtering through the attic window. Twisting the other way, she peered at Seth curled up on his bed, the blankets up over his head. She closed her eyes. No need to rise before the sun.

Then she heard the long, distant call of a horn. Was that what had awakened her? Another horn answered on a different pitch. She had never heard horns resounding from the woods of Fablehaven before.

She glanced over at Seth again. He was sure curled up tight. And he didn't normally sleep with his head under the covers.

Crossing to his bed, she peeked under his wadded sheets and found only his pillows. She checked under his bed and found his emergency kit missing.

Kendra did not relish her role as tattletale. But with a brother like Seth, what was she to do? It wasn't like he was stealing from the cookie jar. At Fablehaven, his adventurous nature sometimes led to life-threatening situations.

At the door to her grandparents' room Kendra knocked softly, then entered without waiting for an invitation. Their bed was empty. Maybe Seth wasn't gone after all. Perhaps everyone was awake but her. But why would Seth have disguised his bed?

She hurried downstairs and found her grandparents on the back porch with Tanu and Coulter. They all stood against the railing, gazing out over the yard. The sonorous moans of horns drifted to them from different parts of the woods. Some sounded nearby.

“What’s going on?” Kendra asked.

Grandma turned her head. “The centaurs are agitated about something. They seldom range this far from Grunhold, and never wind their horns so freely.”

Chills tingled through Kendra. “Seth is gone.”

The others whirled. “Gone?” Grandpa asked.

“I don’t know when,” Kendra reported. “He stuffed pillows under his covers. He took his emergency kit.”

Grandpa bowed his head, clapping a hand over his eyes. “That boy will ruin us yet.”

“We wouldn’t be hearing horns if they had caught him,” Coulter observed.

“True,” Grandma acknowledged.

Warren approached from behind, rubbing sleep from his eyes, his hair matted erratically. “What’s going on?”

“Apparently Seth has riled the centaurs,” Grandpa said.

“Would he have gone after the horn?” Grandma asked. “Surely he couldn’t be so foolish.”

“If he had gone after the horn, the centaurs would have him,” Warren said. “More likely he was mad he didn’t get to accompany us to Grunhold. He probably went sightseeing.”

Grandpa was gripping the porch railing hard enough to make the veins stand out on the backs of his hands. “We’d better send Hugo after him.” He raised his voice. “Hugo? Come!”

They waited. Nobody came.

Grandpa faced the others, looking sick. “He couldn’t have cajoled Hugo into joining him?”

“Mendigo?” Grandma called.

A moment later, the human-sized wooden puppet came dashing across the lawn, the golden hooks of his joints jingling. He stopped near the porch.

“Did Hugo leave with Seth?” Grandma asked.

The puppet pointed toward the woods.

“No wonder the centaurs haven’t caught him,” Tanu said. “If he’s on the run with Hugo, he should make it back.”

“And I’ll have to deal with the aftermath,” Grandpa grumbled. “The centaurs don’t smile on trespassers.”

“What can we do?” Kendra asked.

Grandpa harrumphed. “We wait.”

“Who would like a smoothie?” Grandma asked.

Everyone but Grandpa asked for one. Grandma was walking into the house when Tanu spoke up. “Here he comes.”

Kendra looked across the yard. Hugo came loping out of the woods at full speed with Seth tucked under one arm. The golem charged straight to the deck and placed Seth on his feet. At first her brother looked worried, but then he started trying to resist a smile. The call of horns continued to echo across the woods, the forlorn notes occasionally overlapping.

“Is something funny?” Grandpa asked in a severe tone.

“No, sir,” Seth said, still wrestling against a smirk.

Grandpa trembled with anger. “The centaurs are not to be trifled with. And you are not to be trusted. You are grounded indefinitely. You will spend the rest of your time here locked in a cell in the dungeon.”

Grandma laid a hand on Grandpa’s arm. “Stan.”

Grandpa shrugged away from her. “I’ll not lighten the punishment this time. We’ve clearly been too gentle in the past. He is not an imbecile. He knows that this type of behavior puts himself and his family at risk. And for what? To sneak a peek at some centaurs! Frivolous amusement! Hugo, how could you have joined him in this?”

The golem pointed at Seth. “Horn.”

“Yes, we hear the war horns,” Grandpa said impatiently. Then he paused, his expression softening. “Are you telling me that you went to rescue Seth after you heard the horns?”

“No,” Seth said, no longer smiling. He took something from his emergency kit. “He’s telling you that we got the Soul of Grunhold.” He held up the pearly unicorn horn.

Everyone on the deck gaped in disbelief.

“I’ll be jiggered,” Coulter murmured.

Grandpa was the first to recover, his eyes intently roving the trees.
“Inside. Now.”

Seth returned the horn to his emergency kit and climbed over the porch railing. Warren clapped him warmly on the back. “Well done!”

“Hugo, resume patrolling the yard,” Grandpa said. “Your excursion with Seth never happened.”

Kendra followed her brother into the house, her mind reeling. How could he have possibly gotten the horn? Had there been some sort of total centaur malfunction? What about the guards and the maze and the troll? What about the guilt that prevented the horn from being taken?

They took seats in the living room.

“So, how mad are you?” Seth asked, holding up the lustrous horn, a grin creeping back onto his face.

“Less mad,” Grandpa admitted, fighting a smile himself. “At least you weren’t endangering us frivolously. Although it was still unwise. How was this accomplished?”

“First I went to Graulas.”

“The demon?” Grandma exclaimed.

“When I was outside with the satyrs, I heard him calling to me, summoning me, just like when I heard the wraith in the dungeon. I figured Graulas could explain what was happening to me, since dark stuff is his specialty. He told me that the nail turned me into a shadow charmer.”

“A shadow charmer?” Coulter repeated, frowning.

“Yeah,” Seth replied. “That was why I could see the invisible goblin at the hotel, and how I heard the voices. I already had most of the powers. Graulas just explained the details and made it official.”

The adults traded uncomfortable glances.

“Finish recounting how you obtained the horn,” Grandpa prompted.

Seth related the whole adventure, from the help he received from Nero, to crawling past the centaurs, to tricking the mountain troll, to his hasty retreat to the yard.

“No centaurs saw you,” Grandpa said.

“Not a glimpse,” Seth assured him.

“And you told the troll your name was Navarog,” Grandma confirmed.

“Right.”

“The centaurs will undoubtedly suspect us,” Grandpa said wearily. “But without proof, they cannot go to war. Our story will be that we tried to warn them as soon as we learned that the Society might be after the horn. They will be reluctant to admit that we stole the horn out from under them, and may embrace an alternate explanation.”

“Meanwhile, we should head for Wyrmoost,” Warren said. “Once we retrieve the key to the Australian vault, we can return the horn to the centaurs. We’ll pretend we recovered it from the Society.”

“We mustn’t move hastily,” Grandpa replied. “We should consult with the leadership of the Knights of the Dawn. This mission to Wyrmoost must succeed. We don’t have the expertise in this room to form a proper team.”

“I’ll second that,” Coulter muttered.

“We’ll need dragon tamers,” Tanu agreed.

“For sure I’m going,” Seth announced. “I got the horn.”

Grandpa turned to him. “You aren’t out of the woods yet, young man. Don’t start making wild presumptions. You took a huge unauthorized risk going to the centaurs.”

“Would you have ever authorized it?”

“We’re all fortunate you succeeded,” Grandpa continued, ignoring the comment. “Had you failed, you would be dead and we would have a war on our hands. Additionally, this shadow charmer business will require further investigation. Shadow charmers are the stuff of old bedtime stories. They are generally the villains. We have no idea what kind of access dark creatures may now have to you.”

“What if Graulas can now spy on us through your eyes?” Grandma said.

“I don’t think it works like that,” Seth said.

“We possess little sure knowledge of shadow charmers,” Grandpa reiterated. “We’ll do what we can to acquire more.”

“Don’t hold your breath,” Coulter mumbled.

Grandpa leaned forward, regarding Seth kindly. “I honestly don’t know what to do with you. Facing Graulas was incredibly brave. So was retrieving the horn. I know you had good intentions, that you took a calculated risk. Moreover, you weren’t wrong. You pulled it off. Recovering the horn was a major coup. But until we learn more about your status as a

shadow charmer, and because you took a potentially disastrous risk without permission, I'm afraid I still have to punish you."

"Punish?" Seth blurted, rising to his feet, the horn in his hand. "Good thing I didn't find the cure for cancer—you might have had me arrested!"

"I'm with your grandfather on this," Grandma said. "We love you and we're proud of you. The risks you took worked out this time. But how can we reward such behavior? Because we love you, we must teach you caution, or your boldness will destroy you."

"I weighed my options and made smart choices," Seth responded. "I didn't set out to borrow the horn. I only decided to try for the horn after Graulas showed how my skills as a shadow charmer gave me a realistic chance at success. It was me or nobody. What would Patton have done?"

Warren chuckled. "He would have shaved the centaurs, dipped them in honey, covered them with feathers, and hung them up like a bunch of piñatas." Kendra, Seth, and Tanu laughed. "I'm just saying."

"Very few men who live their lives like Patton Burgess die in bed," Grandma said gravely, extinguishing the snickers.

"We're not sure how to guide you, Seth," Grandpa said resignedly. "Considered in context, maybe your decisions were reasonable. Maybe if we were more willing to let you take risks, you could have come to us. I certainly don't relish reprimanding you for courage and success."

"Then don't!" Seth urged. "Just be glad we have the horn! I know you love me, but sometimes that gets in the way. Honestly, was there any chance you would have let me visit Graulas if I'd come to you and asked?"

Grandpa met Grandma's eyes. "No," he admitted.

"You guys don't like to let me take risks because you feel like you have to protect me. Even when protecting me could harm all of us. If we don't stop the Sphinx, you won't be able to protect anybody. I wasn't off goofing around. Sometimes risks are necessary."

"You'll need to give your grandmother and me some time to consider this in private," Grandpa said.

"Just keep in mind that my new abilities could come in handy at the dragon sanctuary," Seth said.

"The excursion to Wyrmoost will likely be a suicide mission," Grandma said. "The entire sanctuary is a death trap. Punishment or no, keep

in mind that we'll need to send in a small team of our most experienced operatives."

Seth put his hands on his hips. "You can't just cut me out of it."

"Who we include or exclude is not up to you," Grandma stated firmly.

"The reward would be not having to go," Coulter huffed.

"Yeah, well, I'll give this stupid horn back to the centaurs before I get left out of the trip to Wyrmoost," Seth threatened. "Good luck taking it from me!"

"It isn't going to be a vacation," Coulter said.

"And it isn't about seeing cool dragons," Grandpa growled, clearly losing his temper.

"Although they will be cool," Warren murmured, earning an elbow from Tanu.

Tears brimmed in Seth's eyes. His mouth opened as if he wanted to say more; then he turned and stormed out of the room.

"What are we going to do with that boy?" Grandma sighed.

"I don't know," Grandpa said. "If he hadn't decided to go after the horn, we'd still be treading water. Maybe he's the only one of us seeing this clearly."

Grandma shook her head. "Don't kid yourself. His main interest is still the adventure. Saving the world is a happy side effect. This is all still a game to him."

"Patton was the same way," Warren mentioned. "He did a lot of good, partly because he relished the thrill."

"I think Seth cares," Kendra spoke up. "It isn't only about the fun anymore. I think he's learning."

"He went through a lot tonight," Tanu said. "And he hasn't had much sleep. His emotions are tangled."

"I could go talk to him," Kendra offered.

"No, let him brood," Grandma said. "He's a good boy. He'll settle down and find the shame in his outburst if we let him stew."

"He's right that we can't take the horn from him," Warren pointed out. "In fact, we may not be able to use it without him. It is still stolen property. He may be the only person who can withstand the guilt."

“We’ll cross that bridge when we must,” Grandpa said. “I swear, that boy will be the death of me. For now, let me get on the phone to Dougan. The Lieutenants should be able to help us assemble a strike force.”

“I’ll go and get—” Grandma began, but the sudden blast of a horn cut her off. Much louder than the other horns, this one sounded close.

Warren rushed out of the room. “They’re at the outskirts of the yard,” he called.

“I’ll handle this,” Grandpa said. “I hope Seth is right about their lack of proof.”

“Let me come,” Kendra suggested. “It’ll look more innocent, like we were caught off guard.”

Grandpa appeared ready to disagree. Then his expression changed. “Why not? You’re right, we don’t want to appear the least bit defensive. We want to look bewildered by their presence. But let me do the talking.”

Dale came stumbling down the stairs, bleary-eyed and in his nightclothes. “What’s all the racket?”

“Dale,” Grandma said. “Go stand on the deck and watch Stan speak with the centaurs. We have no idea why they’ve come.”

Grandpa escorted Kendra outside. They crossed the lawn to where Cloudwing waited beside a tall centaur with light blue fur.

“Greetings, Cloudwing,” Grandpa said as they drew near. “I didn’t expect to see you again so soon.”

“Make no pretenses at courtesy,” the blue centaur growled. “Return the Soul.”

“Now, hold your horses,” Grandpa responded in a less friendly tone. “What are you talking about? I’m not sure we’ve met.”

“Skygazer is our spiritual leader,” Cloudwing explained.

“When I awoke today,” Skygazer said, “the power shielding Grunhold had waned. The Heart remained, but the Soul had fled. We found human tracks leading to the marsh. On the far side of the marsh we located similar tracks along with the unmistakable footfalls of your golem. The golem’s tracks were very fresh, and returned directly to your yard.”

Grandpa stared at Skygazer in astonishment. “And you think that means one of us took the horn?” Kendra had never realized her grandfather was such a good actor. His disbelief seemed authentic. “One of our spies

recently sent us information that our enemies might make an attempt for the horn. We relayed that information to your king. I sent Hugo out as a precaution, to keep watch for anything suspicious.”

“You asked to borrow the Soul yesterday,” Cloudwing reminded him.

“Right, we *asked*. It would come in useful. We knew our enemies wanted it as well. But we harbored no illusions about stealing it. If we intended to steal it, why would we draw attention to ourselves with a visit? Why would we warn you to guard it well?”

Skygazer glowered. “When necessary, we have secret means of communicating with our mountain troll, Udnar. He mentioned the name Navarog.”

“Navarog!” Grandpa exclaimed. “The dragon? The demon prince? He was imprisoned until recently. We’ve heard he is abroad again. This bodes ill.”

“A demonic dragon could not have entered Grunhold,” Skygazer stated.

“Navarog can assume human form,” Grandpa said thoughtfully. “He is a powerful demon lord. He might have had magic to foil your defenses. Later, if he changed form again and took flight, it would explain why his footprints vanished.”

“Or he was working with you, and the golem brought him here,” Cloudwing said, his posture and voice less certain.

Grandpa laughed. “Right, Navarog the dragon, the demon prince, is now our errand boy.”

Skygazer scowled. “Udnar reported that the intruder moved inhumanly fast, and taunted him by divulging his name, as if fearless of retribution. He left a banana where the Soul belonged.”

“These are dire tidings,” Grandpa lamented. “Our enemies will employ the horn to our significant detriment.”

“You claim no involvement in the thievery,” Skygazer confirmed.

Grandpa shrugged. “Does it seem possible that one of us could have navigated the many safeguards protecting your Soul? If we uncover any leads, you’ll be the first to know.”

“Very well,” Skygazer relented. “We’ll be watching.” The centaurs wheeled about and cantered away through the leafless woods.

* * *

Seth stalked back and forth across the attic bedroom, the horn clenched in his fist. He had felt confident that his success would override any resentment of his disobedience. And it had, to an extent. But in the end he still felt he had disappointed everyone.

Why did he want to go to Wyrmoost so badly? Were they right? Did he mostly want to go as a tourist? Was his chief motivation to see dragons? Or did he sincerely believe his presence would make a difference?

Yes, seeing dragons would be awesome. Why lie to himself? The dragons were part of the allure. But they were not his only reason for wanting to go to Wyrmoost. The Society of the Evening Star had come into his neighborhood and kidnapped his sister. The Sphinx had demonstrated that no place was safe anymore. He would never relent. He had to be stopped before he opened the demon prison and destroyed the world.

Seth had powers now. Who knew, with emotions immune to magical manipulation, he might make a fabulous dragon tamer. But nobody would know unless they gave him a chance. Gavin was supposedly their top dragon tamer, and he wasn't an adult either.

Certainly Seth could make himself useful at Wyrmoost. He always found a way. Was it any less dangerous to sit at home and do nothing while the Sphinx took over the world?

He shouldn't have gotten so angry at his grandparents. Getting them riled would not help his chances of going. They responded to reason, not threats. And they deserved his respect. It was just so frustrating having everyone always telling him what he could or couldn't do!

He heard footsteps on the stairs. The door opened and Kendra entered. She looked around the room, her eyes sweeping over him. Her brow crinkled. "Seth?"

The curtains were shut, leaving the room fairly dim. He stood a good distance from the door. But he wasn't hiding.

Kendra turned to go.

"I'm here," Seth said.

Startled, she spun around. "There you are! Where were you?"

"Here all along."

“Wow, I guess that shade walker thing really works. It isn’t that dark in here.”

Seth shrugged. “Did you want to scold me too?”

“Actually, I wanted to make sure you were all right. And to check out the unicorn horn.”

Seth held it up. “It’s heavier than it looks.” He studied it appraisingly. “I’d say it’s worth about ten million awesome dollars.”

“Or ten million idiot points. Depending on your perspective. Can I hold it?”

Seth scowled suspiciously. “Did they send you up here to get the horn from me?”

Kendra looked at him reproachfully. “No. I don’t think they’re stressed about your threats. I’m just interested.”

“I’m not sure I can let you handle it,” Seth said. “After all, it’s stolen property. What if you touch it and start feeling all guilty? You might go mental and try to return it to the centaurs.”

“You borrowed it, not me. What would I have to feel guilty about, as long as you don’t mind me touching it?”

Seth ran his thumb along the smooth surface of the horn. “If I’m able to lend it to you, it means I could entrust it to them as well. I won’t have to be included on the team to Wyrmoost.”

“We’ll have to find out if you can share it sooner or later. Might as well be now. Look, if you’re worried I’m trying to take it, just give me permission to hold it for a minute. Then I’ll have to give it back.”

Seth sighed. “Okay. You can hold it for a minute.” He held out the horn.

Kendra took it. “You’re right, it does feel heavier than it looks.”

“No guilt?”

“None. It’s so white.”

Seth frowned. “Looks like they won’t need me after all.”

Kendra handed the horn back to him. “Who knows what they’ll decide?”

“I do,” Seth said. “Patton’s message explained that Wyrmoost is protected by a powerful distracter spell. Which means that even though nobody will like the idea, you’ll probably have to go. For the other slots

they'll select old people like Warren. They'll be too worried that I'd get hurt, and that I don't have enough experience, never mind the fact that my proven abilities make me uniquely qualified."

"I don't see why you'd want to go," Kendra replied. "The thought that I might have to go makes me want to throw up."

"Even if Gavin joins the group?"

Kendra blushed. "Whatever. Why would that matter? We're barely pen pals." She bit her lower lip. "You think they might need him?"

"It's a guarantee. Wyrmoost is a dragon sanctuary, and he's the dragon-taming prodigy. This will be your second date at a deadly wildlife park! Next time you guys should go miniature golfing."

"You're a weirdo," Kendra said. "And you dodged my question. Why do you want to go so badly?"

"Would I love to see dragons? Sure, who wouldn't? Besides you, I mean. The more important reason is simple. We have to stop the Sphinx or we're all doomed, and I know I can help do it."

"There are lots of ways to help," Kendra argued.

"Good point. Maybe I can pack your sack lunches."

"You don't have to do everything."

"Nope. Just the boring stuff. Maybe I'll write the Sphinx a stern letter."

Kendra laid a hand on his shoulder. "No matter what happens, please promise that you won't do anything stupid."

"Or anything awesome. Depending on your perspective."

"Promise."

Seth fingered the horn. "We'll see."



Moving Out

Christmas had always been Kendra's favorite holiday. During her younger years, it had been a day when magic overlapped reality, when the regular routine was suspended and, under the cover of darkness, visitors swooped out of the sky and snuck down the chimney with presents. She had always hoped to stay up late and catch Santa in the act, but she always fell asleep before he came and had to settle for a plate full of cookie crumbs and a thank-you note.

As she grew older, Christmas became more about seeing her friends and family. The holiday meant fancy meals with Grandma and Grandpa Larsen, eating turkey or lamb off fine china with ornate silverware, then topping it all off with as much pie as she could handle. Thanks to the gifts given and received, there remained a giddy anticipation the night before and an enchanted atmosphere on the holiday itself.

This Christmas was different.

For one thing, her parents thought she was dead. For another, the holiday had totally blindsided her. She usually looked forward to Christmas Day for weeks in advance. This year, she hadn't even remembered it was Christmas Eve until Seth mentioned it before they went to bed. How could she pay attention to the calendar when her mind was consumed with a potentially deadly mission?

Kendra had decided that her brother should become a fortune-teller. He had correctly named her, Warren, and Gavin as members of the strike force. Tanu had been included as well. Grandpa had recited the same reasons that Seth had anticipated. Her brother was also correct that he would be left out.

Fortunately, Seth had taken the news much better than she would have expected. Grandma and Grandpa seemed relieved and surprised when he had handed over the horn without a fuss. Kendra assumed it must have helped that her brother had expected the decision. Whatever the reason behind his acceptance, Grandma and Grandpa had been sufficiently impressed to forgo formally grounding him. Kendra sometimes pitied her grandparents as they tried to manage Seth. Short of locking him in a cell, how were they supposed to ground a resourceful kid who refused to stop sneaking out?

Now Kendra sat alone in the living room, enjoying the aroma of the pies baking in the kitchen. There had been no Christmas tree, but her grandparents had filled stockings with treats and given her and Seth wrapped presents. Her presents had seemed suspiciously tailored for the upcoming mission: sturdy boots, a thick coat, new gloves. At least she had had something to unwrap.

They would be eating Christmas dinner at lunchtime, so she, Warren, and Tanu could leave to catch their flight. By the evening they would meet up with Gavin, Dougan, Trask, and Mara in Kalispell, Montana. From there a private helicopter would shuttle them to their destination.

It would be strangest to see Gavin and Mara. Despite her protests to the contrary, Kendra had developed a considerable crush on Gavin as they had exchanged letters during the fall. Seeing Mara would be odd because, since they had last spoken, the Native American woman had lost her mother and her home. Grandpa had explained that after the destruction of Lost Mesa, Mara had joined the Knights of the Dawn and was rapidly becoming one of their most trusted operatives.

Seth trotted into the room, face red from the cold outside. “Kendra, somebody brought you a special present.”

“What do you mean?”

“Come see.”

Seth led her to the back porch, where she found Verl waiting. Clad in a turtleneck and a black top hat, the satyr looked terrified. He was leaning

against the porch railing in an unnatural pose, straining to appear casual. As she opened the door, he raked his fingers through the hair above one ear and gave an awkward little smile. She stepped out onto the porch, and Seth followed.

When Verl spoke, his words came out in a rush, as if he were reciting rehearsed lines. “How good to see you, Kendra! What lovely weather today! I trust your holiday has been satisfactory? Mine has been splendid! I enjoyed a scrumptious breakfast of plum pudding and walnuts.”

“Nice to see you too, Verl,” Kendra said politely. “I really liked the picture you drew for me.”

His smile brightened. “A trifle,” he chortled, waving a dismissive hand. “I periodically dabble in the arts.”

“It was very lifelike.”

Verl plucked at the woolly fur on his legs. His eyes kept meeting hers, then glancing away. “I fear my humble portrait has become outdated. I must attempt another. You constantly blossom. Each day I find you fairer than the last.”

Beside Kendra, Seth tried to disguise his laughter by coughing.

“You’re very kind, Verl.”

“I had hoped to honor the festive customs of this holiday by giving you another present.”

“Oh, you shouldn’t have,” Kendra said.

“I cannot help myself.” Verl stepped aside, revealing a mysterious object about three feet tall covered by red fabric. “I hoped to give you a gift that would complement your beauty. What more glorious present could I give you than yourself?”

With the flair of a stage magician, Verl whisked the fabric away, unveiling a statue of Kendra wearing a toga and holding aloft a cluster of grapes. Seth started coughing again. It sounded like he might choke. The statue was very artfully rendered.

“Wow,” Kendra said, “that looks just like me.”

Verl flashed a crooked smile. “I have never felt such a crushing weight of inspiration. My hands were guided by my admiration.”

“I need to grab a drink,” Seth managed, eyes watering. He slipped into the house. His laughter became audible after the door shut.

“Seth loves to rake me over the coals,” Verl chuckled. “I don’t mind trading jests now and again. We enjoy an almost . . . brotherly affection.”

“You really did amazing work,” Kendra said, crouching in front of the statuette. “It’s too much. You shouldn’t have. You know, I meant to get you a gift, but things have been really hectic.”

Verl waved both hands. “No, stop, please, no gift is required. My lady, a soft glance, a kind word, these more than suffice. Your very existence leaves me forever indebted.”

“You get that I’m fifteen?”

“All too well. I’ve come to terms with the sobering reality that we can never be a couple. Consider me a remote admirer, adoring your elegance from afar. All the great love stories have their tragic elements.”

Kendra stood and smiled. “Thanks, Verl. The statue is beautiful. It obviously took a lot of work. Happy holidays.” She took off his hat and pecked him on the forehead.

Verl’s face lit up like a Christmas tree. His eyes darted and his fingers fidgeted. He met eyes with Kendra and bowed stiffly. “Merry Christmas.” Turning away from her, he pumped his fist. She heard him mutter something like, “Newel owes me an hour of television.” Then he vaulted over the porch railing and ran off across the yard.

She still held his hat in her hands.

Seth returned to the patio. “You just made his year.”

“I can’t believe he carved a statue of me.”

“You need to stop blossoming into such a lovely young maiden.” Kendra punched his arm. “I told you, the guy has it bad. He forgot his hat? He made that, too, you know.”

“What should I do with it?”

“Leave it on the porch. Are you going to bring your monument inside?”

“I think I’ll keep it out here for now. Why grapes and a toga?”

Seth opened the door. “Verl’s mind is a mystery better left unsolved. Grandma said dinner is almost ready. Want to help set the table for your last meal?”

“That isn’t funny! What if it really is my last meal!”

Seth rolled his eyes. “It won’t be. I’m sure you guys will grab something at the airport.”

Dinner consisted of a huge ham garnished with pineapple, garlic mashed potatoes, carrots sweetened with brown sugar, green beans, and hot buttered rolls. For dessert there was pumpkin pie, apple pie, pecan pie, and vanilla ice cream.

Seth ate like a bottomless pit, wolfing down his dessert quickly and excusing himself before anyone else. Kendra struggled to find her appetite. She picked at small portions and managed to finish with a warm piece of apple pie.

After the meal, Grandma and Grandpa had parting words for them, but Kendra had a tough time paying attention. Her visit to Lost Mesa with Warren had been a terrifying experience, and this had every chance of being worse. Warren was specifically charged with her care. The Lieutenants had desired a five-person team, and to that they had added Kendra, along with Warren to protect her. Theoretically she and Warren would see no action, hiding out in the caretaker’s home. But Kendra had already learned the hard way how such plans can go awry. Nobody knew much about Wyrmoost. Supposedly Patton was the only outsider who had ventured there in many decades.

Kendra had put on a brave face. She understood the necessity of the mission and knew she would have to appear confident and eager in order for Grandma and Grandpa to consent to her participation. In the end, her willingness and the overall importance of the undertaking had earned permission from her grandparents.

The time to depart arrived before Kendra liked. She ascended the stairs to the attic with Dale to retrieve her bags, expecting to say good-bye to Seth. Instead she found a note on her bed atop a smoky gray breastplate with a lustrous sheen.

Dear Kendra,

Merry Christmas! This breastplate is made of a super strong metal called adamant. The satyrs gave it to me, and I want you to wear it to Wyrmoost. It should be small enough to wear under your clothes no problem. In fact, it was kind of small on me and will probably fit you better.

I hope you'll forgive me for not saying good-bye in person. It is hard for me to get left out. I've found a place in the woods where I go when I need time to think. It is safe and not too far and I won't let the centaurs get me or anything. I've made some good friends at Fablehaven. They'll help me stop sulking. Tell Grandma and Grandpa not to worry. I may stay there for a little while. If they want to lock me in the dungeon when I get back, so it goes.

Stay safe. Don't get eaten by dragons. Have fun.

Love,

Seth

Kendra folded the note. It was so sweet and so selfish all at once. How could he run off to the woods again after all that had happened? Everyone had plenty to worry about without adding another unnecessary disappearance by her brother to the list. She picked up the breastplate, wondering if something so light would be much protection. Judging by the weight, it felt like the breastplate could have been fashioned out of tinfoil. He had called it super strong. She rapped the breastplate with her knuckles and supposed it felt solid.

When she shared the note with Grandpa, he read it with a frown, then rubbed his eyes. He relayed the content of the message to the others, and asked Warren and Tanu to go make sure Seth hadn't tried to stow away in the car or the knapsack. Grandpa assured Kendra that he would take care of the problem, and urged her to put it out of her mind.

Kendra showed Coulter the breastplate, since magical items were his specialty. Coulter held the object reverently for a long while, examining it with care, then gave it back to her with a charge to keep it hidden. He warned that people would kill for an authentic piece of adamant armor, assured her that the breastplate was priceless, and confirmed what Seth had claimed about it being supernaturally durable.

Before she felt ready, Kendra was hugging her grandparents good-bye and hurrying out to climb inside the idling SUV.

* * *

Although sizable drifts of chunky snow lined the roads, the cold night in Kalispell was shockingly clear. In the moonless sky, the stars gleamed

sharper and more numerous than Kendra had ever witnessed. While they were waiting outside the small airport for Tanu to bring the rental car, Warren had pointed out faint dots gradually drifting in straight lines across the star-strewn firmament, explaining that they were satellites.

As the rental car pulled into the hotel parking lot, Kendra became fidgety, drumming an anxious rhythm on her thighs. Warren had phoned ahead to confirm that the others had arrived. The thought of seeing Gavin made her edgy and self-conscious. Was this how Verl had felt earlier in the day? Suddenly his behavior seemed much less laughable.

She breathed deeply. All she had to do was act friendly. Any pressure she felt was a product of her overactive imagination. This was a dangerous mission, not a date. If romantic feelings ever arose between them, it would happen as a natural outgrowth of their friendship.

Inside the lobby, a fire roared in the hearth. The red commercial carpeting featured an unbroken pattern of gold fleurs-de-lis. A bald man with spectacles and a flannel shirt sat reading a book near the fire. Kendra eyed him suspiciously. At this point, she was ready to consider anyone a possible spy. She wished Seth were with them so he could check for invisible enemies.

While Tanu checked in at the counter, a voice hailed Kendra from across the lobby. She turned and found Gavin coming toward her with a warm smile. When he reached her he gave her a quick hug. Part of her wished the embrace had lasted longer.

He seemed even better-looking than the last time she had seen him, his naturally dark complexion slightly tanner, his cheeks more defined. He remained slim and wiry, moving with the confident grace of a dancer. Was he a tad taller? "Good to see you," Kendra said, trying to keep her manner light and casual.

"I heard you were k-k-k-kidnapped," he stammered.

"I guess word gets around. At least I got away." She glanced at the man reading his book. Was it wise to converse so close to him?

"That's Aaron Stone," Gavin said. "He's a Knight, and our helicopter pilot."

Without glancing up from his book, Aaron saluted her with two fingers.

Warren came and clapped Gavin on the back. “Ready for some more mayhem? Didn’t get your fill at Lost Mesa?”

Gavin gave him half a smile. “You have to w-w-watch it or I’m going to start associating you two with near-death experiences.”

Tanu finished at the counter and waved for them to follow. In the elevator, Gavin explained that the others were ready to have an orientation meeting. Kendra dumped her luggage in her room before joining the rest of her companions in a suite at the end of the hall.

When she entered, Dougan rose from his seat, a bear of a man with bushy red hair and a densely freckled brow. He bore a strong resemblance to his brother Maddox. “Sorry you got roped into this,” he said as he shook her hand.

Trask sat on a bed, polishing the absurdly oversized crossbow on his lap. Designed to fire two quarrels at once, the cartoonish weapon looked almost too large to carry. Mara leaned against a wall in a far corner of the room, arms folded, her expression inscrutable. Her tank top looked extra white against her coppery skin and flaunted the dramatic lines of her lean, athletic physique.

“Glad to see we’re all here,” Trask said in a low voice. “Mara?”

She struck a match and lit a fat white candle.

“While the candle burns, no outsiders should be able to eavesdrop on our conversation,” Trask explained. “I don’t want to blab all night, but I thought we should take a few minutes to get our heads right and make sure we’re all on the same page.” His eyes were on Kendra. “This mission is voluntary. It could not be more dangerous. This dragon sanctuary is closed to visitors for a reason. We know very little about how it operates or what we can expect to find inside. Patton never elaborated about Wyrmoost much, perhaps because he did not want people disturbing the key he had hidden. We can presume there will be a caretaker. Beyond that we know very little. This could be a one-way trip. We may all die. That is not the goal, but it is the reality. I don’t want to be here. I’m here because I feel our enemies have made it necessary. If you still want to participate in this mission of your own free will, I want to hear you say so.”

Everyone individually answered in the affirmative, including Kendra. Mara answered last, whispering her response.

Trask nodded. “Now that Charlie Rose is gone, I’m considered the lead dragon tamer for the Knights of the Dawn. I’m not in the same league as Chuck Rose. Nor do I have the innate talent of his son, Gavin. Along with Dougan, I’m one of four Lieutenants of the Knights. I have a long history as a detective. I possess many skills, but I’m no true dragon tamer. It takes everything I have to keep it together in front of a dragon. That said, I have spent time at the four dragon sanctuaries open to human visitation. I’ve done my best to learn how dragons behave. In my gear I have six arrows tipped with adamant. Most dragons would see them as harmless toys. And they would be right. We will not survive Wyrmoost by force. We’ll survive by never getting into a fight.”

“I’ll s-s-s-second that,” Gavin said.

Trask set aside his crossbow. “According to the plan, Kendra will help guide Aaron to a meadow roughly two miles from the gate to Wyrmoost. If we tried to fly the helicopter over the wall into the sanctuary, none of us would survive—the magical barrier extends miles into the sky. After we leave the helicopter, Kendra will lead us to the gate, where we will use the first horn to enter. Making a guess based on the gate at Isla del Dragón, our assumption is that the gate locks from both sides, and that the distracter spell may function in both directions as well. We will probably need Kendra and the horn to get in and out. That is her main role in this mission. Warren joins us strictly as her protector.

“While Kendra and Warren stay with the caretaker, the rest of us are charged with finding this key hidden by Patton Burgess. Locating the key may be the biggest trick. All we know is that we may find a clue below the false gravestone of Patton Burgess. We may require Kendra’s help to translate the clue.”

Trask slid off the bed and began strolling around the room. “Throughout the coming days, we will have to rely on each other implicitly. I’ve said a few words about myself. I would like each of us to introduce ourselves and to sum up how we intend to be of service. Trust must unite us. When the Sphinx ran the Knights, his philosophy relied on secrets and mistrust. I never liked that system, hiding behind masks among friends. We were supposedly compartmentalizing information in case of spies, but in the end it kept us apart. That type of system made it easier for spies to operate among us and, yes, to lead us. Kendra, I know you have a big secret, and Gavin, so do you. The Society is aware of Kendra’s, and has most likely

guessed Gavin's by now. If our enemies can know our secrets, why not our most trusted friends? Each of you is free to choose how much you care to reveal. Try to be as forthright as possible. Let's start with Dougan." Trask sat down.

Dougan cleared his throat. "I'm a Lieutenant in the Knights of the Dawn. I am no dragon tamer, but I'm a seasoned adventurer, mountaineer, and survivalist. Trask is our team leader, and I'm here to support him."

Tanu stood. "I'm Tanugatoa, call me Tanu. I'm a potion master and I've served with the Knights for almost twenty years. The dragon sanctuary should be rich with ingredients unavailable elsewhere. Hopefully mixing potions will be my greatest contribution. In a pinch, I'm also an experienced healer."

They had been moving in a circle, and Kendra was next. All eyes turned to her as she started speaking. "I've only been a Knight for a few months. My one real ability is that I'm fairykind, which the Sphinx knows." She noticed Gavin and Mara staring at her in astonishment. "I can see in the dark, command fairies, and I can understand just about any language related to Silvian, the fairy language. Distracter spells don't work on me, which is why I'll lead us to the gate. I think we're hoping Patton may have left some clues for us in the secret fairy language, which I can read. I guess that's it."

Warren slapped his hands together. "I'm Warren Burgess, a great-great-nephew of the legendary and somewhat infamous Patton Burgess. I'm a Scorpio who enjoys badminton, snorkeling, and Chinese checkers." He paused for laughter but only earned a couple of smiles. "I'm Kendra's second cousin. I've worked with the Knights for about ten years, part of which I spent in a catatonic stupor at Fablehaven. I'm here to protect Kendra. We brought some useful items, including a knapsack which contains a fairly spacious extra-dimensional storeroom. We loaded the knapsack with lots of supplies, including powdered milk, walrus butter, and a man-sized wooden automaton called Mendigo. You're all welcome to use the extra-dimensional compartment for storage. Claims to fame? I once broke half the bones in my body slaying a giant, two-headed panther."

Mara stepped forward, standing tall and holding her head high. Her body language was defiant, as if ready for a fight, and she spoke in a serious, resonant alto. "I am Mara Tabares. I was about to inherit the stewardship of the Lost Mesa preserve when it was overthrown and my

mother was killed. A dragon played a key role in the tragedy, as did a spy from the Society. I've always had an unusual connection to wild animals. I am a skilled tracker and wind watcher. Some say I may have the potential to become a dragon tamer." She fell silent.

"More than potential," Trask added. "I worked with Mara in October at Soaring Cliffs, and she remained self-possessed during a prolonged interview with a pair of adolescent dragons. No small feat. But I interrupt. Gavin?"

Gavin rubbed the back of his neck, his eyes only occasionally straying from the floor. "I guess you guys know that my dad was Charlie Rose. I b-b-basically grew up on the Frosted Peaks dragon sanctuary in the Himalayas. My dad had a tight relationship with the dragons there. After my mom died giving birth to me, he arranged for me to be accepted as a dragon brother. It is sort of like Kendra being fairykind—the dragons adopted me as one of their own and shared some power with me. I can s-s-s-speak their languages. If dragons kill me they would be challenged as if they had slain a dragon. My status as a dragon brother even affects me physically—I'm a little stronger and f-faster than I look."

He combed his fingers through his hair. "Nobody has been a dragon brother for a very long time. My dad worried that my abilities would turn me into a target, so he kept me a secret. After he was killed, my dad's best friend Arlin brought me to the Knights. Since the Sphinx was running the Knights when I joined, he knew the basics of what I could do, and so we're p-p-pretty sure the Society has guessed what I am. But we're still trying to keep the details of being a dragon brother quiet in case they don't know everything."

Trask rose to his feet. "Thanks for the candid introductions. As you can see, we have an impressive group assembled. All of you have at least been in the presence of a dragon, although a couple of you have never been to a dragon sanctuary.

"Let me convey a few thoughts about dragons, and then we'll get to bed. Gavin, feel free to jump in. Dragons are magical from the tips of their fangs to the ends of their tails. The old ones are among the most ancient creatures on the planet. Highly intelligent, they have their own unique languages, but often speak hundreds of additional tongues. No two dragons are identical. They have diverse appearances, various breath weapons, and

distinct spell-casting capabilities. Much like humans, dragons have a wide array of personalities. Some are just. Others are wicked.

“Communicating with dragons is difficult. Paralyzing fear radiates from them. In the presence of a dragon, most people find that their muscles lock up and their tongues stop working. With the unique exception of Gavin, you should never look a dragon in the eye. To do so will leave you entranced and incapacitated.

“Since dragons are not accustomed to communicating with other creatures, the best way to survive a draconic encounter is to hold an intelligent conversation. They find it amusing, and will often spare your life.

“Dragon sanctuaries are unlike other preserves you may have visited. Some protections are usually afforded to the caretaker, who also serves as the gatekeeper. Otherwise, there are no protections to visitors. For those of us heading beyond the abode of the caretaker, it will be like venturing into the wild. And we will have more than dragons to contend with. These sanctuaries were founded as a home for creatures too large and powerful to cohabit with the beings at the more traditional preserves. Little is known about Wyrmoost. Who can say what we might encounter? Gavin, do you have any words of advice?”

Gavin shrugged. “We’re going in there well armed. Our weapons might come in handy against some of the creatures we may encounter. But forget about your weapons if we face a threat from dragons. The first goal is to talk. The second is to flee or hide. Humans can’t stand against dragons. Once upon a time there were dragon slayers. That time is long gone.

“Here’s a metaphor my dad used: Dragons see us as we see mice. We’re not very tasty. We’re not a real threat. If they find us underfoot, they’ll kill us just to keep the area tidy. But if we talk to them, they’ll view us as we would a talking mouse. We become a surprising novelty, a cute pet. In the presence of a dragon, the goal is to amuse and impress. Play the role of a p-p-p-precocious mouse that no human would kill.”

“Sound advice,” Trask approved. “Any questions? No? Fine with me. We’ve gone over the basics. I’m proud to work with each of you. Let’s get some sleep. Tomorrow will be an eventful day.”

Mara blew out the candle.

* * *

The splintery wall of the crate pricked Seth's arm. The tin of whale butter in his pocket pressed against his thigh. He shifted position, but the movement bent his neck forward uncomfortably, nearly forcing his chin to his chest. The close, stale air inside the crate smelled of dust and rotting wood. He wished he could bore a hole in the side. Sweat slicked his skin. The carpet tented over him served as an unwanted blanket in the balmy darkness.

The saddest part was that the cramped stuffiness of the crate was almost certainly unnecessary. The odds were slim that anyone would descend the ladder until the next morning. He had clung to the ladder near the mouth of the knapsack, listening as Warren bade Kendra good night, and then descended to hide in case anyone decided to stow some final items before going to bed.

All remained quiet. It was probably safe to end the claustrophobic torture, but he refused to risk losing his chance to travel with the others to Wyrmoost. He had found a few roomier crates, but this one was up against the wall, well protected by other shabby containers. Inside this crate, with the lid on and a carpet draped over him, nobody would find him.

Tanu had missed him when he had searched inside the knapsack just before leaving. The big Samoan had thoroughly checked the room with a bright flashlight. He had even lifted the lid to the crate where Seth was hiding, but he had not looked under the carpet.

Seth wondered what Grandma and Grandpa were doing at the moment. As night fell, they would be freaking out, thinking he had roamed off into the woods and gotten lost or captured or killed. Any of those conclusions were fine with him, as long as they failed to guess the truth.

His decision to stow away inside the knapsack had not been made alone. On Christmas Eve, Grandpa had brought him into his office to deliver the news that he would not be part of the team sent to recover the key from Wyrmoost. Having already considered stowing away as a possible contingency, to allay suspicions, Seth had received the news with stoic acceptance.

After the seven members of the team had been announced to the rest of the family, Seth had retired to his room to think and found Warren waiting,

spinning a basketball on the tip of his finger.

“Shame you won’t be coming,” Warren said, eyes on the ball.

“I’m used to it,” Seth replied. “I always miss the coolest stuff.”

“Think fast.” Warren chuckled the ball at him. Seth caught it and tossed it back briskly. “How bad do you want to stow away?” the man asked.

“Stow away?”

Warren grinned. “Don’t bother with the innocent routine. I can spot fake innocence a mile away. Must be pretty tempting when you think about that knapsack. We’ll have to bring it for supplies, of course. Lots of room in there. Lot of places to hide.”

“You’re a jerk,” Seth said.

“Take it easy. I’m not here to rub it in. I kind of hope you do it.”

“What?”

Warren stood, dribbling the basketball between his legs. “I think you’re right. You’ve got unusual abilities that could come in handy. If you hadn’t pulled the nail from the revenant, I’d still be a mute albino. If you hadn’t been at the old manor when we went to retrieve the Chronometer, we never would have found Patton and Fablehaven would have fallen. I’m a believer, Seth. I’m not here to make you go. But if you *want* to go, I’m not going to discourage you. In fact, tomorrow afternoon, I’ll leave the knapsack in the backseat of the SUV, and I’ll make sure a door is unlocked.”

“This is some sort of trick. Grandpa put you up to this. It’s a trap.”

“No trick, I swear. We can’t afford to blow it at Wyrmoost. The Sphinx has the Oculus. We can’t let him have the Translocator. Think what will happen if the Sphinx can see anywhere and go anywhere! What will prevent him from grabbing all of the artifacts? How long will it be before he opens Zzyzx and none of us have anywhere to hide? Like it or not, we’re past playing it safe. If you want to be at Wyrmoost, I’d rather have you there than sitting idle at Fablehaven.”

That conversation had been all it took to thoroughly convince Seth. He had written the note to explain his absence, and, as Warren had promised, after Christmas dinner, the back of the SUV was unlocked, the knapsack waiting.

Since Seth had entered the knapsack, Mendigo had been his only company. Unlike Hugo, the overgrown puppet had no will, no identity. It

did not speak. The big limberjack existed only to carry out orders. Once, the wooden figure had obeyed orders from the witch Muriel. Now it was loyal to the Sorensens.

Seth continued to wait inside the crate, perspiring in the stifling darkness. Aside from the ample provisions packed for the others, Warren had stashed extra food inside an old trunk for Seth. When he felt certain the others were asleep, his reward would be to grab some granola bars and peanut butter. But before Seth could reach that conclusion, he heard the rasp of wood scraping against wood, as if the lid of a container had slid open. He had heard nobody descend the ladder. Peeking out from under the carpet, he saw no light. He heard the faint creak of a trunk opening, the rustle of a bag, and the crunch of an apple.

Somebody was getting into his private food stash!

The noisy munching was loudest right after each new bite. The chewing would gradually dwindle until the volume increased again with a fresh crunch. Who could be eating the apple? Certainly not Mendigo. The puppet didn't eat. Seth felt sure he would have heard somebody come down the ladder, and anyone but Kendra would require a light. Could Coulter have missed a stowaway spy from when Kendra had first obtained the magical knapsack?

Shifting his position slightly, Seth got out his flashlight. There was a wooden baseball bat near his crate that he could use for a weapon. He hesitated, worried what he might see. He would spring into action on the next new bite, he told himself.

The unseen food thief bit into the apple again, and Seth stood up, flinging off the lid to the crate and switching on the flashlight. The beam spotlighted a stocky little goblin with an oversized head; grimy, greenish skin; long, pointed ears; and a wide, lipless mouth. The goblin stared into the light, an apple core cupped in one pudgy hand, eyes flashing like bronze coins.

"Who are you?" Seth asked in a hard voice, groping for the bat.

"I might try the same question," the stout goblin replied calmly, his voice grumpy.

Seth's fingers found the handle of the bat. "You're eating my supplies."

"You're invading Bubda's home."

“This knapsack belongs to my sister.” Keeping his flashlight beam on the goblin, Seth began to climb over barrels and boxes toward the uncluttered portion of the room. The squat goblin stood barely taller than Seth’s waist. “If I tell her you’re down here, they’ll boot you out.”

“But you’re hiding too,” the goblin said with a sly smile.

“Maybe. But I’d happily give myself up to get rid of a spy.”

“A spy? You’re an ally of the night. You speak good Duggish. I took it you knew what Bubda was.”

“Which is what?”

“A hermit troll.”

“I’ve heard of hermit trolls,” Seth said. “You’re the kind who hide out in attics and under bridges. I’ve never met one.”

“Bubda didn’t want to meet you. But you wouldn’t leave, and Bubda got hungry.” The troll stuffed the apple core in his mouth, seeds and all.

Seth reached the open floor. He held the baseball bat at his side. No need to act threatening if he could keep this friendly. “How long have you lived here?”

“Long time. No need to move once you find the right place. Dark. Well-stocked. Private. Places to hide. But two is a crowd.”

“Your name is Bubda?”

“Right.”

“I’m Seth. I’ll only be here a few days. Then you can have it back. How come Coulter never found you?”

Bubda crouched, tucking in his arms. The troll was gone. He looked exactly like a barrel. When he stood up straight again, the illusion ended. “Bubda hides well.”

“That was cool,” Seth said. “Can you look like other stuff?”

“Bubda has lots of tricks. Bubda never shows them all.”

“Did you collect all this stuff?” Seth shone his light around the room.

“Some was here. Some Bubda brought. Bubda finds what Bubda must.”

“You’re down here most of the time?”

“Almost always. Better that way.”

“What about a rest room?”

“Careful what barrel you open.”

Seth snickered. “I could use a rest room. I was thinking about sneaking out.”

“Up to you. Maybe you leave for good?”

Seth shook his head. “You’re stuck with me for a few days. Don’t you get lonely?”

“Bubda likes to hide. Bubda likes to rest.”

“We should be friends. I’m an ally of the night. We speak the same language.”

“Bubda likes to be alone. Other people are a pain. You’re other people, Seth. Better than some. Maybe better than most. But no people is best.”

“Will we get along?” Seth asked. “Are you going to try to harm me in my sleep?”

Bubda shrugged. “Bubda didn’t bother you yet. Bubda waited for you to go. Bubda can wait more.”

Seth glanced at the giant wooden puppet. “Okay. Try not to eat too much of my food. And don’t eat any of the other people’s food. If they notice it missing, we’re finished. Understood?”

“Bubda knows. Bubda only took food from where you took food. Bubda has other food.”

Seth wondered what other food Bubda meant. Did he eat the spoiled goo in the old barrels? The thought triggered Seth’s gag reflex. “All right. I guess we’re roommates.”

“More?” Bubda asked, pointing at the trunk.

“Sure, Bubda. Have a little more. You give me my space, and I’ll give you yours.”

The troll pursed his lips and nodded. “Deal.”

Bubda was no taller than Seth’s chest, but he looked heavy, and he had long, sharp fingernails. Seth sidled over to Mendigo and dropped his voice to a soft whisper. “Keep Bubda under constant watch. If he comes within ten feet of me while I’m sleeping, pin him to the ground. Same if he sneaks up on me at any time. You hear me?”

Mendigo gave a nod.



Wyrmoost

The helicopter soared through the clear sky, rotors beating at the cold air. Sitting up front with the pilot, Kendra enjoyed a breathtaking view of the snowy forest below through the large, curved windows. She had never seen beauty to compare with this rugged panorama of frozen summits and icy lakes.

Not long after they had taken off, Kendra had decided she never wanted to be a helicopter pilot. The numerous dials and gauges intimidated her. Aaron Stone controlled their direction with a stick that projected up between his legs. He used a second stick to take them up or down, and foot pedals to swing the tail from side to side. The coordination and know-how required seemed hopelessly beyond her.

“Go more to the right, Aaron,” Kendra said. Once again, the pilot was veering away from the pair of lofty peaks that dwarfed all others. Trask had said the mountains were actually the two highest points in North America, but were unrecognized as such because of the potent distracter spell shielding the sanctuary.

“You sure you see two tall mountains?”

“I’m staring right at them.”

Aaron lifted the visor on his helmet and squinted. “Are you looking at those summits?” He pointed away from their heading.

“No, the ones I see are much bigger. They’re by far the tallest mountains out here.”

He flipped down his visor. "This is odd. I can usually think my way around a distracter spell."

As they drew nearer, Kendra noticed that the shoulders of the imposing mountains were virtually clear of snow, along with much of the surrounding wilderness. She scoured the hills and valleys for dragons or other creatures, but saw none. She began to notice a faint rainbow shimmer in the air ahead of them, reminiscent of the aurora borealis. The soaring mountains drew ever nearer.

"We're getting close," Kendra said.

"You see the valentine?"

Kendra scanned the snow-choked forest below for a heart-shaped clearing. The helicopter was supposed to set down in the cordate meadow so they could continue the journey on foot. "Not yet."

They continued forward, but the helicopter began to slowly lose altitude as Aaron eased them closer to the ground. Below, the shadow of the helicopter rose and fell with the contours of the terrain. On many slopes, the snow sparkled in the sunlight. Kendra spotted a clearing shaped vaguely like a kidney. "Could that be it?" she asked, pointing.

Aaron followed her finger to the ground. "I don't think so."

"You're veering off course again. Go back to the right."

Less than a minute later, the desired meadow came into view, an unmistakable white valentine amidst the trees, smaller than Kendra had expected. "Here we are," Kendra announced. "Aaron, bring us more to the right. See it?"

"I've got it. Sharp eyes. Good job, Kendra." He raised his head, surveying the horizon. "I still don't see those mountains."

"They're straight ahead. Their summits are much higher than we are."

"You're kidding."

"Along with plenty of lower ones," Kendra reported. "Rocky ridges and steep hills. Looks like rugged terrain inside the sanctuary. Some unfrozen lakes. It isn't snowy in there, just at the tops of the peaks."

"Weird," Aaron said.

"Think you'll be able to find your way back to pick us up?"

"We're leaving a radio and a beacon in the clearing. I've been studying the topography, scouting for landmarks outside the sanctuary. I think I could get back on my own. If not, I'll rely on Trask and instruments."

Based on how often he had swerved away from the sanctuary, Kendra had her doubts about his ability to return unaided. Hopefully the gadgets would work.

Aaron brought the helicopter down softly in the snowy field. Once they were on the ground, the clearing no longer looked much like a valentine. Trask, Dougan, Warren, Tanu, Mara, and Gavin poured out of the helicopter and began unloading gear. Kendra climbed out as well.

The rotors never stopped spinning. Once the gear had been unloaded, Trask ducked into the cockpit to have a few words with Aaron. Afterwards, they all backed away and watched as the rotors sped up and the red and white helicopter ascended noisily into the sky, sending windy waves of snow flying across the field.

Despite the bright sun, the air was bitter cold. Warren helped Kendra adjust her hat, goggles, and collar to reduce exposed skin. Bundled in her bulky coat, Kendra felt like an astronaut. Warren helped her strap her boots into snowshoes. Dougan put a harness on her and clipped it to a climbing rope. Kendra would lead them, and hopefully the rope would help the others keep moving in the right direction.

Tanu tapped his gloved fists together. "Are we sure we don't want to just climb in the knapsack and let Kendra carry us to the gate?"

"We've been over this," Warren replied hastily. "We need to be out and ready in case of danger. There's no reason to have Kendra carry us forward alone. If all else fails, we can try the knapsack."

Tanu shrugged and nodded.

Trask came tromping over the snow. "We ready?" He had finished camouflaging a large plastic container at the edge of the clearing. Everyone behind Kendra was now attached to the rope via harnesses and carabiners.

"Sure," Dougan said.

Trask clipped himself next in line behind Kendra. He spoke over his shoulder to the others. "Remember, don't pay attention to where you're going. Just follow the leader. You see the peaks, Kendra?"

"Yep."

"Anyone else see them?" Trask inquired. "The huge unmistakable mountains? Didn't think so. Neither do I. The more you focus on where we're trying to get, the more you'll find yourself inclined to wander the wrong way."

Follow the rope. No matter what you might think, the rope is right. Kendra, lead on.”

“I keep heading toward the mountains?” Kendra verified.

“That’s right. Heading that way will at least let us find the wall; then we’ll worry about the gate.”

Kendra began trudging into the trees. The others followed. Having no specific expertise with the outdoors, Kendra worried she might lead them poorly. She concentrated on trying to find the best route through the trees, the easiest way up each slope. Her main goal was to avoid the need to double back. Since the others would be struggling against the effects of the distracter spell, she hoped to lead them by the safest, most direct route she could find.

The snowshoes made her strides ungainly, but at least they kept her and the others on top of the powdery snow. Tall conifers towered above her, limbs flocked white. Kendra enjoyed the crisp smell of the snow and the trees. Cocooned as she was within her insulated attire, warmed by the exercise, the cold seemed irrelevant.

She plodded up slopes and around leafless thickets and deadfalls. She tugged insistently on the rope when the others started to meander in the wrong direction. Occasionally a clump of snow would tumble from a tree to land with a muffled thump. Under evergreen branches, she lost sight of the mountains for certain stretches, but she caught plenty of glimpses to keep her chain of followers properly oriented.

Based on some old hand-drawn map in the Knights’ archives, Trask believed that the clearing where they had landed was a couple of miles from the gate. Kendra wondered how far two miles would feel treading cross-country through the snow, mostly uphill. She rapidly grew weary of the way her oversized soles made each step a chore.

As Kendra reached the crest of a long slope, she found she had led her team to the top of a thirty-foot face. They would have to parallel the drop-off for about a hundred yards before they could continue forward. From the elevated vantage, ahead through the trees, Kendra beheld the massive gate. Apparently wrought of gold, the gate was composed of closely spaced vertical bars and hung independent of any physical wall or fence. Instead of attaching to a tangible wall, the gate was situated in the middle of an iridescent barrier of prismatic light. Extending high into the air, the multicolored barrier shimmered like the northern lights, but inhabited a fixed

position. Kendra paused at the brink of the drop, watching ropes and wheels and sheets of light flutter and fold and collide in endless combinations.

Trask tugged at the rope. "We'd best head back."

"No, we just need to move along the little cliff until we can continue forward. I can see the gate."

"You've lost the route," Dougan mourned. "We've come the wrong way."

Everyone holding the rope was looking backwards, away from the gate and the impressive light display. They began to pull against her together, and Kendra found herself stumbling away from the gate.

"Don't trust yourselves," Kendra said.

"We've reached an impassable cliff," Trask argued.

"Stop!" Kendra shouted, struggling against them. "Your instincts are blind. I won't let us get hurt. I see how we can get to the gate."

"Close your eyes," Warren demanded. "Close them tight and follow her lead."

"That's right," Kendra agreed. "I'll keep us well away from any edges. Let me guide us."

Mumbling uncertainly, the others closed their eyes. Kendra leaned into her steps now more than before. The others kept trying to stray and, even with their eyes shut, continued to second-guess their heading. She led them to where the sheer drop-off dwindled and started directly toward the gate.

"Stay with me!" Kendra commanded as the others started hauling her in the wrong direction.

"You're leading us into an avalanche zone," Dougan cried in alarm.

"He's right," Mara agreed.

They pulled against her so hard that Kendra fell. They dragged her across the snow, away from the prismatic barrier. Kendra called out to them in desperation, "Stop! Guys, stop! You're going the wrong way!"

"Ignore your instincts," Gavin called.

"Go where she pulls us," Warren agreed.

Tanu dug in hard, and they stopped moving in the wrong direction. "Keep your eyes closed," the Samoan bellowed.

"I can sense the danger," Mara insisted.

“Your senses are messed up,” Kendra said with conviction. “We’re right by the gate. Don’t think, just follow.”

“Blind faith,” Gavin said.

“Blind faith,” Trask agreed.

Kendra arose and plodded in the right direction again, trying to move fast to keep their momentum flowing toward their destination. They were close. It was time to sprint to the finish.

They emerged from the forest into a wide, clear snowfield. Now nothing impeded a full view of the high golden gate and the scintillating wall. Kendra charged forward, breathing hard, straining against the rope. Her eyes drank in kaleidoscopic swirls of light stretching to the edge of sight in either direction. Slow spirals rippled and curled. Glancing back, she saw that even with their eyes closed, her companions kept their faces averted. They followed her on stiff, hesitant legs. But they followed.

It was strange to approach the shimmering radiance of the barrier. The colorful wall looked too much like a rainbow or a mirage, an illusion that should recede when an observer drew near. Instead, the barrier inhabited a fixed position, flashing and gleaming, filling Kendra’s field of vision as she approached the gilded gate.

“Stand still,” Kendra called at last, a step or two from the shiny gate. Glancing back, she saw that the others were trembling.

“Hold your ground,” Trask growled.

Gavin and Warren dropped to their knees. Mara moaned and grimaced. Dougan hummed a simple tune in a strained voice, beads of perspiration on his brow. Tanu took deep, cleansing breaths, wide nostrils flaring, broad chest expanding and contracting.

Kendra unzipped her coat and felt for the inside pocket where she had stashed the unicorn horn. Her gloves made her fingers clumsy, so she pulled one off, and soon held the smooth horn in her bare hand.

“Forward,” she encouraged, leaning against her companions to grind out the final steps to the gate. Seeing no keyhole, she touched the tip of the horn to the center of the gate. Upon contact, the metal gleamed brilliantly and the gate swung silently open. Even upon close inspection, the hinges of the gate were apparently anchored to nothing more than the translucent barrier of light. Legs churning, she towed the others through the opening.

On the far side of the barrier, she no longer had to pull. Opening their eyes, the others gathered around her, wearing befuddled expressions as if they had just awakened. The frigid bite had gone out of the air. Tiny wildflowers bloomed in the tall grass. No snow clung to the trees here, nor to the ground, save a few meager patches in the shade. Ahead of them stood a gray stone wall with round towers at the corners and a raised drawbridge in the center, dark timbers studded with iron. The broad, crenellated wall reached maybe twenty feet high, the corner towers an extra ten feet taller. None of the buildings beyond the wall reared much higher. No visible guards or sentries manned the battlements. The stronghold looked timeworn and dreary, more like an abandoned fort than an occupied castle. Behind them, the golden gate clanged shut.

“Welcome to Wyrmoost,” Trask murmured.

Kendra found the sturdy, silent fort disquieting. “Do we go knock?” she wondered.

Tanu scratched his head, staring up at the tremendous mountains. “How did we miss those?”

A roar like a thousand lions exploded from the nearest stand of trees, making Kendra start and turn. A gold and red creature snaked up from the grove, long body twirling and winding like a ribbon. Two sets of gold-feathered wings fanned out, propelling the serpentine dragon toward the gate.

“Stay calm,” Gavin urged. “Stand your ground. Don’t reach for weapons. Don’t make eye contact.”

Kendra stared away from the dragon, watching it approach from her peripheral vision. The great wings spread wide, creating a rush of wind as the dragon alighted near them. Paralyzing fear washed over Kendra, the terror instinctual and overpowering. Was this how a rabbit felt when it saw a hawk swooping down? The dragon had a head like a giant lion, with red-gold fur and a crimson mane. Eight sets of legs supported the scaly body, the large feet each a hybrid of dragon claw and lion paw. The dragon stood half again taller than Trask, and stretched longer than two school buses.

“Visitors,” the dragon purred in a rich, interested voice. “We seldom have visitors. This is a dangerous domain. I prevent the unworthy from entering. Are any of you capable of speech?”

“I can converse with you, mighty one,” Gavin said.

“And look me in the eye. Impressive. What of your companions?”

“I can speak,” Trask said. “We seek the caretaker.”

“I can speak as well,” Mara added.

Kendra trembled. She doubted she could move her arms or legs, but forced some words past her lips. “As can I.”

The dragon inclined his leonine head. “An impressive group of humans. Four of seven retaining some semblance of control. One with true self-possession. Who can move?”

Mara and Trask went to stand at either side of Gavin, who saluted the dragon casually. Kendra tried to override the paralysis in her limbs but failed. The dragon shook his head, fluffing up his shaggy mane. “Three? Why not the fourth? I see, although she harbors a strange energy, she is not a true dragon speaker. What errand brings you to Wyrmoost?”

“We s-s-seek audience with the caretaker,” Gavin said.

“Fair enough,” the dragon replied. “You will find Agad inside Blackwell Keep. I am Camarat. I work with Agad. I have not screened visitors for many years.” Camarat prowled forward and sniffed Warren, then took a whiff of the knapsack. “More in there than one might suspect. But nothing too alarming.” The dragon moved in front of Trask, exhaling blue-white fumes from his nostrils. “What brings you to Wyrmoost?”

“We seek the key to a distant vault,” Trask said, scowling after the words left his mouth.

“A key? Interesting.” The dragon moved to Mara, exhaling on her. “What else do you hope to accomplish?”

“We want the key and we want to survive,” she replied.

The dragon reared up like a cobra, towering over them, two sets of legs pawing at the air. “Very well, you may pass. Be forewarned. Wyrmoost is not for the faint of heart.”

The gilded wings spread wide and with a rush of air the dragon took flight, elongated body curling and snapping like a whip. Awed by the fluid grace of the magnificent creature, Kendra watched it corkscrew into the sky. With a clacking of gears and the clang of heavy chains the drawbridge in the wall began to swing down. A hard-packed path wide enough for a wagon led directly from the golden gate to the drawbridge. Trask marched toward the fort.

“Is there often a dragon at the gate to welcome visitors?” Kendra asked Gavin, falling into step beside him.

“I’ve n-n-n-never seen such a thing. We would have warned everyone. I haven’t met a dragon quite like Camarat either.”

“Was he breathing truth serum on Trask and Mara?”

“Or something like it. Hey, good job dragging us through the gate. I was feeling pretty foggy.”

“We all have our specialties.” She hoped she sounded casual instead of proud.

They reached the drawbridge and passed over a shallow, dry moat choked with thorny shrubs. The iron teeth of a raised portcullis hung menacingly above as they strode through the thick wall and out into a flagstone courtyard. A solid gray building topped by battlements stood before them. No light shone within the high, narrow windows. Three figures awaited them in front of the single heavy door to the stone structure.

In the center, the tallest minotaur Kendra had ever seen leaned on a long-hafted battle-ax like a staff. His shaggy fur was the silky chestnut of an Irish setter, and a black patch covered one eye. To the left stood a creature like a centaur, except with the body of a moose. Several scars defaced his brown skin, the most gruesome angling down from one ear and curving halfway across his throat. He carried a black bow and wore a quiver of arrows. A polished horn hung from one shoulder by a leather strap. On the right, a thin, hairless woman with four arms and skin like a snake tested the air with her slender tongue. Her lower hands held daggers with jagged blades.

The minotaur stepped forward, twisting his head so he could better regard the newcomers with his good eye. “What brings you to Blackwell Keep?” he asked gruffly.

Trask held his hands at his sides, palms outward. “I am Trask. We come as friends, hoping to lodge here for the night. Are you Agad?”

The minotaur snorted, nostrils flaring. “Agad will receive you in the High Hall.” He gestured at the snakelike woman. “Simrin will escort you. Leave your arms and gear in the guardhouse.” With his ax, he pointed at a structure to the side of the main entry. “The alcetaur will assist you.” The moose-bodied centaur came toward them.

“Let’s do it,” Trask muttered, heading for the guardhouse.

The silent alcetaur showed where to pile their gear. Warren checked with Trask before setting down the knapsack, then complied after receiving a curt nod. Kendra kept the unicorn horn inside her coat pocket.

With their belongings stored, Kendra and the others followed Simrin through a cavernous hall where crows roosted in the rafters. Shorter than Kendra, the serpentine woman moved with a fluid, slithery stride. She led them out a door at the rear of the hall, up two flights of stairs, and across an enclosed walkway to an adjacent building. Kendra peered down through a window at a courtyard overrun by ferns, bushes, and gnarled trees. Chipped statues spotted with lichen watched over the vegetation, marble faces all but worn away.

Simrin guided them up a few steps and through a large set of doors into a narrow chamber with a barrel-vaulted ceiling. Daylight shone through leaded lancet windows onto a long stone table with twelve seats on each side. At the head of the table in the largest and most elaborate chair sat a plump, elderly man whose flowing gray beard reached his lap. A black cloak trimmed with sable hung from his hunched shoulders, mostly covering the silky red robes beneath. Jeweled rings adorned each finger. He was eating moist chunks of meat out of a hollowed heel of tough, dark bread.

The old man motioned to the nearest chairs. "Please join me," he invited, licking his thumb.

Trask and Dougan claimed the chairs nearest the elderly man. They all sat down. "You are Agad?" Trask asked.

"I am Agad, custodian of Wyrmoost." The old man dipped his fingers in a wooden bowl of water and wiped them on a linen napkin. "You seek the key deposited here by Patton Burgess."

They hesitated to respond. The bearded man regarded them coolly. "Correct," Dougan finally said.

Agad took a sip from a heavy goblet. "Patton was a friend of this sanctuary until he and a colleague smuggled a dragon egg off the premises. The exploit proved fatal."

"I heard he has a grave here," Kendra blurted.

Agad gave her a prolonged stare. "Not common knowledge. But yes, his bones are interred here at Blackwell. Only bones remained." The old man turned to Trask. "These are no environs for charming young girls. You will not find the key. My counsel is for you to depart immediately."

"We mustn't turn back," Trask said. "We were hoping to leave the girl and her protector here at the keep while the rest of us pursue the key."

"Alas," Agad lamented, folding his hands, "your intention is in vain. For us to maintain peace with the dragons, visitors may only seek shelter within

the walls of Blackwell Keep during the first and last night of their stay.”

Kendra and Warren exchanged a worried look.

“Surely we can arrange an exception for the child,” Dougan said.

“I am afraid the terms of our truce allow for no exceptions,” Agad sighed. “However, if you would indulge me, I would like to speak to the girl alone.”

“We intended to ask for some assistance—” Trask began.

Agad held up a hand. “I oversee the keep and watch the gate. I have little involvement with the diverse inhabitants of this sanctuary, and virtually no interest in the agendas of visitors. The girl has clearly been adopted by fairies, and I have long taken an academic interest in such rarities. Your best chance to garner any advice from me would be to allow us some words in private.”

Laying a comforting hand on Kendra’s shoulder, Warren arose. “How do we—”

“I am master of this keep and custodian of this refuge. As visitors, you live or die by my word. She will be safer with me than in your company. I pledge that I intend the young woman no harm.” Agad did not raise his voice, but his manner left no room for argument.

“I’ll talk with him,” Kendra said. “Go on, I’m not worried.”

Agad smiled as if her words had officially settled the matter. “Simrin will show you to your quarters. The girl’s gallant protector can wait outside this hall.”

Kendra whispered assurances to Trask and Warren, remaining in her seat while the others shuffled out. Simrin closed the large doors at the end of the chamber as she exited.

“Come nearer,” Agad offered. “Would you care for food?”

“I’m not hungry,” Kendra said, moving to the nearest seat.

“Do you mind if I continue my meal?”

“Not at all. Go ahead.”

Keeping his elbows tucked close to his chest, the old man resumed transporting slimy chunks of meat from the bread bowl to his mouth with his fingers. “I have long wondered when you would appear.”

“What do you mean?”

“Patton told me that one day a girl who was fairykind might show up searching for the key. Are you here of your own free will? These companions

are not captors, I hope.”

“They’re friends,” Kendra assured him. “I’m here on purpose.”

“And you expect to retrieve the key?”

“We must. Our enemies know about it. They haven’t come for it yet, have they?”

Agad shook his head. “No. You seven are our first guests in a great while.”

“How did you know I was fairykind?”



“I would scarcely be half a wizard were I blind to such telltale brilliance as accompanies you, my dear Kendra.”

“You know my name.”

“Patton spoke of you in considerable detail.” Agad packed another pinch of dripping meat into his mouth, the red juice staining his whiskers.

“I thought wizards were extinct,” Kendra said.

“You are not far from the truth. Very few true wizards survive. Oh, you can find pretenders, magicians and witches and the like, but my kind have become an extremely rare breed. You see, all true wizards were once dragons.”

“You’re a dragon?”

“No longer. Many mature dragons can assume human form. Most are content to transform back and forth on occasion. Ages ago, a very wise dragon named Archadius discovered that by permanently assuming human form, he significantly increased his magical abilities. Others of us, those most interested in magic, followed suit.”

“I guess that makes you a good caretaker for a dragon sanctuary.”

Agad dabbed at his lips with a napkin. “Yes and no. I certainly have a profound understanding of dragons. Enough to realize that dragons have little fondness for those of us who embraced permanent humanity. To some extent they view us as weak, to some extent they are jealous, and to some extent they blame us for the general decline of dragons.”

“Why blame wizards?”

“With good reason. Wizards were among the greatest dragon slayers. Like humans, dragons have alliances and enmities. Those battles raged on after various dragons took human form, and in the process, humanity discovered how to slay dragons. Furthermore, wizards played an instrumental role in confining dragons to sanctuaries.” He wetted his fingers in the bowl of water, then dried his hands on the napkin.

“Can other dragons tell you used to be a dragon?”

“Only by witnessing the extent of the spells I can work. Or if anciently they had seen me transform. Under normal circumstances, the metamorphosis is so complete that even a fellow dragon cannot identify a dragon in human form. A human avatar serves as a virtually perfect disguise.”

“Do you like being human?”

The wizard gave her a lopsided smile. “You ask difficult questions. A dragon prefers being a dragon when he is a dragon. We can only tolerate being human while clothed in human form. Changing back and forth is disorienting. The form we assume affects our minds. Here, now, I cannot fully recall the experience of being a dragon. I enjoy the mastery of magic I have achieved. I mostly enjoy how a human thinks and perceives the world. Do regrets linger? Indeed. Yet overall, with no way of rewriting history, I am content with my decision.”

“You made the choice a long time ago?”

Agad exhaled sharply. “Thousands of years ago.”

“So you age slowly?”

“Almost as gradually as a dragon.” He sipped from his goblet. “But we digress. I meant to talk with you about Patton.”

“It sounded like you hate him.”

“I must present that façade. It is true that he was unpopular among the dragons here, even before he snatched an egg. But I know the truth. The egg he took belonged to a dragon named Nafia who had fallen into a pattern of eating her young. Dragons breed infrequently, and I wanted her most recent offspring to survive. Patton smuggled the egg to a safe location. To appease the dragons, I feigned outrage, invented a ruse that Patton had perished, and pretended to inter his remains in our churchyard.”

“Do you know where he hid the key?”

Agad shook his head. “He did not trust that secret even to me—although, if you dig, you will find peculiar markings on the portion of his headstone below the ground. I take it you can decipher the secret fairy language.”

“Yes. Can you help us retrieve the key?”

“Sadly, I can offer almost no assistance. The dragons have no love for me. Potent magical defenses reinforced by an ancient truce protect me while I remain at Blackwell Keep. Should I stray beyond these walls, the dragons would devour me and my assistants. Same if I broke our truce by letting you lodge here longer than is allowed.”

“How can you be caretaker if you never leave?”

“My assistants venture beyond these walls as my eyes and ears. Not an enviable job. And I can discern much by magical means.” The wizard settled back in his chair. “I was not lying to your companions when I told them they would fail.”

“We have to try,” Kendra said. “Our enemies are resourceful.”

“Even if you somehow manage to remove the key, can you guard it better than dragons?”

“Now that they know it’s here, our enemies will find a way to get it. We have to move it.”

“They have the Oculus. They’ll find it again.”

Kendra stared at him. “How do you know they have the Oculus?”

“I could feel when they spied here. I could not identify the watcher, but I felt the gazing. I have been studied through the Oculus before.”

“Could one of your assistants help us?” Kendra tried.

“I can’t risk any of my personnel assisting you. Dragons are unforgiving. Beyond this castle, you are trespassers, and I cannot let your mission upset our fragile truce. Besides, none of my aides are very trustworthy. I know some of them spy on me for certain dragons. I do not think my assistants would harm you against my orders within these walls, but I harbor doubts even about that. It takes a hard sort to survive in a place like this.”

Kendra crossed her arms on the table. “Okay. When should I check out the gravestone?”

“I’ll instruct Simrin to show you the churchyard. Later tonight, steal down there with a comrade or two. Try not to let my assistants see. Cover your tracks when you leave.” Pushing off the armrests of his chair, the old wizard stood. “Do not reveal my friendship with Patton to anyone, including your friends. Blame my candor on my interest in your status as fairykind. I will supply counsel to you and three companions of your choosing on the morrow. At this juncture, the best help I can offer will be advice.”

“We’ll appreciate anything you can do.”

The wizard patted her arm. “I wish I could say I thought it would be enough.”



Blackwell Keep

Covering the plastic cup with his hand, Seth felt the dice tickling his palm. “Come on, sixes,” he murmured, uncovering the cup and dumping five dice into the lid of the Yahtzee box.

“Three fives,” Bubda announced.

“No sixes.” Seth studied his score sheet. “I already have my fives. I still need four of a kind. Fives will do.” He scooped up the dice and rolled a three and a four. Then he rolled a one and a six.

“No four of a kind,” Bubda said. “You claiming the six?”

“I’d miss my bonus for sure. And I already used my chance slot. I better take a zero for Yahtzee.”

Bubda scooped the dice into the cup and grinned as he rattled them briskly. The hermit troll had already recorded a Yahtzee this round, and had assured his upper section bonus. Boredom had driven Seth to comb through the junk in the storeroom. The Yahtzee box had an old-fashioned design, as if it came from the fifties or sixties. Some of the score cards had been used, but plenty remained blank, and there were two little golf pencils as well. Seth had started playing by himself, and the troll eventually came to watch over his shoulder. Bubda’s reluctant curiosity had mushroomed into a Yahtzee marathon.

The troll tossed the dice into the box lid.

“Four ones,” Seth announced. “You already have your ones. You have four of a kind, and that would be a really low three of a kind. You can try for a full house.”

Bubda shook his head and picked up a single die, leaving the four ones. “Yahtzee bonus is a hundred points.”

He rolled a six. Grumbling, he snatched it up and rolled a one.

“Yahtzee!” Bubda crowed, raising both fists.

Seth could only shake his head. “You’re the luckiest guy in the world.” Bubda had already won nine of thirteen rounds.

Bubda capered in a circle, slapping one hip while twirling a finger over his head. Seth regretted having shown the troll that every Yahtzee deserved a victory dance.

Above and behind him, Seth heard the flap of the knapsack open. Bubda dove over to a pyramid of crates. Tucking his head and scrunching up his limbs, he suddenly looked uncannily like a wooden trunk. As feet started down the ladder, Seth backed into a corner, hoping his shade walking abilities would keep him out of sight. How had he let a game of Yahtzee become a security risk?

When the figure descending the rungs came into view, Seth breathed easier. “I’m alone,” Warren called in a hushed voice. Seth liked how his questing eyes swept over him without any recognition.

“Here I am,” Seth said, coming forward.

“Not bad,” Warren approved. “You appeared out of nowhere.”

“What’s the latest?”

“Sorry I haven’t been able to get down here until now. I didn’t want the others to get wise to you yet.” Warren glanced at the floor. “Were you playing Yahtzee?”

“I don’t cope well with boredom. It’s nighttime, right?”

Warren nodded. “We’re inside a keep. Sort of a little castle.”

“I know what a keep is.”

“Kendra and some of the others are investigating the churchyard for clues. I didn’t relish leaving her side, but I wanted to check on you.” Warren explained to Seth about meeting Agad and how they would all have to move on together in the morning.

“We’re here now,” Seth said. “Should I just come out and reveal myself?”

“I’m not sure how the others will take it.”

“I won’t throw you under the bus for helping me. I’ll pretend I acted alone.”

“I’m not worried about that. I just want the team to stay cooperative and focused. Your appearance could be divisive. You’ll be safer in here than anywhere, and once we leave the keep, you’ll always be with us. I think we might be smart to quietly hold you in reserve. If we get into a jam where you can help, you can be our reinforcements.”

“Okay. I guess that makes sense.”

Warren stooped and picked up the red dice. He shook them in the brown cup and dumped them into the box lid. “Look at that. Large straight.” He straightened up. “I’ve never felt more over my head than with this one. I’m tempted to try hiding the knapsack in some obscure corner of the keep, then hunkering down in here with you and your sister.”

“Why don’t you?”

“Agad is a wizard, and he can’t have us here. He’d get wise to us if we tried to stash the knapsack. Camarat, that dragon at the entry gate, sniffed out the knapsack as soon as he met us. I don’t think there’s a safe place to hide in the whole stinking sanctuary. We need to achieve our objective and get out.”

Warren went to one of the supply boxes and took out a granola bar. He tossed a second one to Seth. They peeled the wrappers and started munching.

“Whatever you do,” Seth said around a chewy mouthful, “try not to leave me down here too long. You can only play a certain amount of Yahtzee games in a row before you become a lunatic.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

* * *

The night was still and not nearly as cold as Kendra would have expected. She doubted that the temperature had even dipped below freezing. Overhead, stars glittered in such quantity that even the most familiar constellations became lost in the abundance.

The gravestones in the churchyard behind the keep's modest chapel stood in various states of disrepair. Many were cracked or chipped. Some had been worn smooth. Some leaned drunkenly. Several graves were simply marked by piles of stones. Three were designated by rough-hewn granite spheres the size of beach balls. Kendra could see well enough to read most of the headstones without light, so Trask and Gavin followed blindly, trusting her eyes.

The headstone for Patton Burgess was more solid and legible than many of the others. It rose to her waist and read:

Patton Burgess

Word to the Wise

Tread Lightly Among Dragons

Kendra read the words aloud, then walked around to look at the other side. "Nothing on the back." It was strange to think that in her hometown, she had her own false headstone. Her parents still believed she was buried there. But it was for the best. If it would keep them safe, it was worth it.

Trask and Gavin crouched and began scraping at the hard earth with spades. Kendra surveyed the churchyard. Mara, Dougan, and Tanu were keeping watch somewhere, while Warren kept the lights burning in some of their sleeping quarters.

"This is like digging through iron," Gavin complained.

Trask paused, uncapping a vial Tanu had lent him and sprinkling some of the contents on the ground. After a moment they resumed digging and seemed to make faster headway. Kendra felt tense. The keep had an oppressive atmosphere. Designed to house a small army, the sturdy complex felt too large and too empty. There were too many parapets, too many obscure windows and alcoves, too many places to hide. She could not help wondering who might be watching. As her friends chopped deeper into the defiant earth, the sounds of their excavation were magnified by unnatural echoes. Kendra scanned the surrounding walls for unfriendly eyes.

Simrin came to mind. Earlier in the day, she had glimpsed the snake woman climbing straight up a wall to a catwalk, palms flat against the stone instead of gripping, moving up the vertical surface like a gecko. Was Simrin

spying on them right now, peering down from a gloomy perch, ready to convey information to the dragons?

During the day, Kendra had run across other creatures besides the minotaur, the snake woman, and the alcetaur. She had seen a huge hunchback ogre with meaty forearms and a pruned face crossing a courtyard with an anvil under one arm. The lumpy brute had one eye larger than the other, and a scabby bald head fringed by thin yellow hair. She had also noticed a small man no taller than her waist springing around on slender legs like a grasshopper. Who knew what other unusual assistants Agad had enlisted?

“This headstone does reach deeper than one would suspect,” Trask panted.

“Any words yet, Kendra?” Gavin asked.

Kendra crouched and saw the first lines of a message. “Yes.” Kendra got out the pen and paper she had brought. They had decided to have her write down the inscription to avoid discussing the clue out in the open.

Trask and Gavin grunted as they prodded and scraped deeper into the ground, revealing more of the deeply rooted tombstone. Trask sprinkled more of the potion Tanu had provided, and Gavin began attacking the soil with a small pickax. A flare of light made Kendra glance up, and she caught the end of a shooting star streaking across the sky.

By the time the entire message was exposed, a ring of rocks and dirt surrounded the sizable hole. Perspiration glistened on Trask’s hairless head. Although the inscription was written in small letters, Kendra could read the message without difficulty. Sitting at the edge of the hole, she copied the words.

The object you desire is an iron egg the size of a pineapple, the top half crowned with protuberances, hidden inside the treasury of the secret Dragon Temple, alongside other items sacred to the dragons. Access is heavily guarded. Success is unlikely. Retrieve no extra items. Ignore the gauntlets. Enmity with dragons is no minor concern. Tell no dragon you seek the temple, including Agad. Directions to the temple can be had at the Fairy Queen shrine near Split Veil Falls.

“Got it,” Kendra said, folding the note.

Trask and Gavin set about refilling the hole, packing the rocks and soil back into place as best they could. While she waited, Kendra reread the message several times. Kendra had not suspected the Fairy Queen would have a shrine here at the sanctuary. She hadn’t seen a single fairy. Apparently Kendra would have been joining the others whether or not Agad had allowed them to stay. If the Fairy Queen shrine at Wyrmoost was anything like the shrine at Fablehaven, Kendra was the only person who might survive trespassing there.

She tried not to imagine what obstacles might await if they managed to locate the Dragon Temple. It was already clear that when Patton had set out to make the Translocator hard to find, he had meant business.

* * *

Seth tried to resist, but the voices were so insistent. He hung near the top of the ladder for several minutes, listening to the whispery pleas, trying in vain to stifle his curiosity. The gibbering chorus reminded him of the Hall of Dread. The indistinct voices overlapped so much that most words were hard to catch—he most frequently heard “hunger,” “thirst,” and “mercy.”

Warren had trusted him to stay put. Seth didn’t want to make a stupid blunder, not here at Wyrmoost, with so much at stake. But once the whispers had begun, he had found them impossible to ignore. What if the hushed voices led to important secrets that only he could uncover? This could be his chance to prove he belonged on the adventure.

Pushing up the leather flap of the knapsack, Seth climbed out into the guardhouse and crouched in silence. The dark, still courtyard awaited beyond the door. Outside of the knapsack, he could discern that the babbling whispers originated from a single direction, reaching his ears from a source deeper inside the keep.

Keeping to the walls, Seth crept out into the gloomy courtyard, eyes wandering up to the starry firmament. Considering the lack of light, his shade walking abilities should make him nearly invisible to onlookers. Leaving the knapsack was a risk, but the possibility of gaining useful information about the sanctuary was too attractive. He might even be able

to create an alliance with a powerful being. Desperate situations sometimes called for extreme measures.

And to be honest, if nothing else, it was a reasonably good excuse to get out of the stuffy storage room. The crisp mountain air was already rejuvenating his spirits.

Closed portcullises and a raised drawbridge barred an excursion beyond the wall. Across from the gateway, the main building loomed, dimly visible by starlight, accessible by a single heavy door. Staying near the walls, tense and watchful, Seth took the long way around the courtyard before reaching the iron-bound door. To his delight, he found it unlocked.

In the cavernous room beyond, Seth debated taking out his flashlight. It was too dark to see, but he decided that even a muted glare would be too risky in such a prominent room. Instead of navigating by sight, he followed the confused babble, the voices increasing in volume as he inched across the room, shins, toes, and outstretched hands occasionally bumping against unseen obstacles.

Finally Seth reached a wall and then a doorway. Briefly risking his flashlight with a hand cupped over the bright side, he found a stairway that went up and another that went down. The whispers were definitely coming up from a lower part of the building. Maybe the stronghold had a dungeon like the one at Fablehaven.

Upon hearing a gritty scrape from above, Seth extinguished his flashlight and backed against the wall. The scuffling sound had been unnatural. A moment later he heard faint footfalls carefully descending the stairs. The unseen person reached the bottom steps and then stopped. Seth could hear steady breathing.

“They were in the graveyard,” a low voice said, “digging up Patton’s grave.”

“Did they take anything?” a quiet female voice answered.

“No. They seemed interested in markings on the headstone.”

“They have returned to their rooms?”

“Far as I could tell.”

“Keep an eye out. I’ll check their wing.”

Seth remained rigid in the darkness, an anxious hand squeezing his flashlight. From the timbre of the voices, he suspected the snake lady

Warren had described and the minotaur. But there was no way to be sure. He heard soft steps shuffling away across the cavernous room.

Once he thought he was alone again, Seth considered returning to the knapsack. If he had expected the keep to be crawling with spies, he would have stayed in his hiding place. But the gibbering whispers persisted, and now that he was out and about, it would be a shame not to finish what he had started. It didn't sound like either of the speakers had descended the stairs, so Seth moved blindly forward to the vicinity of the downward staircase. Probing ahead with one foot, he found the lip of the first step and started down.

Advancing with as much stealth as he could manage in the darkness, Seth descended two long flights of stairs, passed through a door, down a hall, through a doorway, and down a winding stairwell. All the while, the volume of the whispers increased, until he worried whether he would be able to perceive any other sounds.

His hands found a door of solid iron, the surface rough and flaky with corrosion. His fingers located a catch, and with a clang the door squealed open, releasing an even more boisterous flood of cryptic whispers. The clangorous door made Seth uneasy. Others who were not saturated by the whispering might have heard the metallic racket from a considerable distance.

Heart hammering in his chest, Seth lingered in the doorway, working up the courage to proceed. The blackness ahead felt too ominous and too loud, so he took out his flashlight again. This deep below the keep, the light shouldn't glare out any windows. The glow revealed a short corridor that led to the curved wall of a partially visible chamber. Advancing cautiously, Seth emerged into an oval chamber with a circular hole in the floor, a shadowy mouth of unfathomable darkness. The babbling voices rose from the well, hissing and begging and threatening. A pervasive coldness in the air chilled Seth to his center.

No railing protected the hole. Had he failed to use a light, Seth might have stumbled into it unawares. The thought sent chills racing across his shoulders. The hole was perhaps ten feet across, the room no more than thirty. A single long chain snaked around the floor, forming several heavy piles of coils along the way. One end was anchored to the wall, the other

ended near the circular well. Each oxidized link contained two holes, one for the previous link and another for the next.

Seth advanced to the brink of the hole, uncapped the flashlight, and shined the beam down. He could see a long way, but the light did not reach the bottom. As soon as he uncovered the light, the whispering rose to furious levels.

“Quiet,” he muttered.

The whispering stopped.

The abrupt silence seemed much more unnerving than the prior clamor. A mild breeze wafted up from the depths of the hole.

Worried that the owners of the hushed voices could see him, Seth switched off the flashlight, plunging the room into impenetrable darkness.

“Help us,” whispered a plaintive, parched voice. “Mercy.”

“Who are you?” Seth whispered back, trying to keep his teeth from chattering.

“We are those confined to the depths,” the thirsty voice answered.

“What kind of help do you—”

“The chain!”

A chorus of other ghastly voices repeated the request. “The chain, the chain, the chain, the chain.”

Seth cleared his throat. “You want me to lower the chain?”

“We will serve you for a thousand years.”

“We will fulfill your every wish.”

“You shall never know defeat again.”

“You shall never know fear.”

“All will kneel before you.”

More voices kept adding promises until Seth could no longer make out any specifics.

“Quiet,” Seth demanded. The voices complied. “I can’t hear you when you all speak at once.”

“Wise lord,” a raspy voice began, speaking alone, “we have lost all sense of time and place. We do not deserve this abyss. We need the chain. Send us the chain. Where is the chain?”

Other spectral voices took up the cry. “The chain. The chain. The chain . . .”

“Hush,” Seth said. Once again, the voices fell silent. “We’re going to play the quiet game. The first person to talk loses. I need a second to think.”

Seth clicked on the flashlight. He shone it on the rusty chain. Fully uncoiled, it would reach deep into the hole. Once lowered, the metal chain would be far too heavy for him to raise alone. He walked around the perimeter of the hole. None of the unseen entities spoke. Seth’s parents sometimes made him play the quiet game when they were driving together. He hadn’t even needed to promise the winner a treat!

“Okay, I have some questions,” Seth said. “I’m going to need a single spokesman to respond.”

“Me,” an avid voice answered.

“Fine. We’re at a dragon sanctuary. What do you know about Wyrmoost?”

There came no reply for a moment. “We know little of sanctuaries. But we can kill dragons. We shall slay hundreds of dragons on your behalf. Their treasures will adorn your hall. No enemy shall stand against you. Give us the chain.”

“I have a feeling if I lower the chain, you’ll come up here and eat me.”

“Not far from the truth,” said a voice behind Seth.

The comment startled Seth so badly that he nearly fell forward into the hole. He lost his grip on the flashlight and it spun down into the blackness, illuminating an increasingly distant section of the endless pit, skipping twice against the side as it descended. The light vanished without Seth glimpsing the bottom, and without any far-off crunch of the bottom being reached.

A torch flared, driving back the momentary darkness in the chamber. An old man with a long beard and a heavy cloak held the firebrand aloft. Seth edged away from the gaping hole. “You must be Agad,” Seth said. “You almost gave me a heart attack.”

“And you must be the interloper from the knapsack,” Agad replied. “Camarat could sense you inside, along with a hermit troll and an unconventional automaton. The dragon had it right. You are young, and you are a shadow charmer.”

“I don’t mean any harm.”

One of Agad’s eyes twitched. “Interesting that the first place you came was the Blackwell.”

“I was following the whispers. I haven’t been a shadow charmer for very long.”

“Well, this is easily the most dangerous room in the keep, and probably one of the most dangerous in the entire sanctuary. I wondered if you might be drawn here. Patton said you have a penchant for mischief, though he neglected to mention your full-fledged status as a shadow charmer!”

“Patton mentioned me?” Seth asked.

“He told me to expect you as well if the girl showed up. I’d like to think you would not have lowered the chain.”

“The chain? No way! You kidding? I was just hoping I could get info from them or something.”

Agad walked over to the nearest pile of coils and sat down. He gestured with the torch and Seth sat as well. “The entities inside the Blackwell would say anything to gain freedom, at which point their promises would evaporate. Do not treat with these types of beings, Seth. They do not give. They only know how to take.”

“Why do you have a chain in the first place?”

The question earned a reluctant smile. “If one knows how to manage them, to guide them, to liberate them temporarily and under strict conditions, the inhabitants of the Blackwell have their uses. But even I would employ them only as an absolute last resort.”

“In the future, you might want to lock the door.”

Agad smiled more broadly. “I left the room accessible in anticipation of your visit. Truth be known, you and I are the only people in Blackwell Keep who could have entered this room, locked or not. A pervasive fear more potent than dragon terror shields the Blackwell from the unworthy.”

“Could I learn to control them?”

The wizard considered him. “Perhaps. But should you try to learn? I think not. These unholy fiends will turn on you given the slightest opportunity. Seek more savory allies than these. With thousands of years of experience, I have rarely attempted to use them, and still consider myself perilously vulnerable.”

Seth could feel the cold of the links through his pants. “Could you skip telling the others about this? Most of them don’t know I came along yet. I’m hiding out in reserve. You know, for emergencies.”

“To cause them or repair them? Presumably your friends would be cross if they knew you came to the Blackwell.”

“They already think I’m an idiot.”

Agad coughed into his fist. “Patton did not share that opinion. He recognized a lot of himself in you. But that worried him, because of how many times he narrowly avoided a premature death. I also see great potential in you, Seth Sorenson. Most shade walkers are evil to the core. You strike me as quite the opposite. Take care here. A dragon sanctuary is no place for the reckless. Properly applied, courage may serve you well. Curiosity, daring, a thirst for adventure—these will likely lead to your demise.”

“I’ll try to remember that.”

Agad smiled sadly. “I have learned not to get too attached to visitors. Whether or not you accomplish your aim here, mere survival would be a noteworthy triumph. You had best get back to your knapsack.”

“Okay. Thanks for the advice.”

The wizard arose. “I suppose it goes without saying that I expect never to discover you near the Blackwell again.”

“I’ll keep away from the voices. By the way, about telling the others . . .”

Agad winked. “I won’t tell if you don’t.”

* * *

Threatening clouds blotted out much of the morning sunlight as Kendra strolled along the top of the keep’s wall. Above her, the sky was blue and clear, but leaden clouds massed on all sides, as if the sanctuary sat in the eye of a hurricane. Light breezes stirred the air from unpredictable directions.

Ahead of her, Simrin led the way with sinuous grace, the supple scales on her back subtly rippling with each stride. Behind Kendra came Trask, Gavin, and Tanu, the three she had chosen for this final interview with

Agad. Simrin had explained that Agad wanted to meet inside one of the keep's corner towers.

Kendra had awakened with a raw, scratchy throat. She had hoped the soreness would fade once she was up and about, but if anything, the sensation was getting more irritating. Each swallow seemed less comfortable than the one before. She reminded herself to ask Tanu for a remedy.

Where two walls intersected at a rounded tower, Simrin opened a heavy oak door banded with iron and stood aside. Kendra led the way into a circular room about twenty feet across. Thin arrow loops interrupted a wide section of the wall. Off to one side, a wooden ladder accessed a trapdoor in the ceiling. Simrin closed the oaken door without following.

Agad waited at the far side of the room holding a long, slim rod. Between them, a relief map of Wyrmoost covered the floor, complete with the two towering peaks, plenty of hilly forests, several valleys, a few lakes, many streams, and a tiny model of Blackwell Keep.

"Good day," Agad said. "I thought the Lesser Map Room might be an appropriate venue for this discussion. I considered the Greater Map Room, but the detail is too exquisite. A custodian must protect some secrets."

"Looks like we may be in for foul weather today," Trask observed.

Agad fixed him with a shrewd gaze. "Is that a comment or a question? No doubt you have noticed the disproportionate lack of snow at Wyrmoost." He tapped one of the lofty peaks with his rod. "The sky giant Thronis lives atop Stormcrag. Not only is Thronis the largest living giant on record, he is a gifted sorcerer. He chooses to view Wyrmoost as his domain, and tempers the climate with sorcery. The dragons despise him, but his stronghold is unassailable, and they appreciate the reduced winds. Gales and dragon flight do not mix well."

"I had no idea any sky giants remained in the world," Tanu said.

"Welcome to Wyrmoost." Agad smiled. He tapped the other mountain with his rod. "Near Moonfang, the higher summit, lives Celebrant the Just, widely acknowledged as king of all dragonkind. You would need wings to scale these mountains. Give them a wide berth. The entire sanctuary is perilous, but no foes are more deadly than the entities atop these mighty peaks."

"What other creatures can we expect to encounter?" Gavin asked.

Agad stroked his beard. “Dragons, firedrakes, wyverns, basilisks, griffins, giants, mountain trolls, rocs, and phoenixes are among our more powerful inhabitants. Even the small game can be most hazardous. After centuries dwelling here, not even I can name all that lurks under sky, leaf, and stone at Wyrmoost. Needless to say, visitors do not enjoy long life expectancies. Keep your visit short.”

“Perhaps you can help us shorten our stay,” Trask said. “We know we’ll be looking for the Fairy Queen’s shrine.”

Agad glanced at Kendra. “I suppose that might help explain the presence of our young friend. Although I’m sorry to say the shrine lies on the shoulder of Stormcrag, within the boundaries most jealously watched by Thronis. You say your errand must take you there?”

“Unfortunately,” Trask confirmed.

The wizard winced. “The immediate surroundings of the shrine should offer shelter from Thronis or any other foes. Unfortunately, most who tread there are instantly obliterated. On the chance any of you should be taken alive by Thronis, beware his mind. The giant is no fool. There are reasons he has endured so long, residing in comfort on sacred land coveted by all the dragons of Wyrmoost. Those reasons extend far beyond his incomprehensible brute strength. I take credit for installing his greatest weakness—an irremovable collar that will constrict and strangle him if he speaks a lie. Do not utter my name to the sky giant. Thronis has no love for me. Where else might your errand take you?”

The companions looked at one another. “We’re unsure,” Kendra finally confessed.

Using his rod to point for emphasis, Agad described the best route from Blackwell Keep to the shrine of the Fairy Queen. The way was not straight, but he detailed how the circuitous course would avoid the most rugged terrain and circumvent the lairs of the most fearsome creatures. He went on to point out other dangerous locales: a gorge frequented by mountain trolls, a wooded vale home to dozens of wyverns, a high pass near the nest of a roc, and numerous dragon lairs. Kendra hoped the others had better memories than she did.

Finally Agad stepped away from the map, leaning his rod against the wall. “That orientation should give you a slightly better chance out there.

Remember, nothing is certain. Trouble can happen anywhere, anytime. This is a sanctuary for predators, and they are often in motion.”

“Thanks for the guidance,” Kendra said.

Agad closed his eyes momentarily, a slow blink. “Thank me by surviving. Try not to smash any hornet nests. I have enough problems without visitors stirring up new ones.”

“How do we leave Wyrmoost when we’re done?” Kendra asked.

The wizard rubbed his mustache. “You were admitted through the gate, you must exit through the gate. Use the same key. If you wish, you can seek refuge here on your final night. Any final inquiries?”

“Could you spare any potion ingredients for me?” Tanu asked boldly. “I could particularly use substances derived from dragons. It would be a way for you to help us discreetly.”

The wizard cocked his head and scratched behind his ear. “True. It would be hard to trace any ingredients back to me. Come with me after we terminate this meeting. Perhaps we can barter. You must have some items rare to Wyrmoost.”

“I’d be happy to do some trading,” Tanu said.

“Are there rules to slaying d-d-d-dragons?” Gavin asked.

The wizard shot him a hard look. “Are you expecting a fight?”

“I’m asking hypothetically.”

Agad scowled. “Unlike some sanctuaries, there are no formal penalties affixed to the murder of a dragon here. But as you must know, no dragon looks upon a dragon slayer with a kind eye unless the death occurred within the mutually accepted parameters of a formal duel.”

Gavin nodded.

The wizard shook his head slightly. “Please do not lose your life and doom your friends by engaging a dragon in combat.”

“I have no intention of fighting dragons,” Gavin assured him. “I just like to know the ground rules.”

“Camarat said you seemed experienced with dragons,” Agad said.

“I’m young, but my dad taught me a lot. Chuck Rose.”

“Never heard of him.” Agad started toward the door. “We need to get you outside the wall before midday. After that, you may do as you will, but I recommend stealth and haste.”

“I wish I could bring Mara and the others to see this map room,” Trask said. “I would love to repeat some of your instructions.”

Passing through the doorway, Agad glanced at the sky. “You have my permission. Be quick about it.” The old man patted Kendra on the shoulder. “Good luck to you. I hope you find what you are seeking, and that the price is not too steep.”

Agad strolled away with Tanu at his side.

Kendra turned to Trask and Gavin. “Helpful?”

Trask gave a small shrug. “The more we learn about what we’ll face here, the less I like it. But I’d rather be scared than blind. We better get the others.”

Walking with Trask and Gavin, Kendra considered their leader. Trask seemed to be the most capable of all of them. He was tall, strong, skilled, worldly. He moved with confidence. He made swift decisions. He carried himself like a man who had seen it all.

She did not enjoy hearing that he was scared.



Dragon Tamer

By the time Kendra started across the drawbridge with her companions, the entire sky had gone cloudy. The gray ceiling directly above the sanctuary looked lighter than the murk surrounding Wyrmoost, but flurries of snowflakes had begun to fall, pushed by inconstant breezes. When Kendra cast her eyes beyond the rainbow barrier, the snowfall outside the sanctuary looked much heavier.

Kendra glanced regretfully back at the wall enclosing Blackwell Keep. She and her friends were out in the open now. Vulnerable. Back at the hotel, Gavin had related how dragons viewed people much as people saw mice. At the moment, she felt like a mouse dropped into a cage of snakes. Within the boundaries of Wyrmoost, dragons or other mystical predators could await beneath any tree, inside any cave, beyond any rise. No viable shelter remained. It was only a matter of time before they attracted attention.

They started up a slope, moving in a loose cluster. Tanu had given her a lozenge for her throat, but it still felt raw. As Blackwell Keep shrank behind them, Kendra watched the others. With his long, purposeful strides, Trask seemed determined and confident. Tanu and Mara wore serious, thoughtful expressions. Dougan appeared calm, as if on a casual stroll to enjoy nature. Warren repeatedly tossed a stick in the air, apparently trying to see how many times he could spin it end over end before catching it. Gavin brought

up the rear, anxiously rubbing his palms with his thumbs, eyes in constant motion.

They passed beneath tall cedars and pines, the capricious wind stirring the limbs overhead. Beneath the trees Kendra saw dry accumulations of old needles, tangles of twigs, a few jutting boulders, and periodic patches of old, dirty snow. The tiny flakes falling at the moment were not sticking to the ground. In fact, under the trees, not many flakes managed to reach the forest floor.

“Should we break out the puppet?” Warren asked. “Might as well have Mendigo scout for threats. He does us no good in the knapsack.”

“We’ll pause at the top of this ridge and get him out,” Trask said.

Toward the top of the ridge the terrain grew steep. Kendra used both hands while scrambling to the crest. On the far side, the ground fell away even more sharply. The snow flurries had ended for the moment, although the breeze had picked up. Above them loomed higher ridges and hills, stony spines, wooded ledges, rocky faces, and eventually the bald, sheer cliffs of Stormcrag. Off to the left and farther away, Moonfang soared into the sky, the summit obscured in mellow gray clouds.

Kendra recalled looking down on the sanctuary from the helicopter, as well as the map at Blackwell Keep. Using the mounting ranks of high ground for reference, she tried to visualize some of the unseen ravines, valleys, meadows, streams, and lakes.

“Look across the gulf,” Dougan said.

A dark, lumbering shape emerged from the trees on the next ridge over. Built like a bear, the creature had the shaggy fur of a yak and a thick, hawklike beak. The beast reared onto its hind legs, standing twice the height of any grizzly, and emitted a sound halfway between a screech and a roar.

“What is it?” Kendra whispered.

“Not sure,” Trask muttered. “Might be past time we got our weapons out.”

Trask and Warren opened the knapsack and descended into the storeroom. The bearlike monstrosity continued up the opposing ridge and then disappeared over the far side, swishing a hairless tail with a bulbous knob at the end.

“Look above the shoulder of Stormcrag,” Mara said, eyes skyward.

Kendra followed her gaze and saw two distant silhouettes reeling through the air, widespread wings canting sharply. They lacked the long necks and tails of dragons, but the airborne creatures were large, with four legs.

“Griffins,” Tanu said.

As they watched, the creatures swooped and circled acrobatically. Then they plunged out of sight together.

“They found prey,” Dougan commented.

A minute or two later, Trask and Warren emerged from the knapsack, followed by Mendigo, the golden hooks of his joints jingling. Besides carrying his huge crossbow, Trask wore a pair of matching swords across his back and twin daggers at his waist. Warren held the sword he had claimed at Lost Mesa. Mendigo toted an eight-foot spear and a heavy battle-ax. Mara took the spear and Dougan accepted the ax.

“No weapons for you guys?” Kendra asked Tanu and Gavin.

Tanu twisted, showing Kendra the blowgun tucked into his belt. “Sleeping darts and potions for me.”

Gavin twirled his walking stick. “This will do for now. Avoidance will be our best friend. But it’s good to be armed in case of smaller threats.”

“Like giant hawkbears,” Kendra said.

He grinned. “Exactly.”

“Mendigo,” Warren said, “scout our perimeter. Don’t range too far from us. Alert us of any possible threats. Don’t let any creatures take us unawares. Our goal is to avoid encounters. Should trouble break out, guard Kendra as your first priority, then the rest of us. Get her into the knapsack if the danger becomes extreme. Our first goal is to flee conflicts, but use violence in our protection as required. As a last resort, if you must kill to protect us, do it.”

The wooden humanoid bobbed his head and skipped down the far side of the ridge, moving with a loose, jangling grace. Kendra soon lost sight of him under the trees.

“We’ll follow this ridgeline for a time,” Mara said, “then drop into a wooded valley.”

“Off we go,” Trask said, resting his great crossbow over one shoulder.

The hike took them across a variety of terrain. They picked their way across stony scree, forded narrow brooks, traversed brushy meadows, and skirted an oblong lake. Near a shaded pond, they fell flat behind a fallen log as a dragonlike creature with black wings, two scaly legs, a scorpion's tail, and a wolfish head guzzled down gallons of water. They saw more griffins wheeling high above, but never up close. At one point, near the crest of a hill, Mara pointed out a column of dark smoke rising in the distance.

As night fell, they took shelter in a shallow gully against a concave wall of clay beneath a rocky outcrop. Mara built a campfire and they ate well from the plentiful stores in the knapsack—tin foil dinners of salty beef and vegetables, complemented by dried fruit and applesauce. After the meal, they broke out graham crackers, chocolate bars, and marshmallows to make gooey s'mores. Gavin and Tanu let their marshmallows catch fire and ate them charred, but Kendra preferred to patiently roast hers to a golden brown.

Warren offered to set up a small dome tent for Kendra, but the others were content sliding their well-insulated sleeping bags into waterproof bivouacs, so she opted for a bivouac as well. Despite having Mendigo prowl the area as a sleepless sentry, they decided to keep watch one at a time as well. Dougan mentioned that they might take shelter in the knapsack, but Warren pointed out that they could get cornered inside and should consider the knapsack a last resort.

Kendra took the first watch. She sat beside the coals of the banked fire, staring out into the dimness of the surrounding trees as sporadic snow continued to fall, still not noticeably sticking to the ground. She tried not to dwell on what terrors might patrol the night beyond her field of view. Hopefully Mendigo would alert her before anything deadly came too close.

Midway through her watch, fierce growls reached her ears, echoing along the gully. Branches snapped and stones tumbled. It took several minutes to relax after the vicious snarls subsided. Later, when Dougan came to relieve her, the air grew calm, and they listened together to the slow beats of huge wings high above them, like the rhythmic flapping of some enormous tarp.

The next morning dawned cold and frost-crusting. Clouds still ringed Wyrmoost, but no longer formed a solid ceiling, nor retained such a threatening color. After her watch, Kendra had slept quicker and better than

expected. The hot chocolate Tanu had prepared helped her gain the courage to abandon the toasty cocoon of her sleeping bag. Kendra plopped in a marshmallow and watched it melt into foam as she sipped. The beverage had been made with powdered milk from Fablehaven in order to keep magical creatures visible for the others.

Throughout the morning and early afternoon, Mara led the way. She had an uncanny knack for keeping the map of Wyrmoost in her mind and matching it to the surrounding landscape. Whenever debates arose regarding which direction they should head, they relied on her judgment as the final word, and invariably they would encounter a landmark that proved her intuition right. They crossed a ravine on a natural bridge of stone. They traveled through a defile too narrow for two of them to walk abreast, a thin strip of sky visible high above. They crept around the edge of a tranquil valley crossed by a winding brook, hoping to avoid the attention of the basilisks who, according to Agad, resided there.

Having snacked throughout the hike, they stopped for a late lunch on a craggy hilltop. Stunted conifers covered the shoulders of the hill, but only jagged boulders crowned the summit. Huddled among the stones, Kendra ate a sandwich, a slightly overripe banana, and a hearty granola bar. She drank two boxes of fruit punch through tiny straws.

As they were packing up lunch, Mendigo came clattering across the rocky hilltop, pointing back the way he had come. The puppet waved for them to run the other way.

Swiftly chimneying up between two boulders, shielding her eyes with a long brown hand, Mara peered in the direction Mendigo had come from. "I see a peryton," she reported. "No, several; no, a whole herd. Coming fast! Run!" She half climbed, half fell from the boulder, rolling over unforgiving stones when she landed, rising with a badly skinned elbow and a deep gash in her knee.

"To the trees," Trask urged, holding his crossbow ready.

Dougan grabbed Kendra's hand and they clambered across the stony summit until they reached dirt and trees. Looking back, Kendra saw a large winged stag gliding about fifty feet above the hilltop. The stag had a massive rack of black horns, golden fur, and feathered wings and hindquarters. Other perytons promptly soared into view. Kendra counted

more than a dozen before she tripped and went sprawling onto a moist mat of old pine needles.

A tremendous roar exploded behind them, an earsplitting imitation of thunder and jet engines, exceeding even the mighty bellows Kendra had heard from the demon Bahumat. A peryton hit the ground near Kendra, sharp hooves gouging the earth, jaws snapping at her, razor teeth missing by inches. Without pause, the peryton bounded skyward, wings unfurling. Another landed near Dougan, antlers lowered, and he sprang aside, putting the trunk of a tree between himself and the cruel prongs. Again, rather than stay to fight, the peryton returned to the air. The attacks seemed halfhearted, done in passing.

Kendra lunged behind the bole of a tree, hoping the cover would shield her from horns, hooves, and fangs. Other perytons skipped off the ground to her left and right, wings folding temporarily and then flapping as they climbed. Apparently there were limits to how far they could remain airborne—the creatures moved in gigantic, gliding jumps.

One frantic peryton became tangled in the branches halfway up a nearby tree, bleating and squealing, antlers thrashing and feathers falling until it crashed through a jumbled ladder of limbs and flopped awkwardly to the ground. The cervine creature arose with a pronounced limp and turned to face Kendra, lips peeled back to reveal wicked yellow teeth dripping with foam.

The stampeding herd thumped off the ground on all sides, showing little interest in the humans, but the injured peryton charged Kendra, dragging one hideously askew leg. The tree beside Kendra had no reachable branches, so she scooted to the far side of the trunk. As the snarling peryton drew near, Mendigo dove beneath it, wrenching and jerking the injured leg. Frothing and snapping, the mutant stag struggled forward. Dougan came at the ferocious creature from the side with a snarl of his own, burying his ax in the top of its neck. The deerlike legs buckled, and man and peryton collapsed to the ground.

Overhead, a second explosive roar drowned out all other sound. Glancing up through the limbs of the trees, Kendra saw a tremendous blue dragon soar overhead, flying at great speed. The perytons had not been attacking! They were fleeing!

Suddenly Mara was at her side, yanking Kendra to her feet. “The dragon is overtaking the perytons,” she said, leading Kendra perpendicular to the downhill route the herd had taken. “They may double back this way.”

Glancing back, Kendra saw Dougan trailing after them. She glimpsed Trask moving parallel to them farther down the hill. Where was Warren? Tanu? Gavin?

Kendra, Mara, and Dougan raced diagonally down the hillside. The lower they went, the taller the pines became. There was little undergrowth to contend with, just the inherent unsteadiness of moving fast over uneven terrain. The dragon roared again, the deafening volume striking Kendra like a physical blow. Lightning flashed and thunder boomed.

“Here they come,” Mara warned, raising her spear.

Perytons came gliding and bounding up the hill, some above the treetops, others swerving adroitly between the conifers. The herd had fanned out, some going straight up the hill, some coming at diagonals. There seemed to be at least fifty.

A blinding bolt of lightning hit the top of a tree farther down the hill, splitting the trunk in a dazzling shower of sparks. The booming thunder came instantly, followed by a louder, more prolonged roar.

Kendra ran by instinct, heedless of the danger of falling, trying to match Mara’s inhuman speed. She could hear Dougan pounding along behind her, breathing hard. Mara slid to a stop beside a particularly thick tree and Kendra skidded into a crouch beside her. On all sides, hooves thumped briefly against the forest floor as perytons kicked off the ground. Overhead, winged stags filled the air at various altitudes. Then the dragon blocked out the sky, scales shining blue and violet. The great jaws snapped, and the rear half of a peryton plummeted to the forest floor trailing wet streamers.

“Go,” Mara whispered, and they bolted straight down the hill. Trask lingered beside a tree until they caught up with him.

“They’re coming back around,” he predicted, bald head shiny with sweat.

The dragon roared again from well behind them. Kendra, Trask, Mara, and Dougan sprinted down the hill, drawing to a halt at the edge of a broad meadow.

“Down,” Trask said, kneeling beside a trunk, crossbow held ready.

Kendra squatted beside Mara. Panicked perytons came streaking down the hill, leaping and gliding out over the meadow, some quite high, others skimming along just above the brush. Kendra gasped as the immense blue dragon circled into view some distance off, curving toward the clearing. The perytons in and above the meadow tried to veer away from the oncoming threat, but the dragon swooped across the far side of the meadow, batting perytons from the air with claws and tail.

As it passed the clearing, the dragon's head turned. For an instant, Kendra glimpsed a glaring eye, bright as a sapphire. The dragon wheeled and broke hard, wings thrust out like parachutes. Dipping below the treetops, the immense predator plowed through the tall pines, bulky body noisily felling trees as it smashed to a halt.

"It saw us," Mara and Trask said with one voice.

"Heads up," Dougan warned. Many of the perytons in the meadow had reversed their course and were now coming back toward them.

Most of the perytons landed between thirty and fifty yards from the edge of the meadow, springing and flapping hard in the attempt to clear at least the initial treetops. Kendra saw one peryton stumble badly. Instead of jumping, it skimmed forward just above the ground, feathery wings spread wide. As it neared the trees, the peryton lost momentum and crumpled, flattening a strip of brush.

As the creature staggered to its feet, Mara darted from cover, casting her spear aside and seizing the peryton by the base of the antlers. The lean muscles in her arms tensed as the peryton swayed and jerked in her grasp, but soon the creature calmed, and she pressed her forehead to its muzzle. With the woman and the creature standing together, Kendra glanced down and noticed that the peryton cast an incongruently humanoid shadow.

Farther across the meadow, the dragon emerged from the trees on foot, wings folded, neck craning up like some nightmarish dinosaur. Elaborate spines and ridges projected from the horny head. Even from a distance, Kendra felt numbing fear wash over her. Wings still tucked, the immense dragon galloped toward them, burnished scales gleaming metallic blues and purples.

Trask scooped Kendra into his arms and ran out into the meadow. Mara now sat astride the elk-sized peryton, and Trask heaved Kendra in front of her. Mara dug in her heels and the peryton lunged forward, running along

the border of the meadow parallel to the trees, taking them away from the charging dragon.

The volcanic roar behind them made Kendra clamp one hand over an ear. She needed the other to hang on. The peryton jumped, and Kendra's stomach lurched like she was on a roller coaster. The wings flapped, but they did not rise very high. Over her shoulder, Kendra saw the dragon taking flight in pursuit. Dougan and Trask waved their arms, trying to distract the raging beast, but the dragon ignored them.

Mendigo crashed out from under the trees into the meadow, holding the knapsack by a leather strap. The puppet flung the knapsack at Kendra, and Mara caught it as the peryton sprang again, climbing a little higher this time.

A huge shadow fell over Kendra, and Mara leaned toward the trees. The peryton swerved, and suddenly they were weaving through a slalom course of pines. Lightning flashed and a trunk off to one side burst asunder. Mara handed Kendra the knapsack. The next time the peryton hit the ground, Mara leapt off, rolling to a stop.

Without Mara's weight, the peryton climbed higher. Kendra caught glimpses of other frightened perytons racing through the woods. Above the trees the dragon bellowed again.

Kendra and her peryton burst from the trees, losing altitude over a pond in a grassy clearing. Instead of helping her get away, fleeing astride the peryton seemed to attract the dragon's attention, so she flung herself from the winged mount, skipping twice on the surface of the frigid water before coming to a stop in the shallows. Her peryton splashed down in the shallows, then took flight again, vanishing into the trees.

When Kendra stood, the water came to her thighs. Slowed by the water, she sloshed toward the shore, fumbling with the flap of the knapsack. If she climbed inside, the dragon might miss her. But as she exited the water, the dragon alighted in the grassy area beside the pond, filling the field. This dragon was ten times the size of Chalize, the coppery dragon that had ravaged Lost Mesa. Kendra found herself gazing up into eyes like burning sapphires.

"You shine brightly, small one," the dragon said. Each word sounded like three female voices shouting a dissonant chord.

Dripping, shivering, Kendra could not move. She wanted to reply, but her jaws felt glued shut. Her lips twitched. A response awaited in her mind. She wanted to say, “Not as bright as you,” but her mouth refused to make the words. Kendra groaned feebly.

“No last words?” the dragon said. “How disappointing.”

* * *

Seth dangled from the ladder near the top of the knapsack. He looked down at Bubda. “The dragon got her. Kendra can’t speak.”

“Nothing you can do,” the troll advised. “Live to fight another day.”

With the flap closed, Seth had seen nothing, and the room felt none of the motion during the pursuit, but he had been listening to the frantic chase. He had no idea what perytons were, but he could tell there had been many of them, and that a dragon was chasing them. The thunderous roars had sent Bubda scurrying to the farthest corner of the storage room, where he now cowered.

“I’m a shadow charmer,” Seth said. “I may be able to talk to the dragon.”

“Better if we play a game of Yahtzee.”

“Wish me luck.” Seth pushed up the flap and climbed out of the knapsack. He was in a field beside Kendra, near a rippling pond. The dragon was bigger than he would have imagined: the horny head larger than a car, the claws longer than swords, the body a massive hill of flashing scales comparable in size only to a whale.

“Another one?” the dragon exclaimed in its ringing triple voice. “Similar aspects—siblings, I would suppose, but opposites, one dark, the other light. Have you a sharper tongue than your sister?”

Seth was no longer aware of Kendra beside him. He was unafraid, his muscles felt no paralysis, but he found himself utterly fascinated. Those eyes—jewels enlivened by a radiant inner fire. He lost all sense of urgency beneath the mesmerizing gaze.

“Double disappointment,” the dragon lamented. “I take it silence runs in the family? Whom shall I devour first? Light or darkness? Perhaps both together?”

The dragon shifted its gaze back to Kendra, and Seth glanced over at his sister. Had the dragon said it meant to eat them? His head was swimming. He didn't want to die. He didn't want his sister to die. Bracing himself for dragon teeth, he took her hand. All of a sudden, cold clarity rushed through Seth's mind.

"Neither!" Kendra blurted, squeezing his fingers. "Shouldn't we get acquainted first?"

"She speaks," the dragon exclaimed, eyes narrowing. "Why the delay?"

Seth stared the dragon in the eyes. "We were overwhelmed at first." The dragon still looked impressive, but whatever spell had clouded his thinking no longer bothered him.

"We've never seen such a spectacular dragon before," Kendra agreed.

The dragon lowered her head near them. They could feel the humid exhalations from her wide nostrils. "You have spoken to dragons before?"

"Only a couple," Kendra said. "None so impressive as you."

"You interrupted my hunt," the dragon snapped. "I have not seen humans in ages. The novelty distracted me. You do not belong here."

"We don't plan to stay long," Seth said.

The dragon made a melodic humming that Seth took for a chuckle. "You disrupted my plans. Perchance I should return the favor."

"We don't taste good," Seth warned. "Kendra is bonier than she looks, and I don't bathe much."

"How about a game," the dragon proposed. "I shall round up the rest of your party. There were six others, I believe. I will devour the four dullest, and find a use for the others as servants in my lair."

"I think not!" called a stern voice. Seth turned and saw Gavin striding from the woods. He had previously seen him only in a photograph.

The dragon looked up. "A third speaker, nearly as youthful as the others. Neither light nor dark. I could sandwich you between the other two. What sadistic human sent younglings to Wyrmoost?"

"Kendra, Seth, get in the knapsack," Gavin commanded.

The dragon hooked a claw into the strap and flung the knapsack away. "Unacceptable."

Opening his mouth wide enough to show his molars, Gavin began to shriek and squeal in what sounded like magnified dolphin chatter. The dragon responded in louder tones, a cacophonous symphony of tortured string instruments. They screeched back and forth several times before the dragon turned her blazing gaze back to Kendra and Seth.

“You have a unique protector,” the dragon acknowledged. “I had no idea that dragon brothers persisted in the world. Out of respect for his singular status and surpassing eloquence, I will spare you and your friends. Enjoy your reprieve. Do not linger here.”

The dragon sprang skyward, vast wings unfolding. Seth raised an arm to shield his eyes from the brief windstorm. Once aloft, the dragon passed swiftly out of view, heading back toward the larger meadow.

Gavin jogged over to them. “You all right?” he asked Kendra.

“I’m fine. This is my brother.”

“I s-s-s-suspected,” Gavin spluttered.

Kendra grabbed Seth by his upper arms and shook him. “What are you doing here?”

“Easy!” He shrugged away from her. “What did you think? That I wandered off into the woods at Fablehaven to pout? Give me a little credit. I stowed away. Good thing I did. Don’t you get what happened? Together we’re a dragon tamer!”

“I was impressed,” Gavin said. “You were looking Nafia in the eyes and speaking naturally. None of the others would have been capable of that. I watched for a moment before speaking up.”

“How are the others?” Kendra asked.

Gavin winced. “T-T-Tanu took a hard fall. I think it knocked him out. Warren was gored. He got hung up on the antlers of a peryton right at the start. It d-d-dragged him quite a ways. Sorry I lost track of you for a while. I was trying to help him.”

“Will he be all right?” Kendra asked.

“He’s hurt, but he’ll recover.”

“What did you tell the dragon?” Seth asked.

“I just talked tough. They think it’s cute. And of course I used my claim as a dragon brother. I told Nafia you were all here under my protection.” Gavin looked Kendra up and down. “You must be cold.”

“I wasn’t feeling it before,” she said. Her arms were curled up against her chest. Seth could see her shivering.

Gavin trotted over and retrieved the knapsack. “Get inside and find a change of clothes. Things are b-b-b-bad enough without you catching pneumonia.”

Kendra nodded and climbed into the knapsack. Seth closed the flap.

“Should we go find Warren and the others?” Seth asked.

“You read my mind.”



Griffins

They found Warren concealed underneath the tangled deadfall where Gavin had left him. Kendra was still changing her clothes inside the storage room. Dougan, Gavin, and Seth heaved rotten limbs out of the way. Looking up at Seth, Warren gave a wan smile, the right side of his shirt soaked dark with blood. “Looks like the cat’s out of the bag,” he muttered.

“You knew about Seth?” Dougan asked.

“I might have caught wind of his presence.”

Gavin crouched, examining the wounds in Warren’s shoulder and upper chest. Warren winced when Gavin fingered the sodden fabric near one of the punctures. “Ugly,” Gavin said.

“Sharp antlers,” Warren gasped. “Not a very impressive way to go. Stabbed by a deer. Don’t put that on my tombstone. Blame the dragon.”

“You’ll be all right,” Dougan assured him, his eyes less confident than his voice.

“Where’s Tanu?” Warren asked.

“Big guy took a spill,” Dougan said. “Lost consciousness. Mara and Trask are trying to revive him.”

“What stopped the dragon?” Warren asked.

“Gavin spoke to her,” Seth said. “He used dragon talk. It was freaky. He calmed her down and sent her away.”

“Seth and Kendra were holding their own,” Gavin approved.

“Sorry to be the weak link,” Warren muttered. “The deer gored me and kept on running. I was spitted on those antlers for a long time. Long enough to really notice, you know? To think about it.”

Trask and Mara came jogging down from higher on the hill, led by Tanu. The brawny Samoan glared at Seth. “What are you doing here?”

“You missed me during your inspection,” Seth replied.

“Perfect,” Tanu muttered. He dropped to his knees beside Warren. “Sorry I’m late.”

“Heard you banged your head,” Warren said.

Wearing an embarrassed grin, Tanu smoothed a hand over his thick, dark hair. “Don’t know what happened. Must have tripped and hit a rock.” Tanu produced a knife.

Warren grimaced as Tanu began to cut away his shirt. “I feel sorry for the rock.”

Tanu shrugged. “It smacked me pretty good. I’ve never been knocked out before. Thick skull.” He slashed away a wide section of fabric.

Warren eyed the knife. “You’re not dizzy or anything?”

“I do my best work dizzy.” Tanu ripped away another portion of the bloody shirt. He set aside the knife, rummaged in his satchel, fished out a small bottle, uncapped it, and took a sip.

“How about some of that for me?” Warren carped.

Tanu squinted and clenched his teeth, then shook his head briskly. “You don’t want this stuff. This is to clear me up, sharpen my senses. Trust me, you’re going to want things dulled.”

“You’re the doctor.”

Tanu scrabbled through his satchel again. “Not strictly speaking.”

“Right, well, you’re the medicine man.”

“Try some of this.” Tanu poured a small amount of potion onto a cotton ball, then wafted it beneath Warren’s nostrils.

“Whoa,” Warren said, going slightly cross-eyed. “That’s more like it.”

Tanu leaned forward and began meticulously applying a paste to the puncture wounds.

Kendra pushed open the knapsack’s flap. Gavin stooped and gave her a hand up.

“How’s Warren?” Kendra asked, emerging.

“He should be all right,” Tanu said. “We’ll have to rest him in that knapsack of yours, and get out the unicorn horn.”

“Will it heal him?” Seth asked.

Tanu shook his head. “The horn doesn’t heal. It only purifies. Keeping the horn in his grasp should prevent infection and counteract any toxins.”

Kendra nodded. “How about you?”

Tanu shrugged. “I have a little headache. My pride took the biggest hit.”

“*Your* pride?” Warren griped, his speech slurred. “I was vanquished by a deer!”

“A giant magical flying deer with fangs,” Seth said, parroting a description Gavin had shared earlier.

“That sounds a little better,” Warren conceded. “Seth is in charge of my tombstone.”

“Don’t speak,” Tanu soothed. “Relax. Breathe. You need to rest.”

Gavin and Kendra had wandered away a few paces. Seth joined them. His sister glowered at him. “What?” he asked.

“You shouldn’t be here,” Kendra snapped.

“How about thanks for saving—”

“Gavin would have saved me. That’s his specialty. Look at Warren. He’s a wreck and we’re barely getting started. I don’t want you dead.”

“N-n-not to interrupt,” Gavin said, “but Seth may very well have saved you, Kendra. I’m not sure I would have made it to you in time. Nafia was in hunting mode. She would have struck quickly.”

Kendra rolled her eyes. “Seth doesn’t belong here. He hitched a ride uninvited. Wyrmoost is a death trap. Whether I die or not, I don’t want him getting killed.”

“I don’t want to get killed either,” Seth said agreeably. “I’d much rather live. Partly because I know you’d write ‘I told you so’ on my gravestone. Believe it or not, I don’t want *you* to die, either. I know what it feels like to bury you, and I’d rather not go through it again.”

Kendra folded her arms and shook her head. “I’m glad you helped me. I am. Too bad Grandma and Grandpa are going to kill you.”

“We’ll have to make it out of Wyrmoost first,” Seth responded. “Please, one crisis at a time.”

“Did you two know that holding hands would make you dragon tamers?” Gavin asked.

Seth shook his head. “No, but it kind of makes sense. I’ve been thinking about it. At Fablehaven, when Ephira was attacking us, as long as I touched Warren, he shared my immunity to fear.”

“When I faced the dragon, my mind was clear,” Kendra recounted, “but I couldn’t make my mouth move. I was paralyzed. As soon as Seth touched me, I was free.”

“And I wasn’t scared or frozen,” Seth said, “but the dragon had me mesmerized. I couldn’t think. Except, when the dragon glanced away from me, and said she would kill us, some instinct made me grab Kendra. Half to comfort her, half to get comfort. I didn’t want to die alone. Then all of a sudden I could think clearly.”

“Amazing,” Gavin said. “I’ve never heard of anything like it.”

“I’ve never heard anything like you speaking the dragon language,” Seth chuckled. “When you first started, I thought you’d lost your mind.”

“It made me self-conscious to have you guys watching,” Gavin said. “I know how I look. And how I sound. Like a demented rooster.”

“A demented rooster who saved our lives,” Kendra said. “Thanks.”

Gavin shrugged. “That’s why I’m here.”

“Know what makes me mad?” Kendra said. “I could talk to Chalize. I was frozen, but I managed to speak. And I talked to Camarat too. But with Nafia glaring down at me, my jaw would not work.”

“Chalize was young, and I was distracting her,” Gavin explained. “Camarat wasn’t pushing us very hard. Dragons can deliberately exert their will to dominate us. The older ones are better at it. With Nafia, you got a full dose of dragon terror. But when you were holding hands, it didn’t seem to bother either of you.”

“I felt fine after we held hands,” Seth said. “But I was still worried she would eat us.”

“She might have,” Gavin confided. “There are no guarantees with dragons. Flattery is good for the young ones. The older ones prefer spunk and personality. Most of the time.”

Trask came up to them. “You three all right?”

“We’re good,” Kendra said. “Except it’s hard to make my brother feel as guilty as he deserves when he saved my life.”

Trask nodded. “Seth will have to deal with the consequences of joining us. I can’t say he made a wise choice, but there’s no way to undo it, so we’ll make the best of his presence. Tanu has Warren stabilized. We better load him in the bag and move out.”

Kendra tossed Trask the knapsack.

“There’s a hermit troll in there,” Seth said. “I think he’s lived in there a long time. He seems pretty nice. His name is Bubda. We’ve played a lot of Yahtzee. He wouldn’t pose a threat to Warren, would he?”

“Thanks for the tip,” Trask said. “Hermit trolls aren’t usually much trouble. They’re scavengers. They mostly want to be left alone. I’ll have a chat with this one, size him up. Bubda, you say?”

“Could he be spying for the Sphinx?” Kendra asked. “I got the knapsack when I left Torina’s.”

“Doubtful,” Trask said. “Hermit trolls are the vermin of trollkind. They work no harmful magic. They make no allies. They have a talent for worming into cramped spaces and hiding—little else.”

Getting Warren into the knapsack proved to be tricky, since he had lapsed into medicated unconsciousness. Trask clung to the ladder while Tanu handed Warren down. Dougan and Mara waited at the bottom.

Seth wanted to be down there to hear the conversation with Bubda. He hoped they wouldn’t hurt him. The troll might be grumpy and aloof, but Seth felt sure he posed no threat. Bubda just wanted solitude. When Trask emerged, he told Seth not to worry. Bubda had been everything he had expected, and in return for some food he had vowed not to go near Warren.

The hike that day took them across increasingly rocky terrain. They navigated through and around tumbled boulders and other detritus. They hiked up a steep slope covered with stunted trees, half walking up the incline, half using the wind-warped vegetation to climb. For a time, they walked along a ridgeline with a sheer drop-off at either side.

Seth enjoyed being outside—the smell of the pines, the cool thin air, the ice-fringed streams full of smooth, glossy pebbles. He relished the glimpses of circling griffins, and the sight of a monstrous, bearlike creature devouring a recent kill, stringy scraps of meat dangling from a curved beak.

The others seemed generally accepting of his presence, although Tanu gave him some disappointed looks.

With dusk coming on, the scant trail they had been following ended at a tall crack in a stone cliff.

“Sidestep Cleft,” Mara recognized.

“Cuts through the rock for almost half a mile,” Trask said. “Agad said a couple of sections are barely wide enough for big humans to squeeze through. Sidestep Cleft is only a few miles from our first destination. We should reach the shrine tomorrow.”

“Do we camp on this side?” Dougan asked.

Trask checked the sky. “Starting at the far side of the defile, we’ll be on ground claimed by Thronis the sky giant. No place is safe at Wyrmoost, but I take it this side might be a tad more hospitable than the other.”

Backtracking a little, they set up camp in the midst of a grove of short, thickly needled evergreens. The long, irregular clearing had just enough room for them to build a fire and lay down their sleeping bags together. They dined on canned chili, corn bread, and baked potatoes, finishing the meal with chocolate bars.

When they bedded down, Seth used Warren’s sleeping bag and bivouac. Mara had the first watch. Tucked into his sleeping bag, Seth gazed up at the stars, amazing himself with how far away they were. It was so easy to shrink the distance by thinking of them as little pricks of light on a black ceiling. But if peering off a cliff could make his knees a little wobbly, why not staring out across billions of miles of empty space? When he thought about it, the jaw-dropping vastness of the gulf separating him from those stars almost made him dizzy. How strange to think that the whole universe was arrayed above him like his own private aquarium.

He considered climbing out of the sleeping bag and helping Mara pass the time. Living inside a knapsack had thrown off his sleep schedule. Telling himself that he would regret staying awake now when his watch came later, he closed his eyes and forced himself to relax.

* * *

Kendra had the third watch that night. Dougan woke her gently and reminded her that she was to awaken her brother next. Nodding, she

slithered out of her sleeping bag, wrapped herself in a blanket, and moved closer to the small fire.

Sitting alone, she wondered why they bothered keeping watch. No matter who was awake, Mendigo would raise the alarm first. And once he did, it would do little good. They had all been awake when the puppet had warned them about the perytons, and that had still turned into a mess.

Wyrmoost was not Fablehaven. The creatures here were huge. If a dragon like Nafia wanted them dead, they would die. They had escaped the dragon only because Gavin talked her out of killing them. He could not force her. They had relied on her generosity, and she had opted to let them go. What did it matter if they kept watch for creatures they had no chance of defeating?

She stared up at the sky, searching for satellites moving among the stars. The moon was up and getting fuller, its light making the stars look dimmer than they had of late. But after a few minutes, the slow, steady motion of a dim pinprick of light caught her eye.

Her gaze returned to the earth when she heard the jangle of Mendigo approaching. He was not coming fast, but he was coming. She had neither heard nor seen him the last time she was on watch.

The puppet strode into view through the evergreens alongside a tall, beautiful woman. The lovely stranger had aristocratic features—chiseled cheekbones, flawless skin, imperious eyes. A flowing, gauzy gown hung from her lithe frame, and golden sandals clad her feet. Most striking was her hair, a lustrous cascade of silvery blue. Aside from her air of casual confidence, nothing about the woman suggested that she should be roaming a dangerous mountainous sanctuary in the middle of the night. Her age was hard to gauge. Despite the silver in her hair, at first glance Kendra would have estimated mid-twenties, but the stranger carried herself with a stately grace well beyond those years. Mendigo walked beside her, holding her hand.

“We have a visitor,” Kendra announced loudly, rising to her feet. She thought that the woman might be a dryad, but she had no intention of confronting the stranger alone.

“I mean you no harm,” the woman called, her voice musical and gentle. Kendra heard her companions stirring in their sleeping bags.

“Who are you?” Kendra asked.

“Let me handle this,” Gavin grumbled, crawling out of his sleeping bag and pulling on a coat.

Trask had a hand on his crossbow.

The woman stopped a few paces from Kendra. In her flat sandals, she stood more than six feet tall. “Have you no guess? We’ve met before.”

“Nafia?” Kendra whispered.

The woman blushed. “I go by Nyssa in human form. I’m here to help.”

Gavin came up beside Kendra. “How might you help us?” he asked.

Nyssa’s gaze became shrewder as she met his eyes. “I know the lay of the land.”

“I’ll b-b-believe that much,” Gavin said.

“What an adorable stutter,” Nyssa said, almost flirtatiously.

Gavin pressed his lips together. “Why would you want to help us?”

Nyssa smiled, perfect lips spreading wide. “I miss humans. Taking their form is a novelty I had nearly forgotten, until all of you showed up. Who knows when humans will come again? The closest thing we have at Wyrmoost is that old turncoat Agad.”

“You’re a dragon lonely for human company?” Gavin asked dubiously.

“Not just any humans,” she said, stepping closer to Gavin. He was not quite as tall as she, so she was looking down. “A dragon brother.” She glanced at Kendra. “And several dragon tamers. My kind of people.”

Gavin glanced at Kendra. He looked disturbed. Kendra thought she understood. Their end destination was the Dragon Temple. No dragon would let them go there.

“You may not wish to come everywhere we mean to go,” Gavin said weakly.

Nyssa laughed. “And where is it you humans mean to go that dragons would not be welcome? Perhaps you hope to make friends with Thronis the Terrible. Not a likely prospect. Yet you’re heading into territory that he watches closely.”

“We have a secret mission,” Gavin said. “We can’t accept your company.”

Nyssa narrowed her eyes. “This is a peculiar troop of humans indeed, where the protection a dragon could offer is unwanted.”

Gavin folded his arms. "I imagine that in dragon form you would not be half so accommodating to our needs."

Nyssa produced a humming response by laughing without parting her lips. "You have that right. As a dragon, I see the world through less generous eyes. Shall we experiment?"

Gavin held out both hands. "N-n-n-no, please."

Nyssa wrinkled her nose. "I love that stutter."

"We mean no offense," Gavin said, a hint of pleading in his tone. "We just need to be careful and—"

"—and a dragon in your party is one dragon too many," Nyssa said, eyes sparkling. "I understand. I do not wish to force my society upon you. If it is your wish, I will leave you in peace so you can march to your deaths on the morrow. You will soon discover that not all the inhabitants of Wyrmoost are as . . . accommodating as I am. In fact, if the rumors are true, even I would not relish being caught in your company, regardless of my form."

"Rumors?" Kendra asked.

"She speaks!" Nyssa laughed. "Is that permissible, dragon brother? I can tell you prefer to do the talking. Yes, rumors. Word has it Navarog was sighted outside the gates of Wyrmoost."

"Navarog?" Gavin cried.

"You have heard of him, I trust," Nyssa said. "A dragon so evil they made him an honorary demon! He has a fearsome reputation. He was one of the few of us who avoided being herded into a dragon sanctuary. Visitors are normally a rarity here. Could his sudden interest in Wyrmoost have anything to do with my new human friends?"

"This is horrible news," Gavin admitted. "He wasn't seen inside the sanctuary?"

Nyssa gave a sly smile. "Not to my knowledge. If the demon prince is here for you, why not let me devour you instead? Less hassle. Less drama. I'll be gentle."

"Thanks for the offer," Gavin said. "I think we'll take our chances."

"The gates to Wyrmoost are strong," Nyssa said. "If he lacks a key, even Navarog will not get past them. Perhaps you should solicit Agad for

employment. With Navarog at the only exit, you might wisely opt to stay longer than planned.”

“W-w-w-we’ll take that under advisement,” Gavin said.

“The brave little stutterer,” Nyssa replied lightly. “You have just been told your death is certain, yet you hang on to your composure. Maybe you actually deserve to be a dragon brother.”

“I would like to think so,” Gavin said, lowering his eyes.

Nyssa embraced Kendra. “Meeting you has been a delight,” Nyssa said. She extended a hand to Gavin, who clasped it and then lightly kissed it. “How chivalrous. This has been nearly as diverting as I had hoped, albeit I would have preferred to partake of your company a while longer. So it goes. I will not intrude. Sorry to bear unhappy tidings. If it comes as any consolation, your demise was almost certain even without Navarog lurking about the gates. Enjoy the remainder of your visit.”

Nyssa turned and strode away into the night without looking back.

Kendra grabbed Gavin’s hand, squeezing it tightly. He squeezed back.

“Could she help protect us?” Kendra whispered.

Gavin shook his head. “Considering where we’re headed, our surest death would have been to invite her to join us.”

Trask came up beside them, crossbow in hand. “I had an easy shot.”

Gavin snorted. “You could have done it. She was vulnerable. Of course, we would have died shortly thereafter. Nothing would dissuade the dragons who came to avenge her.”

“That crossed my mind,” Trask said. He sighed. “I’m not glad to hear Navarog is on our tail. I suppose it’s no less than we expected.”

“But it’s a good deal less than we hoped,” Gavin replied.

Nobody argued.

* * *

The next day Kendra awoke with a sense of foreboding. The news borne by Nyssa had left her unsettled. Kendra had a hard time recalling the details of her dreams, but they had involved beautiful women morphing into dragons, and lots of running. At least the first part of the day should be relatively safe. While they journeyed inside of Sidestep Cleft, no huge monsters would be able to reach them.

Kendra brought Warren his breakfast. He seemed in good spirits, although his breathing was shallow and labored, and whenever he shifted position his face showed reactions to twinges of pain. Together they drank hot chocolate. Kendra also ate an energy bar, but Warren passed, contenting himself with some slices of an orange.

After breakfast, they loaded their sleeping bags into the knapsack and walked to the cleft. The tall crack in the rock wall stretched at least a hundred feet high, narrowing as it rose, ending before it reached all the way up. Kendra had never seen such a tall, narrow cave.

They marched into the fissure with Trask and Gavin in the front. Dougan and Tanu brought up the rear. For a good distance two people could comfortably walk abreast. Before progressing far, they switched on flashlights. Kendra shone hers up and stared at how the gap tapered to an end high above. Eventually they had to proceed single file. At one point, Tanu and Dougan had to turn sideways to fit through a tight section. Kendra tried not to picture the walls closing in, crushing their little group to jelly.

The cleft did not extend quite as high at the far side, maybe thirty or forty feet at most, but the gap ended wider than it had started. For the last couple of hundred yards, four of them could have marched shoulder to shoulder.

Beyond Sidestep Cleft they found themselves following a rocky ledge with a steep drop to one side and a sheer rise on the other. The width of the ledge fluctuated, sometimes many yards wide, sometimes only a few feet. Kendra bit her lip and leaned toward the rock wall as she passed the narrowest sections, tracing her fingers across the cold, rough stone. She tried to avoid fixating on the dry gorge far below. Gradually the ledge descended and became wider, until they reached an area haphazardly strewn with boulders the size of trucks.

Trask abruptly halted and raised a fist. Gazing forward, Kendra saw a griffin atop a wide, flat boulder up ahead. Standing taller than a horse, the creature had the head, wings, and talons of an eagle attached to the body and rear legs of a lion. The long, hooked beak looked made for tearing, and the golden brown feathers shimmered in the sunlight.

Astride the griffin sat a dwarf on a crimson saddle of tooled leather. He had bronze skin, black eyes, and a stubbly beard, and he wore a dented iron helm. A short sword hung from his belt, and he bore a battered shield

emblazoned with a yellow fist. The small man raised to his lips a megaphone made from a furry black hide. "Today is the day you were captured by a dwarf."

Trask leveled his crossbow at the little man.

"Lower your weapon, sir," the dwarf demanded, without a trace of concern.

"Unlikely," Trask growled. "I'm not half bad with this. Slide off the griffin toward me."

The megaphone partly concealed the dwarf's grin. "In the realm of Thronis the Magnificent, trespassers do not issue orders. If you lay down your arms and come quietly, you will not be harmed. Initially."

Trask shook his head. The crossbow remained steady. "Open that mouth again and you'll eat a quarrel. I have another for your mount. Fly away, little man. We don't mean you or the giant any harm. We're just passing through."

The dwarf lowered his megaphone and lightly kicked the griffin. The creature pounced behind the boulder.

Kendra heard the rush of wind an instant before a riderless griffin swooped into view from behind, huge claws clamping hold of Trask's shoulders. Powerful wings swept downward, and the creature jerked Trask off the ground. A second griffin grabbed Dougan in similar fashion, and a third snagged Tanu.

Gavin tackled Kendra flat to the ground. Mara whirled and thrust her spear up into the belly of the griffin reaching for her. The creature screeched and swerved away, the long spear deeply attached. Several other griffins swept by, talons grasping.

"Into the backpack," Gavin insisted in Kendra's ear. He pulled the knapsack from her shoulder and lifted the main flap. "You too, Seth," he called. "Get in here."

The griffins who had missed on their first pass were wheeling around for another run. Kendra counted seven, not including the one behind the boulder and the ones who had already snatched people.

Gavin grabbed her shoulder and shoved her into the knapsack headfirst. It was an awkward way to start down a ladder, but she grasped the rungs and managed to twist around and descend correctly. Kendra hurried down

to make way for her brother. She heard several of the griffins screaming—deeper, louder screeches than should come from any bird.

“Nice nosedive,” Warren said, leaning up on one elbow. An electric lantern shone beside him. “What’s going on out there?”

“Griffin attack,” Kendra gasped, staring up at the mouth of the sack. “Lots of them.”

“Griffins don’t normally come after humans.”

“They already carried off Trask, Tanu, and Dougan.”

“Oh, no.”

Kendra watched in suspense as the mouth of the knapsack closed. Someone had shut the flap.

* * *

Seth scrambled over to Gavin and started to climb into the knapsack. He had one leg inside when a griffin slammed into him with great force, sending him spinning and rolling across the ledge. Elbows and shoulder aching, it took Seth a moment to realize he had not been the target. The griffin had snatched Gavin and was soaring skyward with him.

Three griffins dived at Mara in formation. She cartwheeled away from the leader and twisted to barely avoid the outstretched talons of the second, but the third one snagged her. Her legs flailed as the creature bore her away.

Seth heard a jangling. Mendigo had been scouting ahead, but Seth saw the puppet sprinting back to them. “Mendigo!” he yelled.

Two griffins swooped at Seth, but he rolled flat next to a boulder. Although he felt the wind of their passage, the grasping talons came up empty. Instead of coming fast, the next griffin landed beside Seth, scolding him with a harsh squawk. The limberjack was only a few paces away.

“Escape with the knapsack!” Seth cried, waving the puppet away. “Keep Kendra safe!”

Claws seized Seth by the shoulders, strong wings beat down, and he rose into the air. Craning his neck to look down and back, Seth saw Mendigo beat a griffin to the knapsack, snatching the bag and somersaulting out of the way. The wooden man dodged another griffin on the way to the brink of the cliff and then jumped off, falling out of sight into the gorge.

Could Mendigo survive a fall from such a great height? What about Kendra? Seth knew from experience that the storage room didn't feel the movements of the knapsack. No matter how much the bag was jostled or handled, the room inside remained stable. He hoped that held true for flinging the knapsack off a cliff!

Turning his eyes forward, Seth saw that they were climbing fast, heading toward Stormcrag. Mara, Gavin, Tanu, Dougan, and Trask dangled from griffins ahead of him. None of the other griffins besides the one with the dwarf had riders. Even through his winter jacket, Seth could feel the sharp talons, although they had not broken his skin. Glancing down, Seth saw the distant rocky ground beyond his boots, with hundreds of feet of empty air in between. If the griffin dropped him, he would be skydiving without a parachute. Fortunately the giant claws seemed to have a secure hold.

The sensation of flying with the griffin was undeniably exhilarating. The creature curved left and right as they ascended, sometimes banking steeply and making Seth's stomach tingle. At times the wings beat hard; at other times they glided, the wind whistling in his ears. Higher and higher they rose, until it felt like he was looking down at a map of Wyrmoost, complete with miniature trees, ridges, cliffs, lakes, and ravines.

Stormcrag grew snowy as they gained altitude. He tried to look up, but they were too near the mountain for him to see the top. The air steadily became chillier. The morning had been relatively warm, so he had worn no gloves. He managed to zip up his coat, but even so, the wind created by their speed continued to steal warmth away. He massaged his ears and alternated between jamming his hands in his pockets and rubbing them together.

Eventually, Seth laid eyes on the summit of the mountain. Just below the peak, resting on a jutting expanse of rock, Seth beheld a huge mansion, partly supported by an array of pilings and struts. The sprawling edifice had steep roofs shingled with slate, massive chimneys, and broad stone patios. The closer they got to the unlikely building, the more impressive the scale of the mansion became. The railings around the terraces were taller than his house—the front door considerably taller still.

As his griffin followed the others to the spacious patio before the colossal door, Seth realized that the vastness of the dwelling should have

been expected. After all, this was the home of the largest giant in the world.

* * *

Kendra listened to the tumult from near the top of the ladder. The fierce cries of griffins mingled with the shouts of her friends. She heard Seth command Mendigo to grab the knapsack, heard the windy hiss as they plummeted from the cliff, and heard the sharp crack of wood on stone when they landed.

Gripping the ladder desperately, Kendra had braced herself for impact, but inside the storage room she felt nothing. The room never tilted or wobbled or trembled. She heard jingles and clicks as Mendigo scrambled over the rocky floor of the gorge, then heard the rasp of leather against stone.

Griffins shrieked again. Desperate to know what was happening, Kendra moved to the highest rung and poked the top of her head out of the knapsack until she had a view. She found herself peering out of a small cavity of rock. Missing an arm and with a deep crack visible across his torso, Mendigo ducked and spun and sidestepped until the claws of a griffin locked hold and carried him out of view. A second griffin retrieved his arm. Then a third reached grasping talons into the cavity, but the claw could not reach the knapsack. The creature shrieked and Kendra ducked her head back inside the room.

“What’s going on?” Warren asked.

“Mendigo jumped off the cliff with us. We landed in a ravine. He stuffed us in a crevice in the rocks. Seems like the griffins can’t reach the knapsack.”

“Sit tight,” he advised. “Don’t peek again.”

“I’m not sure we can get out on our own. The little cave is pretty small. I don’t know if I can crawl out of the bag.”

“Wait until they’re gone to try.”

“What if the dwarf comes down here?” Kendra asked. “He might be small enough to fit into the crevice and reach us.”

“The fissure is small?” Warren asked.

“Close and narrow,” Kendra said. “I’m not even sure if Mendigo could have fit. He must have tossed us in. Even the dwarf might be too big.”

“Inside those close confines, you could give the dwarf an eyeful of that javelin over there.”

Kendra glanced over at the slim, sharp-tipped weapon. “Right. Okay. I don’t hear anything. Should I check again?”

“Be careful. Wait a few minutes. Make sure they’re really gone. If they are, you’d be smart to move us to a different hiding spot.”

Kendra retrieved the javelin. Returning to the top of the rungs bolted to the wall, she pushed up the flap and gazed out the mouth of the cavity at the dry, empty gorge. She saw no sign of enemies. Of course, there could be a griffin standing off to one side of the crevice, claw poised to rip her head off the moment she stuck it out. She waited, watching and listening. At length, she decided to check whether she could get out of the knapsack.

Kendra tried for several minutes. She was unable to move the knapsack by pushing the walls and floor of the cavity with her hand. And she could barely get her head and shoulders out of the bag. In the end, she climbed down the ladder defeated. The crevice was too cramped. Even if she somehow managed to get out, her body would fill the snug space, crammed inside a rocky womb, unable to move.

She and Warren might be safe for the moment.

But they were trapped.



Giant Problem

A freezing gust blew across the expansive patio as Seth huddled with Trask, Tanu, Mara, Dougan, and Gavin. The griffins had set them down but remained close at hand, beaks and claws ready. The griffin mounted by the dwarf landed on the first step leading to the colossal door of the mansion.

The small man raised his shaggy megaphone. “You are now utterly at the mercy of Thronis and his minions! Even without accounting for the invincible giant and his griffins, there is no way down the mountain on foot. Lay down your arms. Humble cooperation is your only reasonable option.”

Trask set down his bulky crossbow, unsheathed his swords, removed the daggers from his waist, and pulled a throwing knife from his boot. He nodded at the others. Dougan let his battle-ax fall from his fingers to clang against the patio. Tanu dropped his blowgun. Mara threw down a knife. Gavin and Seth held no weapons.

“Wise decision,” the dwarf proclaimed. “There is no shame in submitting to a pride of griffins. Or the cunning dwarf who leads them.”

“You better not tell us you’re Thronis,” Dougan groaned.

The dwarf chuckled. “I am the giant’s dwarf. His Magnificence will appear when it suits him.”

The great door behind the dwarf swung open. “It suits me now,” a mighty voice boomed, not particularly deep, but very powerful.

Out strode an impossibly large man, several times bigger than the fog giants at Fablehaven. Seth was not half as tall as his shins. His proportions were not deformed like an ogre's—he looked like a regular man in everything but scale. His head was bald with a few liver spots and a close-cropped fringe of graying hair. His astute face was lined in places but not overly wrinkled, with a wide mouth, a longish nose, and salt-and-pepper eyebrows. Seth would have guessed he was sixty. He wore a white toga and was slightly overweight, with a bit of loose flesh below his chin and some softness around the middle. A slim silver collar encircled his neck.

Two more griffins swooped down to the patio. One dumped Mendigo to slide and roll across the hard surface. The limberjack's gashed torso came apart, cleanly split into two halves. The second griffin dropped a wooden arm.

"It has been a long while since I have gazed on humans," the giant commented in a voice more thoughtful than gruff. "You were foolish to stray into the shadow of my mountain. I do not take intruders lightly, no matter how tiny or naïve they may be. Come inside, so I can size you up."

Thronis withdrew from the doorway.

"You heard his Magnificence," the dwarf barked. "I'll see to your weapons. Get your sorry carcasses inside."

Mendigo had dragged his top half over to his arm and was attaching the limb with its golden hooks. Seth crouched beside the puppet. "Wait for us here," he whispered. "If we die, try to find Kendra and help her."

"On your feet, boy," the dwarf snarled.

Trask led the way. Three steps led up to the front door, each one taller than Seth could reach. Off to one side, ladders granted easier access for smaller people. They climbed the three ladders, crossed to the door, and climbed across the threshold.

They paused in the doorway to marvel at the enormity of the sparsely furnished room beyond. A tremendous bonfire blazed on a stone hearth, flames fluttering and leaping, the wood snapping and shooting out sparks. A gargantuan suit of plate armor the size of Thronis stood in one corner. On the wall beside the armor hung a shield, a spear, a spiked mace, and a sheathed sword, all on a scale to be wielded by the giant. Thronis himself sat in a monstrous chair beside a table larger than a tennis court. Leaning forward, hands clasped, he regarded them pensively.

“Come closer,” he urged, beckoning. “A diverse group of heroes, as might well be expected, though a couple of you look younger than I would have anticipated. Closer, draw closer, on the double! That’s better. Who would be your leader?”

“I am,” Trask proclaimed loudly.

“You needn’t shout,” the giant said. “I know I seem far away, but I have excellent hearing. I am Thronis. Tell me your names.”

Trask recited their names.

“Well met. Tell me, Trask, what brings you to Wyrmoost?”

“Our business is private.”

The giant raised an eyebrow. “*Was* private. Now I have captured you, and you had best respond to my inquiries.”

“We mean no harm to any at Wyrmoost, least of all yourself,” Trask said. “We are here to recover a nonmagical artifact that could help ensure the prolonged imprisonment of many foul beings.”

Thronis stroked his jaw. “Foul beings? Giants, perhaps?”

“Not giants,” Trask said. “Demons.”

“Few of us get along with demons,” the giant acknowledged. “A prudent answer, but insufficient. Would you care to elaborate?”

“I can say no more.”

The giant shook his head in disappointment. “Very well. Six of you will make for a meager pie, but I suppose an undersized delicacy is better than no treat at all.”

“We don’t want to be pie filling,” Seth protested.

Thronis pursed his lips. “What, then? A soufflé? Hmmm. You may be onto something.”

“As food, we’re gone in a moment,” Seth said. “As entertainment, the fun could go on and on.”

“Sensible reasoning,” the giant admitted. “Seth, how old are you?”

“Thirteen.”

“The youngest in the company, I take it.”

“Right.”

The giant crinkled his brow. “You have a peculiar aspect. Were you not so young, I might suspect you for a shadow charmer.”

“Trust your instincts. I’m a shadow charmer.”

“Which might explain why you can speak Jiganti.”

“What’s he saying?” Trask asked.

“I was just observing that Seth can speak the tongue of the giants. I’ll try to keep the conversation in English, Seth, for the sake of your friends, but afterwards we should commune in my native tongue. I do miss Jiganti. Where were we? Pies? Soufflé? No, entertainment. Speaking Jiganti with you would be entertaining, and I would be interested to hear how a child became a shadow charmer. Perhaps I could settle for a five-person pie with a side of stimulating conversation.”

“No,” Seth said. “Tanu is a potion master. Mara can tame wild animals. A bunch of us are dragon tamers. Gavin is a real pro. We could be at least as useful as that dwarf.”

“More useful than Zogo? Perhaps, but it wouldn’t have the same ring. The giant’s dwarf. I have enjoyed the sound of that since day one. Answer me, Seth, whom would you consider the most attractive of your companions?”

Seth glanced over at Mara. With one woman among them, it was an easy contest. “Mara.”

“I would have to agree,” Thronis said amiably. “Too bad she isn’t about ten times taller. Or maybe good thing she isn’t, considering how she must be feeling toward me at present.” The giant rose, stepped forward, crouched, and picked up Mara. He sat back down with her on his thigh. She stared up at him defiantly. “You look Hopi.”

She said nothing.

Thronis regarded her silently. “Not one for conversation, I gather. Am I not wild beast enough for you to tame? No matter. I was not counting on words from you.” He pinched her head between his thumb and forefinger. “Seth, you have spirit, a trait I admire. Maybe your vigor can help rescue some of your friends. I want you to explain in detail why you are here at Wyrmoost. Should you fail to do so, your loveliest companion will perish tragically. Then another. And another. All of them, in quick succession. But not you. You I will keep for a time. Perhaps you can help me prepare the crust.”

Seth’s mind raced. Was it worth keeping their mission a secret if it meant getting everyone killed? The Society already knew about the key.

Navarog was at the gates. A quick decision was required. If information might spare them, why not spill it?

“Okay,” Seth said. “I’ll tell you. But put the lady down.” He avoided eye contact with the others, not wanting to see disapproval.

“A civil decision, young man,” Thronis said, bending down to place Mara on her feet. “Sorry, my dear, nothing personal. I am cursed with an inquisitive nature. Come here, Seth, I want you on the table.”

Seth trotted over to the chair. Thronis scooped him into a huge hand and set him gently on the tabletop. When he glanced down, the others appeared far away, as if he were standing atop a bluff.

“Tell me your business at Wyrmoost,” Thronis prompted.

“We’re after a key.”

“A key to what, exactly?”

“The key to a vault on an enchanted preserve far from here.”

“What lies within the vault?”

“An artifact.”

“What artifact?”

Seth hesitated. “We’re not sure. We think it might be a thingy called a Translocator. The artifact is one of the keys to Zzyzx.”

“Oh-ho,” the giant exhaled. “And how will unearthing the keys to Zzyzx protect us from demonkind?”

“Others are after the keys to Zzyzx,” Seth explained. “Bad people who want to open the prison. We’re moving the keys to keep them hidden.”

Thronis challenged Seth with a suspicious glare. “And how do I know you are not in fact the wrongdoers? You are, after all, a shadow charmer.”

“Good point. I guess that is hard to prove. But I’m not lying. It’s why we’re here.”

Thronis cracked his knuckles. “So you’re hunting for a key in order to access a different key. Did you expect to find this key on my mountain?”

“I don’t think so.”

“Then why make the imprudent mistake of coming near?”

“We were trying to find our way to where the key is hidden.”

“Where might that be?”

“We’re . . . um . . . not totally sure.”

The giant eyed him. “You’re becoming evasive. Do not try my patience. Do you need me to demonstrate that I am serious about squashing your friends? Tell me what you know about where the key you seek is hidden.”

Seth sighed. He glanced down at his friends. Their expressions were unreadable. At least the giant was not a dragon. “The key is inside the Dragon Temple. We’re not sure where that is. Honestly.”

The giant’s eyes flashed. “You intend to brave the guardians of the Dragon Temple?” Thronis turned to address the others. “Is this spoken in jest, Sir Leader?”

“The boy speaks the truth,” Trask said.

Thronis turned back to Seth. “Then you are more courageous than I am. Or more reckless. Or simply uninformed. Have you any idea the chore that lies before you?”

“We’re sort of winging it,” Seth said.

Now the giant laughed heartily. Seth watched in silence. As the flood of mirth abated, Thronis brushed a tear from his eye. “Any dragon at Wyrmoost would immediately slay you for planning to enter the Dragon Temple, let alone actually treading there. Not to mention the three implacable guardians.”

“Who are the guardians?”

The giant shrugged. “I understand that the first is a hydra. Hespera is her name. I have no idea regarding the other two—not that their services would be needed. What are the odds of getting past a hydra?”

“We’ll figure out something,” Seth said stoutly.

The giant laughed again. “I am amused. Truly diverted. I would even use the word *delighted*. This is far better than any pie. It may even exceed a soufflé. I find the absurdity exquisite!”

“I get underestimated a lot,” Seth said.

Thronis composed himself. “I meant no insult. Apparently your need is great, or you would not undertake such a desperate task. You are thirteen, and a shadow charmer, which means there is more to you than meets the eye. No doubt your comrades have hidden talents of their own. But you were taken by griffins! If dragons were hawks, griffins would be sparrows. And the hydra would be a hawk with twenty heads!”

“We have to try,” Seth said simply.

“You get to try only if I opt not to include you in a recipe,” the giant affirmed. “It would be a shame to waste such uncommon ingredients. But perhaps we can reach an accord.” He fingered the silver collar. “You see this ring around my neck?”

“Yes.”

“You have not by chance spoken with Agad the wizard?”

“I have.”

“You have?” Dougan exclaimed.

“Long story,” Seth shot back.

The giant went on, ignoring the interruption. “Are you aware that if I tell a lie this collar will constrict and crush my windpipe?”

“Agad didn’t tell me personally, but I heard the rumor.”

“Good to know that word of my curse reaches the ears of every newcomer,” Thronis said dryly. “Agad is very smug about the accomplishment. As well he should be. I am something of a spell weaver myself, and not easily duped. I wasted years trying to get the collar off, to break the spell, until I finally decided it might be simpler to always be truthful. What I am saying is that if we make an arrangement, I will hold to my end. I must, or I will die.”

Seth placed his hands on his hips. “How do we know the spell is real? Or that you haven’t found a way around it?”

“I suppose that is hard to prove. Nevertheless it is true. And, to be candid, you are in no position to doubt me.”

“What sort of agreement?”

Thronis favored Seth with a sly grin. “Indulge me for a moment while I paint the picture. A giant of my size is a fearsome opponent, even knowing no magic. Granted, at a glance I am intimidating. But a glance would not reveal the millennia I have lived, the spells I have mastered, my deceptive agility, my skill with arms, or the true strength in me, a raw power that goes well beyond the predictable capacity of my large frame.

“Most are aware that the hide of a giant is shockingly resilient. Pause to consider my additional mail.” He indicated the battle gear in the corner. “Reflect upon the quantity of steel required for such magnificent armature, and the additional security it provides. Have you ever heard of a giant with

a suit of plate? Array me in full armor, grant me my weapons, and I could prevail against any dragon of this sanctuary in open battle, save perhaps Celebrant.

“Yet despite these advantages, I have never braved the Dragon Temple.” Thronis gazed pointedly at Seth. “This is not because the location of the temple is a mystery. I have two orbs in a neighboring chamber, one white, the other dark. The dark helps me adjust the climate. The white is for gazing. From my manse on Stormcrag, I can behold most of Wyrmoost, and much of the world beyond the walls. Although I cannot penetrate the Dragon Temple, I know precisely where it lies.

“Dragons are notorious for hoarding treasure. I protect an enviable hoard myself. How many Dragon Temples do you suppose exist in the wide world?”

“One?” Seth tried.

“There are three, one in each of the forbidden sanctuaries. Each temple houses the preeminent treasures of all the hoards, the most powerful items amassed by the dragons of the world. And each temple contains a certain talisman the dragons particularly want to keep out of mortal hands. It was partly in exchange for these three talismans that dragons agreed to come to the sanctuaries in the first place. Do you know what talisman resides in the Dragon Temple here at Wyrmoost?”

“Gauntlets?” Seth guessed. Warren had informed him about the message Kendra had copied from Patton’s grave.

“Precisely. The famed Sage’s Gauntlets. According to legend, when the man who wears them commands, dragons must obey. Do you suppose such gauntlets might come in handy for me?”

“Probably, since you live at a dragon sanctuary.”

Thronis shook his head. “No. They would not fit on my little finger. The Sage’s Gauntlets are meant for mortal wizards. Mastering them would be a complex endeavor even for Agad, let alone for you or your comrades. If you were to steal them, no dragon on the planet would rest until you were eviscerated.”

“We’re not after gauntlets,” Seth insisted. “We’re after a key.”

“I see. Answer me this. The dragon temple is ancient. How did your key get inside?”

“A man put it there.”

“Slipped by the three guardians, did he? How extraordinary.”

“This guy did lots of impossible things.”

The giant leaned an elbow on the table. “Who was this puissant trickster?”

“Patton Burgess.”

Thronis nodded. “I have bothered to learn the names of only a few mortals. But his I know. Perhaps he did hide your key inside the Dragon Temple. Perhaps he gave you knowledge that will help you gain access. The odds are poor, but the prospect intriguing. Which is why I mentioned an accord.

“I have not ignored the Dragon Temple for lack of interest. There is nothing inside to tempt me to risk all, yet there are a few items I would like. Precious figurines. A set kept together. A dragon worked in red stone. A snow giant crafted from white marble. And a jade chimera. There are two other pieces to the set—an onyx tower and an agate leviathan. Bring those as well. Yes, bring all five figurines, and perhaps you will glimpse my generous side.”

Seth tried not to let his dismay show. “Won’t the dragons be furious if we steal those things?”

Thronis waved an impatient hand. “They’ll be furious you enter the temple at all. Taking only these few figurines will not incite them to significantly greater rage. The gauntlets are another matter. Leave the gauntlets where they lie.”

Trask raised his voice. “If we vow to bring you the figurines, you will let us go?”

The giant held up a finger. “I will do more than let you go. In preparation for the endeavor, I will feed you, equip you, and have my griffins fly you to the entrance of the Dragon Temple. But one problem remains. I am unable to lie. You should not be able to deceive me, either. While fruitlessly studying how to relieve myself of my collar, I learned how to devise a similar choker. I will make one for each of you to wear. Should you bring back the figurines, I will remove the collars and provide you with safe conduct to the gate of Wyrmoost. Should you play me false, you will all strangle.”

“What will you give us?” Seth asked. “You know, to equip us?”

“If I am to surrender my pie, I want some hope of a return on my investment. I can give you a dose or two of precious dragonsbane. Maybe a sword edged with adamant, or a spear tipped with the same. Rare items that I would rather not lose, to be sure, but what good is a hoard of objects never used?”

“This sounds better than being baked in a pie,” Seth confessed.

Thronis regarded Trask. “What say you, Sir Leader? This is the only bargain I intend to offer. Remember, I do not lie. You will not receive a second chance. These terms strike me as absurdly generous. Those of you who do not accept have reached the end of your lives.”

Trask conferred briefly with the others in a quiet huddle. “You offer us a better alternative than certain death,” Trask acknowledged. “We accept.”

Thronis slapped a hand down on the table. Seth staggered and fell to his knees, ears ringing. “Let us adjourn to my treasury and get you outfitted,” the giant enthused. “I will place chokers on you to make sure the story the boy shared was true. Nothing will save you if he was fibbing about your purposes. As long as the tale proves to be true, tonight I will feast with my tiny champions, and in the morning, you shall sally forth to win whatever glory chance will allow!”



Raxtus

Bubda sat on the splintery barrel, ankles crossed, arms folded, wearing a grouchy expression. “Bubda think about it,” he said. “Ask again next week.”

“We need you to try now,” Kendra insisted. “If those griffins come back, they’ll kick us out of here. You’ll lose your home.”

“Kick you out. No find Bubda.”

“We found you,” Warren pointed out.

Bubda waved a dismissive hand. “You cheat. Knew Bubda was here. Poke Bubda with rake.”

“If they take us, we’ll tell them about you,” Kendra threatened.

The hermit troll scowled. “Where Seth? Bubda miss Seth! Seth speak Duggish. Seth play Yahtzee.”

Kendra tried hard to keep her tone sincere and sweet instead of frustrated and angry. “If you want to see Seth again, we need you to try to move the knapsack out of the little cave.”

Bubda hopped down from the barrel. “No! Bubda hate sky! Bubda no leave! Bubda hide.” He squatted, curled up his arms, tucked his head, and suddenly looked like a shabby wooden cask.

“How about a game of Yahtzee to decide?” Warren proposed.

Bubda raised his head. “Yahtzee?”

“The three of us,” Warren continued. “If Kendra or I win, you try to move the knapsack.”

“If Bubda win?”

“You get to play us again,” Kendra said cheerily.

Bubda scrunched his face. “Bubda no fool. Bubda win, you nag no more.”

“Fair enough,” Warren conceded.

Bubda brightened. “You no win. Bubda Yahtzee champion.” He waddled over to the Yahtzee box.

Kendra had learned to play Yahtzee with her Grandma and Grandpa Larsen. She could remember nights around the kitchen table with her parents, grandparents, and Seth, eating chocolate-covered pretzels, drinking root beer, and playing round after round. Grandma Larsen had always seemed to win more than anybody, but Kendra knew that, aside from adhering to a few basic strategies, the outcome of the game was based on chance.

As long as either she or Warren won, Bubda would have to try to get the knapsack out of the crevice. It was disheartening to put their safety into the custody of a plastic barrel of dice, but at least they had a two-against-one advantage.

In the end, nobody got a Yahtzee, and chasing five of a kind ruined Bubda. He missed his upper-section bonus, missed his large straight, and penciled in a low four of a kind. Both Kendra and Warren ended up with higher scores through more conservative play.

“Dice broken,” Bubda spat after failing to roll a fifth three on his last turn. “Play again.”

“We had a deal,” Warren reminded him. “We can play again, but first you need to do us a favor.”

Grumbling unintelligibly, Bubda tottered over to the rungs in the wall and climbed up. He slipped out through the top of the knapsack with no apparent difficulty. Seconds later he came back down, still mumbling to himself.

“You put it outside?” Kendra asked.

The troll gave a curt nod.

“That was fast!” Kendra gushed.

Grinning, Bubda raised one arm, cocked his head, and began to dance in place. For a moment, as he turned and swayed, he looked as slender and flexible as a serpent, his body almost elastic. Then he dropped his arm and the illusion ended. "Play Yahtzee again."

"I'll play you," Warren offered. "Did you see anything out there, Bubda?"

"Rocks," the troll answered.

"Any creatures? Anything alive?"

Bubda shook his head.

Warren turned to Kendra. "You ought to head topside and see if you can find a better spot for the knapsack."

Kendra hustled over to the ladder.

"Be watchful," Warren advised. "Move quickly. Don't stay up there too long."

"I'll be careful," Kendra promised.

She pushed through the flap and found herself on the floor of a deep gorge just outside the cavity of rock. Above her stretched a high, sheer cliff, with an equally steep face on the far side of the gorge. The floor of the gorge generally sloped down away from Stormcrag, winding out of sight in either direction.

A brief scan of the area revealed no enemies, nor did she see a particularly good place to stash the knapsack. They appeared to be in no immediate peril. Squatting, she noticed a long fragment of brown wood, clearly a piece splintered from Mendigo. She picked it up.

Clutching the long splinter under the blue sky in the lonely gorge, the weight of what had happened with the griffins came crashing down on her. Tears stung her eyes, but she resisted. Why was she going to stash the knapsack? Who was going to come rescue them? Her brother and her friends had been carried off by flying lions. They were most likely dead.

Kendra sat down hard. At least the griffins had carried away Trask, Tanu, and Dougan alive. She had seen that much. The ferocious creatures had not instantly begun to slaughter them. The conflict had not seemed like a bloody feeding frenzy. The dwarf had called for surrender. There was reason to hope that Seth and the others were alive somewhere. There was also reason to suspect they were being fed to baby griffins in gigantic nests.

Warren had urged her to be quick. Why? So she could find a new place to stash the knapsack before the griffins returned. Right, but why? So they could hide until their food finally ran out? Who was going to come rescue them? If they were still alive, the others were probably in greater need of rescue.

Warren was injured. He probably wanted to hide until he healed enough to help. But Kendra did not believe they had much time. There was no way to track where the griffins had gone. Wings did not leave footprints. That left her with two options. Try to make her way back to the gate. Or try to make her way to the fairy shrine.

Navarog was supposedly waiting at the gate. Plus, turning back would mean abandoning Seth, her friends, and their quest. She had to go forward. According to Mara, they had been near the fairy shrine when the griffins attacked. If she could find a way back up to the top of the cliff, she might have a chance. Maybe if she worked her way up the gorge, the walls would get lower or more climbable.

She should inform Warren. It wasn't fair to leave him down there wondering if she was alive. He might get stupid and try to go up the ladder despite his injuries.

Kendra went back into the storage room. Warren was blowing into the little plastic barrel and shaking the dice. "Warren?" Kendra asked.

He stopped rattling the dice. "Find a spot?"

"I think we'd better try to make it to the fairy shrine."

He frowned. "I might be more helpful in a few days."

"They're not coming back. Seth and Gavin and all of them."

Warren was silent for a moment. "You never know. They may. But we shouldn't plan on it."

"I'm going to see if I can get us back up to where we were before we fell."

"Don't go scaling any cliffs," Warren cautioned. "This is no place to take a fall."

"I'll be careful."

"At the first sign of trouble, hide the knapsack and duck inside. If we have to, we can defend the mouth of the bag."

"Okay."

“Less talk, more Yahtzee,” Bubda griped.

Warren started rattling the dice again. “Be careful.”

“I will.” Kendra went back up through the top of the knapsack.

The rocky floor of the gorge made her footing treacherous, so Kendra took her time picking her way up the gradual slope toward Stormcrag. As the sun climbed higher, neither wall of the gorge offered much shadow. The faint warmth felt good, but she also felt exposed. Any unfriendly eyes gazing down into the gorge could not miss her. Nevertheless, she made good progress. And she saw no creatures, except for a trio of large dragonflies.

Kendra was getting ready to break for lunch when, coming around a corner, she gained a view of where the gorge abruptly ended. Now she not only had impassable stone walls to her right and left but a new one, as insurmountable as the others, directly in her path. There was no way out of the gorge in the direction she had headed all morning.

At first Kendra wanted to scream, but she realized the noise could attract predators. She wanted to punch the nearest wall of the gorge, but decided it wouldn't be worth cutting up her knuckles. Instead she sank to her knees, bowed her head, and cried.

Once she let them start, the tears came hot and fast. Her body shook with sobs. She was glad her brother couldn't see her grief. He would have laughed over her tears. But she didn't want to think about her brother. That just made it worse. More tears flowed.

“Don't cry,” a kind voice said behind her.

Kendra rose and whirled, wiping tears from her wet cheeks, and found herself staring into the eyes of a dragon. Legs numb, she backed away. It was the smallest dragon she had seen yet, with a body the size of a large horse, although the long neck and tail added greatly to its length. Its gleaming armor of silvery white scales reflected a glimmering rainbow sheen, and the head was bright as polished chrome. Overall, the dragon had a lean, sleek build, as if designed for speed. Strangely, Kendra realized that she felt none of the paralysis she had experienced when confronted by other dragons.

“Don't worry,” the dragon said. “I won't eat you.” He had a male voice, somewhat like a confident teenager, but the words came out richer and fuller than any human could have managed.

“I don’t feel scared,” Kendra said.

“I’ve never inspired much terror,” the dragon replied, almost sadly. “I’m glad you’re not afraid.”

“I mean, I don’t feel paralyzed like with some dragons,” Kendra explained, not wanting to belittle him. “I’m plenty startled. I’m sure you could rip me to shreds if you wanted.”

“I mean you no harm. You shine like a fairy. More than a fairy, to be accurate. And more than a fairy friend. I’ve actually been looking for a chance to meet you.”

“What?”

“You’ve been surrounded by other people.” The dragon swung his head away. Was he shy? “You caught my eye right when you entered Wyrmoost. I’ve followed you from Blackwell Keep.”

Kendra scrunched her brow. “You’re a little too shiny to blend in much. How did we miss you?”

Suddenly the dragon was gone, as if he had been wiped from existence. Then he was back. “I can go nearly invis-ible.”

“Wow. That would explain it.”

“Luckily, I have a few talents besides being a runt.”

“You’ll grow.”

“Will I? Hasn’t been going very well the past several centuries.”

“Centuries?” Kendra said. “You’re not young?”

“I’m a full-grown adult,” the dragon said with an edge of bitterness. “Dragons never completely stop growing, but the process slows down as you get old, and I’m well past the age when it slows down. But enough about me. You were crying.”

“I’m having a bad day,” Kendra said.

“I saw. The griffins carried off your friends.”

“One of them was my brother.”

“Seth, right? I’ve been eavesdropping a little. I’m Raxtus, by the way.”

“Nice to meet you.” Kendra glanced up at the walls of the gorge. “I’m trying to get out of here, but it looks like I’m boxed in.”

“You really are,” Raxtus agreed. “Only winged creatures can access this box canyon. If you head the other way, you’ll hit a huge drop-off, the top of a cliff. There is no way to climb down. A stream used to cut through

here. Sometimes it comes back and makes pretty waterfalls, but mostly the water runs a different way now.”

“So I’m trapped.”

“You would be trapped, yes, but I have wings. I could carry you, no problem.”

“Really?” Kendra said.

“Where are you going? You guys always speak low when you discuss your plans. Not a bad idea, by the way. But bad for eavesdropping.”

The dragon seemed nice, and he was clearly her only hope. Would he object to taking her to the fairy shrine? Only one way to find out. “The Fairy Queen has a shrine here,” Kendra said.

“I knew it!” the dragon exclaimed. “You’re fairykind, aren’t you? I could tell. Well, I thought I could tell. I wasn’t a hundred percent sure, but I would have bet on it. Too bad I didn’t.”

Kendra was not normally open about her status as fairykind, but there seemed to be no point in trying to hide it from Raxtus. “Yes, I’m fairykind. Do you know where the shrine is?”

The dragon laughed softly. “You can’t begin to guess how familiar I am with the Fairy Queen’s shrine. I’m probably the only dragon in the world who can go there. I don’t mean near the shrine, in the vicinity, I mean actually right up to the shrine itself.”

“Other dragons can’t?”

“No. Almost nobody can. The Queen would strike them down. I’m guessing you can, though.”

“Yes. I mean, I have before, but only at the shrine at Fablehaven. A different preserve.”

“I’m familiar with Fablehaven,” Raxtus said.

“But I’m not sure if I can visit the shrine here. If the Fairy Queen doesn’t want me there, she might turn me into dandelion seeds.”

“Right. You have to be careful. You don’t just hang out at the shrine without a purpose.”

Kendra chuckled. “You don’t talk like a dragon.”

“I’m unusual. I’m not a dragon of Wyrmoost.”

“You’re not?”

“I’m at Wyrmoost, but not of Wyrmoost. I was never admitted formally. I’m under no obligation to remain here. I come and go. I’m at Wyrmoost a lot, though, partly because my dad lives here. But I travel all over, mostly incognito, you know, invisible. I really like drive-in movies.”

“I’ve seen a dragon outside of Wyrmoost,” Kendra said. “I’ve heard of many others. I’ve never heard of one like you.”

“There are no other dragons like me,” Raxtus admitted. “See, when I was still in my egg, a cockatrice got into the nest. My dad wasn’t around, and my mom had just gotten herself killed, so there was nobody to protect us. Three eggs were eaten. Had they hatched, they would have been my siblings. But before the cockatrice got to the last egg, some fairies intervened and rescued me. By the way, I don’t remember any of this; it was told to me later. Even for a dragon in an egg, I was young when this happened. The fairies who saved me brought me to one of the Fairy Queen’s shrines for protection. I was incubated and hatched by fairy magic, and I came out . . . unique.”

“You’re beautiful,” Kendra admired. “And nice.”

The dragon gave a snuffling, annoyed laugh. “I get that a lot. I’m the pretty dragon. The funny dragon. Problem is, dragons are supposed to be fearsome and awe-inspiring. Not witty. Being the funny dragon is like being the bald mammoth. Being the pretty dragon is like being the ugly fairy. Get it?”

“You get teased?”

“I wish I only got teased! Mocked would be more accurate. Scorned. Berated. Shunned. Who my dad is only makes it ten times worse, although it also explains why I’m still alive.”

“Who is your dad?”

The dragon didn’t answer. He looked up at the sky. “I’ve known you for like five minutes and I’m already confessing my problems. Laying out my whole life story. Why do I always do this? It’s like, I want to get it out there at the start so I don’t get hurt later on. But I just come off as needy and pathetic. Here you are with real problems and I keep turning the conversation back to me.”

“No, it’s okay, I’m interested, I want to know.”

Raxtus pawed at the ground. “I guess I have to continue now that I’ve led you on. My dad is Celebrant the Just. He’s basically the king of dragons.

The biggest, the strongest, the best. And I'm his greatest disappointment. Raxtus the fairy dragon."

Kendra wanted to give him a hug, but realized that might prove his point. "I'm sure your dad is proud of you," Kendra said. "I bet most of this is just in your head."

"I wish you were right," Raxtus replied. "It's no delusion. Celebrant has basically disowned me. I have two brothers. Half brothers. They came from a different clutch, obviously. Each of them rules one of the other forbidden sanctuaries. I look way more like Dad than either of them do—going by shape and color, I mean. I'm the miniature version of Celebrant. He has these glossy platinum scales, a lot like mine, but harder than adamant. On him they look awesome. He's built thicker than me, all muscle. He has like five breath weapons, and knows tons of offensive spells, but he's no thug. His mind is keen as a razor. He has it all. Dignity. Majesty."

"He can't hate you just because you're small!" Kendra asserted.

"Small is only part of it. Guess what my breath weapon does? Helps things grow! You know, makes flowers bloom. And the only magic I can do is defensive stuff like hiding, or else healing. Again, like a fairy. It doesn't help that I look so much like my dad. I know it shames him. He hasn't utterly disavowed me, though. Somewhere deep inside, he feels guilty that my siblings were killed, that he wasn't there to stop the cockatrice, and that he didn't know I had survived until years later. For that, I remain under his protection, which means that as much as other dragons shun me, none of them want to fight me. No dragon on Earth is eager to risk the wrath of Celebrant."

"See! He loves you."

"No. Guilt is not love. Dad has made it clear he doesn't want me near him. And he's right. My presence discredits him: the humiliating contrast between the most magnificent dragon in the world and his absurd jester of a son."

Kendra could think of nothing to say. Again she resisted the urge to hug him.

"Anyhow, now you know my sorry background. The full confession. I don't want to be feeble and useless; I'm not proud of it. I love action movies. My fondest dream is to be a hero. To be fierce and brave, to

somehow prove myself a real dragon. But when the opportunity arises, I cringe. Like when the griffins took your friends. I could have charged to the rescue. Come on, they were griffins! But there were a lot of them, and I knew who must have sent them. I decided to lie low for a minute, and before I knew it, the opportunity had passed me by.”

“Who sent the griffins?” Kendra inquired eagerly.

“Thronis, the sky giant up on Stormcrag. He keeps griffins like people keep hounds. The dwarf was Zogo. The giant’s dwarf.”

“You know where Thronis lives?”

“Sure.”

“Here’s your chance for heroics!” Kendra said. “We can rescue my brother and the others!”

“You’re right, that would be valiant. Too valiant. I’d get us both killed. If I was lucky, maybe I’d invigorate some of his houseplants along the way. I’m barely half a dragon, Kendra. The rest of me is glitter and fairy dust. Even the bravest dragons stay far from Thronis. He is both giant and sorcerer. Powerful spells protect his stronghold atop Stormcrag. True, I yearn to be a hero, but I’m a coward at heart. Want an example? I followed you all morning trying to work up the courage to say hello. I only found the nerve once you started crying.”

“But you could go invisible,” Kendra suggested. “Sneak up there in the dead of night.”

“Spells,” Raxtus said. “Thronis would know. He’d slay me before I could help anyone. Look, as a friend, I’m the ideal dragon. As a hero, not so much.”

“Can you turn into a human?” Kendra wondered.

“Like an avatar? A human version of myself? Not really. I mean, I’ve tried. But it doesn’t work out well. I can’t manage to look like a person.”

“What do you look like?”

The dragon glanced away. “Maybe we should change the subject.”

“What?”

Raxtus looked back at her. “I look like a boy fairy with butterfly wings.”

Kendra did a poor job stifling her surprised laugh.

“Like a foot tall,” Raxtus went on. “You can laugh, I know how it sounds—believe me, I know—just don’t spread that one around, please. It isn’t common knowledge.”

“It just caught me off guard,” Kendra apologized.

“Caught me off guard too. For years I took consolation that one day I could escape to human form, once I learned the trick, and maybe become part of a community. No luck. I’m a freak in any form. I’m polluted by fairy magic down to the core.”

“You’re not a freak,” Kendra said firmly. “You’re the coolest looking dragon I’ve ever seen. You’re like a sports car. The only dragons I’ve seen or heard of are harsh and mean. It’s easy to be mean when you have sharp teeth and claws. It would be much harder to be likable. I’ve never even pictured a likable dragon until right now.”

“You’re very kind. You know, we dragons don’t get to air out our feelings on talk shows. We don’t have therapists. But talking to you has been helpful. Thanks for listening. Hey, you mentioned you’ve been to Fablehaven.”

“Right. I’ve been there a lot.”

“And you can talk to fairies.”

“Yes.”

“I wonder if you might have met my foster mom. Her name is Shiara.”

Kendra brightened. “Silver wings? Blue hair?”

“That’s her!”

“She’s the best fairy at Fablehaven!” Kendra gushed.

“You don’t have to lay it on quite so thick,” Raxtus said.

“No, I’m serious. Shiara stands out. She has helped me. Most fairies are flaky, but Shiara is actually reliable and smart.”

“She saved me from the cockatrice and nurtured me. It wasn’t at Fablehaven. This happened long before Fablehaven was founded. I don’t visit her as often as I should. It feels too much like embracing the sissy side of my nature. As if anyone cared! Sometimes, though, I sneak into Fablehaven at night and visit her.”

“How do you sneak into Fablehaven?”

“Same way I sneak into Wyrmoost. I may be less than half a dragon, but I have a few tricks. One is traveling from one fairy shrine to another.

Anywhere the Fairy Queen has a shrine is open to me.”

Kendra felt almost too excited to ask her next question. “Could you take me home?” If she could only get back to Fablehaven, she could return with reinforcements.

“Sorry, Kendra. I don’t think I could transport a passenger. Maybe someday, with study and practice. Even if I could, the last time I tried to visit Fablehaven, the way seemed barred.”

Kendra frowned. The shrine at Fablehaven had been destroyed, so it made sense that Raxtus would not be able to use it. She should have thought of that before she asked. Still, there were other ways the dragon might be of service. “Could you take me to the Fairy Queen’s shrine here at Wyrmoost?”

“Sure. It isn’t even far. Especially flying.”

Kendra glanced at the knapsack. “You said you have healing powers. My friend is hurt.”

“Warren? A peryton gored him, right? I don’t know what it is with those antlers. They must be slightly poisonous. They make ugly wounds. Well, I could try. I mean, I’m better with plants. But why not? I could give it a shot. Can he get up here? I’m not the biggest dragon, but I doubt I could fit through the mouth of a knapsack.”

“I’ll be right back,” Kendra said. “You won’t leave?”

“I’m a coward, not impolite! Oh, did you mean would I run if trouble shows up? If I run away, I’ll take the knapsack with me. Not that I sense any danger. I’ve been paying attention. I think we’re good. So I’ll be here.”

Kendra descended the ladder. Warren was asleep. She could not see Bubda. Kneeling beside Warren, she prodded his cheek. “Hey, you awake?”

He smacked his lips and his eyelids fluttered up. “Huh? We okay?” His voice sounded thick.

“Did you take more medicine?”

“Sorry, I’m a little loopy. The pain.”

“It’s okay. That’s why you have medicine. I made friends with a dragon.”

Warren blinked. He rubbed his eyes. “Sorry. Feels like my head is stuffed with cotton. I think I misheard you.”

“No, really. A nice dragon. He was raised by fairies, and he might be able to heal you.”

“This is my most messed-up dream yet.”

“Do you think you could climb the ladder?”

“You’re serious?”

“He’s too big to fit down here. But he’s not super big. For a dragon, at least.”

Warren leaned up on one elbow. “You really think he can heal me?”

“Worth a try.”

“Unless he eats us.” Warren winced as he sat up. “You’ll need to be my crutch.”

“Can you make it up the ladder? Should we wait for the medicine to wear off?”

“This is the best time. The medicine numbs me. Up we go.”

Kendra took his hand and helped him rise. He leaned on her as he hobbled over to the ladder. Clinging to a rung, he hesitated for a moment, gathering his strength, then started up. Kendra followed.

When Kendra emerged from the knapsack, Warren was on his back on the ground, sweating and panting. Shielding his eyes with one hand, he stared at Raxtus. “That has got to be the shiniest dragon I’ve ever seen.”

“He doesn’t look very well,” Raxtus commented.

“Thanks, Doc,” Warren mumbled.

“Can you try to heal him?” Kendra asked.

“I can try.” Craning his neck forward, Raxtus stared down at Warren. Squealing softly, the dragon exhaled over the length of his body, glittery sparks twinkling silver and gold. Warren squirmed and shivered, as if taken by a sudden chill. The hair on his head began to flutter, and the stubble on his jaw sprouted and lengthened. A moment later, Warren had long, flowing hair and a heavy beard.

Grimacing, Warren patted his injured chest. Then he raked his fingers through his hair. “You’ve got to be kidding. Who is this joker?”

“Sorry,” Raxtus said. “It didn’t take.”

“Oh, it took,” Warren complained, sitting up. His beard reached halfway down his chest. His thick hair hung past his shoulders. “It just didn’t cure anything. On the bright side, I think I popped open some scabs.”

“Thanks for trying,” Kendra said.

Raxtus hung his head.

“Hey, don’t look down,” Warren said. “I appreciate the effort. I do feel a little more lucid. And my breath tastes slightly mintier.” He scooted toward the knapsack.

“I rarely work with humans,” Raxtus apologized.

“He’s going to carry us to the fairy shrine,” Kendra said.

Warren turned and placed a foot on the ladder. “Now, *that* would be a huge favor. Sorry to be a bear. Excruciating agony makes me cranky. Kendra, you know where to find me.” Grunting and wincing, he disappeared into the bag.

“Humiliating,” Raxtus muttered.

“You warned us it might not work,” Kendra said.

“Did you notice how he wasn’t scared of me? At all?”

“I told him you were nice. Besides, he’s on pain medication.”

“I’m about as intimidating as a puppy. Wearing diapers. With a pacifier in its mouth. Well, one thing I can do right is fly.”

“How do we do this? Should I get on your back?”

“No. I’m too spiny and sharp. You’d need a saddle. Not that any dragon worth a nickel would wear a saddle. They would die of shame. But shame is where I live. I own the whole neighborhood. I’d wear a saddle if we had one. But we don’t. So I’ll have to carry you. Would you feel safer inside the knapsack?”

“Would I be safer?”

“I won’t drop you, if that’s what you’re implying. You can trust me on that.”

“Okay,” Kendra said, shouldering the knapsack. “Take me flying.”



Shrine

Raxtus really was quite adept at flying. He gripped Kendra snugly around the torso with a single foreclaw and ripped through the air with dizzying maneuverability. Because of the way he held her, Kendra was free to spread her arms and legs and pretend she was flying all alone. The speed, the cold wind in her face, the exhilaration of swift turns and sudden dives, all combined to fill Kendra with surprising joy. Soon she was laughing.

“I could set us down,” Raxtus said, “but it seems like you’re having fun.”

“I am!”

“Flying is one of my great escapes. How’s your stomach holding up? Want to try something fancy?”

Kendra had never been a daredevil. But she felt so secure in Raxtus’s grasp, and he flew with such smooth competence, that she found herself saying, “Go for it.”

First Raxtus swooped into a huge loop. The sky became the ground and the ground became the sky, and then everything was right again. After verifying that Kendra was still enjoying herself, he climbed high, then plunged in a corkscrewing dive, spiraling through space at tremendous velocity. To the spirals he added more loops and lightning turns, tracing pretzels in the sky. Kendra lost all sense of up and down as everything blurred into a wild rush of motion.

When Raxtus landed and set Kendra on her feet, she held her hands out to balance herself, took a wobbling step, and fell sideways. The dragon

caught her and laid her down. The ground seemed to tilt and spin.

“Are you sure you’re all right?” Raxtus asked.

“I’m great,” she said. “I loved it. But you’ve ruined roller coasters for me. They’ll never impress me again! Aren’t you dizzy?”

“Flying only clears my head. It never leaves me dizzy or sick.”

She did feel a little queasy. But not horribly. Now that she was on solid ground, the motion sickness was fading. Kendra looked around. She was crouched on a high shoulder of rock, one of the mounting folds of land that led up to Stormcrag. The steady hiss of rushing water reached her ears. Crawling to the nearest edge, she peered down at the top of a lofty waterfall divided into two halves by a mossy outcrop. She liked the peculiar perspective, above and somewhat in front of the falls, similar to the last view a person might have as he plunged off the brink. The water plummeted white and misty to a pool far below.

“Careful,” Raxtus said. “I’m fast, but not that fast.”

“I won’t fall. I’m not woozy anymore.” Kendra backed away from the edge. “Where’s the shrine?”

“Just up the slope from here a ways. I figured you would want a minute to make sure you still felt good about treading there. I’ll walk with you.”

Kendra scrambled over the jagged terrain, using her hands to steady herself. As they worked their way around an upthrust formation of dark gray stone, a wide ledge came into view ahead. A trickle of water flowed off the ledge and across the rocks to join the stream before it plunged over Split Veil Falls.

A dozen golden owls with human faces perched on the ledge, all gazing unblinkingly at Kendra. “Astrids,” Kendra said.

“All twelve,” Raxtus affirmed.

“Are there twelve total?” Kendra asked.

“Twelve who hang around here,” Raxtus said. “There are ninety-six in the world. Can you hear them?”

Straining, she heard only the whisper of the falls. “No.”

“Listen with your mind,” Raxtus suggested.

Kendra recalled how the Fairy Queen had spoken to her with thoughts and feelings instead of audible words. She tried to open her mind to the astrids.

“They’re laughing,” Raxtus reported.

The faces on the golden owls remained expressionless. “Could have fooled me,” Kendra said.



“They want to know if you plan to destroy this shrine as well,” Raxtus relayed in a more serious tone. “What is that about?”

“Tell them I was following orders from the Fairy Queen last time. She had me do it to save Fablehaven from an evil plague.”

“They’re not thrilled with your answer,” Raxtus chuckled grimly. “They have no way to verify with the Queen. But I think they believe you.”

“What exactly are they, Raxtus?”

“You don’t know about the astrids?”

“They’re one of many things I know nothing about,” Kendra said.

“I just assumed since you were . . . never mind.”

“Since I was fairykind?”

“Well, yeah. Wasn’t there an orientation?”

“I wish.”

The dragon swung his head toward the astrids. “Theirs is an ancient story. Long ago, the astrids were among the most trusted agents of the Fairy Queen. As a reward for their outstanding service, they were selected as the honor guard for the Fairy King.”

“There’s a Fairy *King*?”

“There *was* a Fairy King, although the Queen was easily the more powerful of the two. Her astrids failed to protect the Fairy King from Gorgrog, the king of demons. When the Fairy King fell, so did the male counterparts of the Queen’s fairies. Thus the imps were born.

“It’s hard to say how responsible the astrids were for the tragedy, but the Queen blamed them, and she cast them out of her service. Six turned away and went dark. The other ninety remain faithful, clinging to the wish of one day earning her forgiveness.”

Kendra regarded the astrids with new eyes. “You can hear their thoughts?”

“I can. But they no longer commune with the Fairy Queen or the fairies. They lack much of their former splendor. Yet despite their limitations, they strive to watch over the Queen’s interests.”

“Will they prevent me from reaching the shrine?”

“I can’t say.”

“Ask them.”

“They say the shrine guards itself from those who don’t belong.”

“Well, I feel good about it.” She started forward, then turned to look back at Raxtus. “You coming?”

“I better wait here. You go on ahead.”

Kendra went back and set the knapsack by his forelegs. “Keep an eye on that. I don’t want Warren getting zapped for my trespassing.”

“You got it.”

As Kendra approached the ledge, she got her closest view ever of the astrids. They were big birds, nearly as high as her waist. The gilded feathers had faint brown markings. The human faces possessed creamy, flawless skin and displayed no abnormal features. The various astrids differed only slightly from one another. Their eyes remained fixed on her—mostly dark brown eyes, but two had deep blue irises. The largest had light gray eyes the color of old quarters. Kendra could not determine the gender of the faces. Forced to guess, she would have gone with female, but without any certainty.

The Fairy Queen had once warned Kendra that before approaching a shrine, she should search her feelings to check if her presence would be acceptable. Aside from the creepiness of the staring astrids, she felt calm and confident. And she had a genuine need, not only to find the directions to the Dragon Temple that Patton had left, but hopefully to get some additional advice. With no sixth sense warning her away, she boosted herself onto the ledge and looked to the far side where water bubbled up out of the rocks. The water trickled into a shallow pool, hardly more than a puddle, before drizzling off the ledge. Near the spring stood a tiny white statuette of a fairy beside a golden bowl.

Where could Patton have left the directions? At first glance she observed no sign of a message. How might he have conveyed the information? It was almost certainly written in the secret fairy language. He might have jotted it on paper and stored it in a container. Or chiseled it onto a rock.

Kendra glanced at the miniature statue. The thought of petitioning the Fairy Queen suddenly made her shy. The astrids had a point—the last time she had solicited help from the Fairy Queen, it had led to the destruction of the shrine at Fablehaven. She worried the Queen might be resentful.

But this was no time to be bashful. At best, Seth and the others had been captured. At worst, they were dead. Navarog lurked outside the gates of Wyrmoost. Or perhaps inside by now. She could not let him get the key. The Sphinx had too many artifacts already. Kendra needed help. Surely the Fairy Queen would appreciate the severity of the situation.

Kendra knelt beside the tiny statue. "I need help," she whispered.

The air stirred. A cool breeze ruffled her hair, smelling as though it had passed over snowy slopes to reach her. The refreshing scent intensified, then became richer and more varied. Kendra smelled pine sap, wildflowers, decaying wood, honeycombs. She inhaled the earthy aroma of a cave and the salty tang of the sea.

Kendra Sorenson. The words entered her mind almost as if they had been spoken aloud. A distinct feeling of comfort accompanied the thought.

"I hear you," Kendra whispered. "Thanks for saving me when I was peering into the Oculus."

A risky endeavor. Not only can your mind drown amid the flood of stimulation, but as you peer through the Oculus, you leave yourself vulnerable to be observed by others, as I saw you.

"I never wanted to use it," Kendra said earnestly. "The Sphinx made me."

A dangerous man.

"Did you see him when he used the Oculus?"

Yes. His mind was temporarily open to my scrutiny.

"What did you learn? Did you find a weakness?"

I was surprised to discover that he is a man, not a creature in disguise.

"How could he be so old?"

Magical tampering, how else? I could not identify the exact means. But I saw that he truly believes his cause is just.

"Freeing demons? Is he nuts?"

Misguided. He knows that no prison can stand forever. He fears that one day, others less capable than himself will release the demons and fail to bridle their power. He trusts himself to do it right, to hold their ferocity in check. But his motives are impure. In connection with his other motivations, he craves the power. He thinks he can bend the demons to his will, but he is mistaken. The world will pay if he breaches Zzyzx.

"What else did you see about him?" Kendra asked, fascinated.

Little else. With more time I could have learned much. Someone helped him awaken from his trance, as I helped you. Not someone near him. One who reached him from afar. I could not sense who roused him. As soon as the Sphinx released the Oculus, my link to him was sundered.

Kendra wondered who might have helped the Sphinx awaken. No candidates came to mind. Her thoughts turned to her present situation. "I need help. Navarog is trying to get the key to a vault in Australia that holds part of the key to Zzyzx. The vault key is inside the Dragon Temple here at Wyrmoost. We're trying to get it before our enemies have a chance, but a bunch of griffins nabbed Seth, Trask, Tanu, Mara, Dougan, and Gavin. Warren is with me but he's badly injured. A dragon named Raxtus is helping us."

I understand your need. Beholding the Sphinx's ambitions helped illustrate the gravity of this predicament. Sadly, I am nearly blind at Wyrmoost. Very few fairies dwell there, most of them reclusive and sullen. I did not know you were at the sanctuary until you approached my shrine.

"What about the astrids? Maybe they could help."

Rage washed over Kendra. She felt angry and hurt, the bitter residue of an unforgivable insult. It took her a moment to realize the furious emotion was not her own. It emanated from the Queen.

I have no interest in their manner of aid. You would do well to ignore them.

Kendra struggled to separate herself from the wrathful emotions conveyed by the Queen. She wanted to punch somebody. "How long ago did they mess up?"

Eons ago. Their failure did irreparable damage. Time has not dulled my agony. The consequences of their negligence were permanent, and so shall be their exile.

"But after all this time they keep serving you. What about forgiveness?"

The hot fury ebbed, replaced by a cooler, more cerebral emotion.

Your desire to extend mercy is a tender product of your innocence. You cannot conceive of all that was lost. The tragedy was so painfully preventable.

"Did they betray you on purpose? Was it deliberate?"

No. Careless. Weak. Devastating. But not premeditated.

"Weren't they some of your best servants?"

My elite champions. My most able agents. Pride blinded them to their vulnerabilities. A small amount of caution would have prevented the disaster.

"I bet they've learned that lesson."

Not all have remained loyal.

“Don’t forgive those six, then.”

A cold, suspicious emotion took hold of Kendra.

You speak out of self-interest. You are desperate for any aid, even theirs.

“I’m desperate for aid because I’m trying to save the world. Not because I’m selfish.”

The emotion warmed into weary indifference.

My astrids would not be the servants they once were. I stripped them of their power. They are hardly shadows of their former selves.

“You could give it back.”

No, I cannot. Their energy now resides elsewhere.

Kendra tried to gather her thoughts. She had run out of words. It seemed stupid to let a grudge persist for eons. She fought with Seth all the time, but they were smart enough to make up afterwards, and they were only kids.

When at my shrines, you need not speak for me to hear. You have expressed yourself eloquently on behalf of the astrids, and, despite my potent emotions to the contrary, I deem it sound counsel. Unpleasant, infuriating, but sound. My people have not been able to communicate with the astrids since the King was taken. I will remove that barrier.

“Raxtus could hear them.”

Correct. Raxtus is not formally a member of my kingdom, although he was my ward for a time, and I regard him as a friend. Perhaps he can aid you here at Wyrmoost. The dragon has more strength than he realizes.

“Can the astrids help me too?”

Spells and treaties prevent all but dragons and mortals from entering the Dragon Temple. Furthermore, in my astrids’ present state, the help they can lend you will be limited. You must arrange any assistance from them on your own. I remain unready to contact them directly. The barrier between myself and the astrids will endure.

“Is there any other help you can give me?”

You seek the location of the Dragon Temple. Patton inscribed instructions on a stone tablet and threw it into my pool. But I can show you better. The temple is not far. Climb down from here toward the east, and then continue toward the tallest pinnacle to the northeast.

For a moment, everything went black, although Kendra’s eyes remained open. Then a vision unfolded. She soared down a slope away from the shrine,

then curved toward a vertical finger of rock. The vision dissipated into mist, and her regular sight returned.

“I see where to go.”

Drink from the spring.

Kendra intuited that the Fairy Queen meant for her to use the golden bowl. She collected water from the bubbling fountainhead until the bowl was halfway full. Lifting the cold metal to her lips, she drank. The fresh water was flavored by minerals and had a slight metallic tang. But then the fluid tasted like citrus juice, and honey, and saltwater, and grape juice, and milk, and raw eggs, and apple juice, and cream of wheat, and carrot juice—all those flavors at once but somehow separate and distinct.

Now my astrids will hear your mind, and you will hear their thoughts in return. But they will not hear mine. Go in peace, Kendra.

Warm feelings buoyed Kendra better than a physical hug. “Thank you.”

Kendra stood and turned. The astrids perched on the brink of the ledge, regarding her solemnly. Raxtus waited farther down the slope. Stepping between the astrids, Kendra hopped off the ledge, then swiveled to face them.

“How do I talk to you?”

That will suffice. Multiple voices responded together in her mind, the same way she heard the Fairy Queen. *Thank you for advocating our cause. We have waited so long for some acknowledgment from our Queen.*

“Happy to do it,” Kendra said. “Did you hear about my problem?”

We could hear you, but not the Queen.

“Do you always speak in unison?”

We are a cadre of twelve. We have shared our minds for so long that it requires little effort to think as one.

Their telepathic voices were different from the Queen’s. No emotions accompanied the words, and the tone came across more grim and masculine even without Kendra’s physically hearing anything. Now that Kendra could perceive their inner voices, she decided the smooth faces must be male after all.

“You can think on your own as well, though.”

We can do what we will.

“I need your help.”

We are indebted to you, but we cannot enter the Dragon Temple. Raxtus could, in theory.

“But he’s a dragon. We shouldn’t tell him I mean to go there.”

He hears our thoughts. He already knows.

Kendra turned and looked down the slope at the gleaming dragon.

He says not to be afraid.

“Why can’t I hear his mind?”

Who can say? He can’t hear yours, either.

Kendra bit her lower lip. “Can’t you do anything to help me?”

You will have what support we can lend.

“Thanks.” The twelve somber faces were unsettling. Did she even want eerie mutant owls as allies?

We are not all we once were.

“I’m sorry,” Kendra blurted. “I didn’t mean to think ungrateful thoughts.”

We understand.

Kendra turned and hustled back toward Raxtus, regretting that the owls could read her mind, and feeling embarrassed that they could perceive those regrets. She heard wings flapping, and glanced back to see several astrids flying away in different directions.

“You mean to enter the Dragon Temple,” Raxtus said. “I should have known you were up to something terrible. That’s how my luck goes. Kendra, if I fail to stop you or at least report your intentions, I become an accomplice and could be killed for treason.”

“I’m only trying to recover something a friend hid there,” Kendra explained. “I have no other motives.”

“The astrids told me telepathically. They can hear your mind now. I trust them, and I trust you. You must be an incredible person to be fairykind. You’re very personable. I’m sure you and your friends really need this key. However, no other dragon will care about your motives. The Dragon Temple isn’t casually off-limits—access is strictly forbidden. Don’t fret, I won’t turn you in. But I would love to talk you out of it.”

“I have to try,” Kendra insisted.

“Alone? Have you any idea the obstacles you would have to overcome to reach the treasure vault? Three invincible guardians block the way.”

“Do you know any tricks to get by them?”

Raxtus laughed nervously. “Nobody knows anything about the guardians. Except there’s a widespread rumor that the first is a hydra. Which is almost worse than not knowing. How could you possibly hope to get past a hydra?”

“What’s a hydra?”

Raxtus lowered his head and closed his eyes. “You don’t even know? Kendra, you have no business going up against these kinds of creatures alone. Even with your whole team, going into the Dragon Temple will be a one-way trip. Just leave the key in the treasury. Let your enemies die trying to get it.”

“The Sphinx has Navarog on his side, and he knows the key is here. If I do nothing, the Sphinx is sure to claim the key.”

“Navarog is bad news,” Raxtus conceded.

“The owls relayed our dilemma to you?”

“The basics, yeah.”

“What if you help me? This isn’t just for me or my friends. We’re trying to save the world from a man who wants to unleash a horde of demons.”

The dragon turned away. “Honestly, you’re nice, and your reasons sound legitimate, but you don’t understand me. I tried to explain what a coward I am. I wasn’t being modest. And I’m not only afraid of us dying. It would be so illegal for me to venture into the Dragon Temple. It would be a betrayal of my whole species.” He swung his head back around to gaze into her eyes. “I may be pathetic, but I’ve never lost my honor. My involvement in this would end poorly. On top of losing my honor, I would be useless to you. It would be a disaster.”

“The Fairy Queen said you have more strength than you realize.”

He perked up. “Really? She said that?”

“Her words.”

“Well, that’s encouraging. Although, she’s basically my fairy godmother. An endorsement from a parental relative is nice, but hard to put on a résumé. Look, I’ll pretend I never heard where you were going. I’m pretty good at deluding myself. But don’t ask me to join you. I just can’t go into the Dragon Temple. Life is short enough without chasing certain doom. Kendra, you seem determined, I can read it on your face. If you insist on going through with this, I won’t stop you, but my involvement will have to end. I’ve already shamed my dad by what I am. I can’t risk shaming him further by what I do.”

“Will you at least carry me to the entrance?”

“I’ll carry you to a spot *near* the entrance. None of the other dragons pay attention to me, and I can be fairly stealthy, so I’m not too worried about getting identified near the temple. But then I’ll have to take off.”

“I understand,” Kendra said. She tried to keep her voice even. She had asked Raxtus to risk death and humiliation, and he had denied her. Could she really blame him? At least he would provide a lift to her destination. He had already been more help than she had any right to expect. Even so, she felt disappointed. “You never explained about hydras.”

“Right. Sorry. I’m always wandering off onto tangents. Picture a really big, mean dragon with lots of heads. If you chop one off, two grow back. Hydras technically aren’t dragons. They don’t work magic or have breath weapons. They’re famously hard to kill. I can’t guarantee the first guardian is a hydra, but that is the rumor. I have no clue about the other guardians.”

How was she supposed to get by a hydra? Let alone the other guardians. She was alone. Raxtus was right. Going to the Dragon Temple would be suicide. Inside the knapsack, Warren had the unicorn horn. Should she ask Raxtus to take her to the main gate of Wyrmoost? Navarog might be there, but maybe she could hide in the knapsack and have Raxtus turn invisible. They might be able to slip away.

It would mean deserting her team and abandoning their quest. Seth would never run away. Would any of the others abandon her? No, she could at least investigate the Dragon Temple and the first guardian before utterly forsaking the mission. She owed everybody that much.

“I’m ready,” Kendra said. “Should we go?”

“Should we? No way. But I’m willing to take you.”

Raxtus grabbed her with one of his front claws and soared into the air. This time he performed no fancy tricks. He turned invisible and flew low to the ground, staying near cover whenever possible. Kendra saw the finger of stone approaching just like in the vision the Fairy Queen had shown her. When they landed in a grove of tall pines, Raxtus set Kendra on her feet. The dragon remained invisible.

“It’s getting late,” the dragon murmured. “Why not sleep on it?”

“If I’m doing it, now is as good as tomorrow.”

“You’re the boss. You’re so dead, though. No offense, but you really are. I mean, I could almost cry. Anyhow, just go down this slope, walk around the nearest bluff, and you’ll see the entrance. Can’t miss it.”

“Is it hard to get inside?”

“No doors. You just stroll in. I have no idea how far in the first guardian will be situated. Careful, getting out may not be as simple as entering. These types of places tend to be designed that way.”

Kendra nodded. She had received similar advice back when she had ventured into the vault containing the Sands of Sanctity at Fablehaven. The reminder sort of wrecked her idea of tentatively peeking at the first guardian. She would have to consult Warren.

“Thanks, Raxtus. I appreciate your help. I better go talk to Warren about our next move.”

“I hope he talks you out of this. Tell him I’m sorry about the beard. Be careful. Nice to meet you.”

The air stirred as he beat his invisible wings.

And then she was alone.

Kendra sat down. Did she really want to go down and talk to Warren? He would tell her to wait to enter the temple until he was healthier. Would he be wrong? They could hole up in the knapsack for a few days—even weeks, if necessary. They had plenty of food. The main drawback would be the risk of Navarog catching up.

She stretched out on her back and stared up at limbs bristling with green needles. The trees provided good cover. The air was cool but not frigid. Her mind wandered. She vaguely hoped a brilliant idea would occur. Inspiration refused to strike.

Eventually she sat up. She should find a place to stash the knapsack while she talked with Warren. Was it good enough to set it beside a tree? What if some creature came along? Maybe she could dig a shallow hole. Or at least cover the knapsack with some branches. Maybe she could stow it on a tree branch. If so, would she still be able to climb inside?

Kendra wandered the grove looking for an ideal spot. Nothing jumped out at her. Most of the trees lacked low branches. The ground had no usable irregularities, and it was too hard for digging.

Fluttering wings caused her to turn and crouch beside a tree. She fumbled with the flap of the knapsack, hoping to hide before she was spotted, but relaxed when an astrid glided into view. The golden owl perched on a branch above her.

Your friends are with Thronis.

“My brother?”

They are alive and well. Apparently the giant plans to help them.

She felt hope awaken inside her. “How did you learn this?”

Two of us flew into the mansion and spied.

“I thought Thronis was protected by spells.”

Astrids have been ignored for centuries. The sky giant has warding spells against dragons and other perceived threats. We are beneath his notice.

“Then I should just sit tight?”

We will continue to scout for you. If you go into the hidden room, I can transport the bag somewhere safe.

Kendra began to weep with relief. The astrids could help her hide the knapsack, her brother and friends were alive, and she might not have to face the Dragon Temple alone. Deep down, she had been quietly resigning herself to the fact that she would have to retrieve the key on her own. Her problems remained far from solved, but at least she no longer felt entirely hopeless.



Temple

Seth had never seen so many dragonflies. Ranging from the length of his pinky to half the length of his forearm, the streamlined insects hovered and darted above the reedy pools near the entrance to the Dragon Temple. One landed on his arm. He glanced down at the compound eyes, the transparent wings, and the slim, multihued body. After a moment, the dragonfly took flight, joining the swarms.

Had he not drunk powdered milk from Fablehaven that morning, Seth might have suspected the insects were magical creatures in disguise. But these were the real thing, shimmering in every color of the rainbow. Until now, he had never made a connection between dragons and dragonflies.

The yawning entrance to the Dragon Temple loomed before him. The temple was basically a natural ravine covered by an arched stone roof. Matching granite dragons nearly the size of Thronis flanked the mouth of the gloomy gorge, fierce jaws agape.

Seth caught sight of a griffin skimming over some distant treetops. After covertly dropping them off beneath a stand of pines, the griffins had flown off to continue the search for Kendra. Earlier that morning, Mara had found tracks in the gorge where Kendra had fallen the day before. Those tracks went a long way up the gorge until they tangled with the tracks of a very young dragon. Fortunately, there had been no blood or other evidence of a struggle. Mara had identified more of Kendra's tracks near the Fairy

Queen's shrine, once again converging with dragon markings. From there, the trail went cold.

As unlikely as it sounded, Mara's best guess had been that the dragon was transporting Kendra. Trask agreed. Since Kendra had already visited the Fairy Queen's shrine, she presumably knew where to find the Dragon Temple. But at the entrance to the Dragon Temple, they had discovered no further traces of Kendra or a young dragon. Could she have braved the temple alone? Maybe the dragon had learned where Kendra was heading and turned on her. Trask, Mara, and the others had all fanned out to search the vicinity, leaving Seth near the entrance with their gear.

"I've got her!" Gavin called.

Seth spied Gavin scrambling down the scree beside the bluff to the right of the entrance, causing little rockslides as he went. Kendra followed behind, picking her way more carefully, the knapsack over one shoulder. Seth checked the sky, relieved to see no dragons. While searching for Kendra, they had been exposed. If a dragon spotted them this close to the Dragon Temple, their adventure would end before it began.

While waiting for Gavin and his sister to reach him, Seth considered the immense temple. What kind of creatures raised a roof over a canyon and called it home? With an entrance that big, and such vast space inside, who knew what might await them? The stone dragons out front seemed like a not-so-subtle hint.

"I'm so glad you're all right," Kendra said as she approached Seth.

"We lucked out," Seth admitted. "Thronis wants some stuff from the treasure room."

"We're not going to steal for him," Kendra said, turning to check with Gavin.

Gavin fingered the silver chain around his neck. "If we d-d-d-don't, these will strangle us."

Kendra glanced at Seth. "You all have one?"

Seth shrugged. "It was the only way to avoid getting baked in a pie. Seriously."

"The dragons won't like it," Kendra warned.

"At least the dragons will have to catch us to kill us," Seth reasoned. "Thronis had us for sure."

“Makes sense,” Kendra allowed.

Seth studied Kendra. “While we were following your tracks, they said it looked like you were with a dragon.”

“I made friends with a small dragon named Raxtus. Small for a dragon, I mean. He was fully grown. He refused to take part in anything related to entering the Dragon Temple. But he dropped me off nearby and wished me good luck.”

Gavin frowned. “Let’s hope he doesn’t repeat what he knows to less friendly ears.”

“I think he’ll keep quiet,” Kendra said. “I haven’t seen Raxtus since yesterday, and no dragons have flocked to bar access to the temple.”

Trask jogged over to them. “Kendra, good to see you. Is Warren well?”

“He’s hanging in there.”

Trask ran a hand over his bald scalp. “I’m sorry to say, but you’ll probably want to enter the temple with us.”

“I was planning on it,” Kendra assured him.

Trask nodded. “We have no idea what wards protect the temple, but we could easily trip magical safeguards or alarms simply by entering. If word of our intrusion gets out, it will likely be safer inside than out here. I prefer we stay together.”

Mara approached. Dougan and Tanu could be seen returning as well, trotting doggedly toward them.

Kendra looked down at some of the gear piled near Seth.

“Big enough sword?” she asked, raising her eyebrows.

The sword in question had a thick blade at least eight feet long. Beside it lay an assortment of other armaments.

“Weapons from Thronis,” Seth explained. “The huge sword is edged with adamant. The spears are tipped with adamant. Some of the smaller blades have adamant edges as well. They’re all too small for him to use, so he was willing to risk them. But he wants them back if we survive.”

“Now all we need is somebody who can lift the sword,” Kendra joked.

“Between Agad and Thronis,” Seth said, “Tanu managed to gather ingredients to make two of his giant potions. You know, like the one he used at Fablehaven to fight the resurrecting cat.”

“The sword is too small for Thronis,” Trask said. “But just right for me if I were a little bigger.”

Seth hefted a coarse brown sack. “We have three of these. Each contains a dose of dragonsbane, the only poison that works on dragons.”

“Does it work on hydras?” Kendra wondered.

“Why hydras?” Seth asked suspiciously.

“The dragon I met heard a rumor that the first guardian is a hydra.”

“Thronis came across the same story,” Seth said. “He thinks dragonsbane would work on a hydra, and so does Tanu, but neither of them is certain.”

Kendra lightly kicked one of the sacks with her toe. “How do we get dragons to eat it?”

“One way is to hang onto a sack if one of us gets gobbled up,” Seth said.

“Cheerful thought,” Kendra muttered. “Do we know whether any of the guardians are dragons?”

“Pretty safe bet,” Trask said. “Dragons have access to dragons, and no guardian would be more formidable.”

“Except maybe a hydra,” Seth chimed in.

“Whatever happens in there,” Trask said, “if we get into serious trouble, you and Seth are to duck inside the knapsack and Mendigo will try to escape with you.”

“Where is Mendigo?” Kendra asked.

“Scouting,” Seth replied. “He got busted up when he jumped off that cliff with you, but Thronis repaired him. He’s good as new.”

“Together we have a wide array of expertise and abilities,” Trask said. “We’ll find a way to get past these guardians and get out with the key.”

“Afterwards you have to take some treasure back to Thronis?” Kendra said.

“His griffins will meet us at a rendezvous point,” Seth said. “It should be smooth sailing if we can survive the temple.”

“Except that Navarog might be waiting at the main gate,” Kendra reminded him.

“Right,” Seth said pensively. “Well, hopefully we’ll have some dragonsbane left over.”

Tanu reached them, panting lightly. Dougan arrived a moment later.

“You guys are all warmed up,” Seth said. “I hear a brisk jog is just the thing before fighting dragons. Should we do some stretching?”

“We about ready to go inside?” Tanu asked, ignoring Seth’s comments.

Trask gave a nod.

Tanu rummaged in his satchel. “Time for me to earn my keep.” He pulled out a bunch of small plastic cylinders capped by little rubber stoppers. “These are the closest I could come to creating dragon insurance. For three hours after swallowing a dose, we’ll be fire resistant and have some protection against electricity. There is also some liquid emotion in the mix, a jolt of courage to help against dragon terror. I have a second dose for each of us in case three hours isn’t enough.”

“Fire *resistant*?” Seth asked. “How about *fireproof*?”

Tanu shook his head. “Against dragon fire, resistant is the best I can claim.”

“Fire is the most common draconic breath weapon,” Gavin said. “But the guardians of the Dragon Temple may not be very common.”

“Protection against fire is better than nothing,” Trask said, accepting a cylinder, uncapping it, and downing the contents. The others followed suit. Seth found that the clear liquid tasted sugary at first, then spicy hot, then cool and tangy.

“Anything else?” Seth asked.

“A gaseous potion for each of us,” Tanu said. “As a last resort, chug it and try to drift away. Use it wisely. As a gas, you’ll move slowly, and a direct blast of dragon fire would probably sear you into nothing.” Tanu handed a small bottle to each of them.

“You have the smoke grenades?” Trask asked.

“I was getting to them.” Tanu pulled out small glass bulbs full of purple fluid. “This liquid turns to smoke when exposed to air. The vapors will smell nasty to us but much worse to creatures with more highly developed olfactory senses. Like dragons, for example. The fumes should basically blind their noses. Trask and I will take charge of these grenades.”

“Call back Mendigo,” Trask prompted Seth.

“Mendigo!” Seth cried. “Return to us!”

“I can turn two of us into giants,” Tanu said, holding up a pair of crystal vials. “I vote for Trask and Dougan, our two most tested fighters. Any objections?”

“Makes sense to me,” Gavin agreed.

Trask nodded and accepted a vial. Dougan claimed the other. “Let’s get ready to move out,” Trask said. He picked up his heavy crossbow and a large oval shield that covered more than half of his body.

“Mendigo, take the big sword,” Seth ordered as the man-sized puppet joined them.

Mendigo picked it up, staggering for a moment before balancing the preposterous weapon against his wooden shoulder. Tanu pulled on a heavy shirt of overlapping metal rings and strapped on a sword. Dougan seized his battle-ax. Gavin and Mara each lifted a spear. Seth buckled a sword around his waist and claimed a crossbow. He handed Kendra a sizable knife in a sheath.

“What am I supposed to do with this?” Kendra asked, pulling the knife out.

“Stab,” Seth suggested.

Kendra sheathed the knife and opened the knapsack. “We’re going in,” she called down.

“Good luck,” Warren responded from below, his voice hoarse.

“If we see a dragon, let me try to talk first,” Gavin advised. “I may be able to negotiate or trick it. If nothing else, I should be able to calm it.”

“You’ll get your chance to talk,” Trask said. “Meanwhile, I’ll be aiming.”

As they marched toward the entrance and the stone dragons, Seth drew his sword. The weight felt comforting in his hand. He envisioned himself slashing a dragon across the snout.

Walking beside him, Kendra leaned over. “We should stay close in case of dragons.”

“Right.” He had almost let himself forget how Nafia had muddled his mind. He supposed he could cling to Kendra with one hand and wield the sword with the other.

They passed between the granite dragons and into the shadow of the high, arched roof. Several dragonflies flitted through the air. Nothing

decorated the ground or the walls but the natural stone and dirt of the ravine. Trask led the way, crossbow held ready. Next came Gavin and Tanu. Mendigo strolled beside Kendra and Seth. Dougan and Mara had the rear.

Up ahead, the ravine curved. Just prior to the curve, the ground fell away almost vertically for roughly thirty feet. The precipice stretched from one wall of the ravine to the other.

“Rope,” Trask said.

Gavin disappeared into the knapsack.

Edging forward, Seth peered over the brink. The smooth slope was not quite ninety degrees, but it might have been eighty.

Gavin emerged from the knapsack with a sturdy length of knotted rope. Dougan fastened one end around a tall boulder and tossed the coil off the edge. The rope reached the base of the slope with several feet to spare.

Slinging his crossbow over his shoulder, Trask picked up the rope. “If you lean away from the wall,” he instructed Seth and Kendra in a low voice, “you can walk down. Or if you prefer, you can descend from knot to knot with your hands and feet.”

Leaning away from the precipice, trusting the rope, Trask began walking backward. Keeping his body perpendicular to the slope, step by step, hand over hand, he walked confidently to the ground. Gavin hurried down next in similar fashion, followed by Tanu.

Copying their technique, Seth grabbed the rope and leaned out over the drop. Part of him wanted to embrace the rope and descend knot to knot, but once he started walking backwards, he could feel how his grip on the rope kept his feet planted against the slope, and realized that this way was superior.

When Seth reached the bottom, he glanced over at Gavin, eyeing the silver chain around his neck. It would be a shame to let such a remarkable object go to waste.

Seth pulled Gavin aside. “Level with me. Are you interested in my sister?”

“I’m not sure this is the t-t-time to get into that,” Gavin responded, eyes straying to the top of the steep slope.

Seth fingered his own silver collar. “Seems like the perfect time.”

“Since when are you a matchmaker?”

“I’m just curious.”

Gavin flushed a little. “If you must know, yes, I am very interested in Kendra. I can’t wait to see where our relationship goes.”

“I thought so,” Seth replied smugly. “For the record, I think she likes you, too.”

Growing redder, Gavin started distancing himself. “She’ll come down any minute. We can talk more later.”

Seth looked up, waiting for Kendra. Mendigo descended one-handed, clutching the enormous sword in the other, releasing and grabbing the rope at such a pace that he was practically running backwards. Mara came down next with the knapsack. While Dougan worked his way down, Kendra emerged from the knapsack.

“You cheated,” Seth whispered.

“Dragons and hydras are stressful enough,” she replied.

“I think somebody has a crush on you,” Seth mentioned casually.

Kendra’s eyes widened. “You didn’t say anything to him?”

Seth shrugged. “He didn’t get strangled. I think he’s got it bad.”

Kendra grabbed Seth’s arm tightly. Was there a flicker of excitement in her gaze? It took her a moment to find words. “Don’t talk to boys about me. Ever. For any reason.”

“I was just trying to ease your stress.”

Her grip tightened more. “I sort of appreciate the intention, but it does not make me less stressed.”

“You should just kiss him and get it over with.”

Kendra released him in disgust. Seth suppressed a laugh.

As they came around the first significant bend in the ravine, the daylight from the entrance grew dim. Glowing white stones set in the walls and distant ceiling provided sufficient illumination to see, although the uneven radiance left the cavernous room cloaked in pockets of shadow.

Ahead of them, a lake covered the floor of the ravine, the light from the luminous stones reflecting off the dark, glassy surface. Shaped like a trapezoid, the far side of the lake was much narrower than the near side. Just beyond the lake, the ravine tapered to a tall, narrow passage not unlike the Sidestep Cleft. A ledge running for hundreds of yards along the left wall of the ravine provided the only route around the lake.

“I don’t like it,” Trask murmured. “We’re going to get ambushed. We’ll be trapped on that ledge over the water with no way to maneuver.”

“We should cross the lake in groups of two,” Dougan recommended. “That way at least we can cover one another.”

“And avoid getting everyone wiped out by a single blast of dragon breath,” Trask agreed. “Okay, me and Gavin first. Then Mara and Seth. Then Kendra and Tanu. Then Mendigo and Dougan.”

Seth wrung his fingers as Trask set out along the ledge with Gavin, moving in a low crouch, treading lightly and quickly.

“Keep that crossbow handy,” Dougan murmured in Seth’s ear. Nodding, Seth unslung his crossbow and made sure it was ready to fire.

When Trask waved his crossbow over his head at the far side of the lake, Mara and Seth set out. They descended near to the water to boost themselves onto the ledge. The stone shelf angled upward, so they were soon a good ten or fifteen feet above the dark and silent lake. In places, the ledge narrowed to only a few feet wide, but most of the way falling was not a concern. They moved swiftly, trying to step lightly. Seth winced whenever dirt or pebbles crunched grittily underfoot.

The last section of the ledge descended like a ramp to deposit them at the far side of the lake. When they arrived, Trask signaled with his crossbow again and Kendra started across with Tanu. Seth watched the murky lake and listened, but detected nothing threatening.

Finally Dougan and Mendigo started across at a brisk pace. Seth and the others had backed away toward the narrow passage that led deeper into the roofed ravine. Trask remained nearer to the water, a pair of adamant-tipped quarrels ready in his oversized crossbow.

Seth began to relax as soon as Dougan and Mendigo reached the near shore. And then shrieking heads came boiling up out of the water.

With water raining down on them, Dougan and Mendigo broke into a run. Fumbling the giant sword, the limberjack dragged the tip behind him, the metal scraping and clanging against rocks. Unflinching, Trask took a step closer to the lake, aiming his crossbow. Tanu shepherded Kendra, Seth, and Mara deeper into the passage. Gavin dashed toward the lake, waving one arm, shaking his spear, and screeching the dragon language.

As the dark green hydra scooted its bulky body onto the shore, Seth gawked in amazement. The massive creature had no fewer than fifteen

heads swaying at the end of as many serpentine necks. Three shorter necks ended in charred stumps. The draconic heads were roughly the size of coffins, varying somewhat one from another in size and shape. Several bore scars.

As Gavin continued to wave his arm and shriek, all the heads gradually fixated on him, malevolent eyes glittering. Breathing heavily, Dougan reached Seth and the others at the mouth of the narrow passage. Mendigo arrived behind him.

“We don’t care who you are,” the heads spat together, harsh voices ringing in unison. “All who enter this temple must die.”

“We’re not after the g-g-g-gauntlets,” Gavin called, switching to English. Seth wondered if Gavin also stuttered when speaking the dragon tongue.

“You think we care what you’re after?” the heads cried. “We have killed since the dawn of time, and we shall kill well into the dusk.”

The hydra looked old to Seth. Compared to Nafia, the heads and necks seemed wasted, more skeletal. One was missing an eye. Another lacked a lower jaw. One head dangled listlessly at the end of its neck, either dead or unconscious. Missing patches of scales left bare spots on the scarred necks. Lank scarves of scum glistened wetly.

“You call yourself a killer?” Gavin taunted. “I name you a slave! A broken-down old watchdog!”

The heads screamed. Seth covered his ears, and even so the wails resounded with tremendous volume. “We are Hespera! We guard sacred treasures!”

“You cower in a muddy pit reeking of slime,” Gavin laughed. “Elsewhere in this same sanctuary a younger hydra roams a glorious swamp, hunting fat prey as it pleases!”

“Liar!” the heads snarled together.

“Oh, these dragons really pulled one over on you. Listen to yourselves! So many sad voices singing the same sorry tune.” Gavin pointed to one head. “Say something on your own.” He gestured to the head missing an eye. “How about you, cyclops?” Gavin shook his head. “Your minds are further gone than your body! Pathetic!”

Two of the heads on the right began to hiss at each other. Another head began to squeal. A head on the left stretched toward Gavin, fangs bared, but

he skipped out of reach.

“Silence,” demanded a single head toward the center, yellower than the others.

Gavin pointed at the speaker. “That one.”

Trask loosed a quarrel at the yellow head, and one of its eyes went dark. The head reared up, jaws opening, and Trask launched a second quarrel into the mouth. Using undersized forelegs and semicircular fins, the hydra scooted farther out of the lake. Trask tossed his crossbow to Gavin, who caught it as he sprinted away from the lake. Several heads lashed toward Trask. Casting aside his shield, he drew a pair of swords, and the blades rang against tooth and scale as he whirled and slashed, moving generally away from the water.

Seth fired his crossbow, but could not tell where the arrow landed. Tanu threw glass bulbs that began to fill the air with smoke. The hydra flopped farther onto the shore. After hacking off part of a tongue, Trask turned and ran. Everyone stampeded deeper into the passage. Behind them the hydra flailed and bellowed. The echoing wails seemed to come from all directions.

“Slow down,” Trask panted. “Don’t rush, we’re out of danger.”

“We should stop here,” Tanu suggested in a stage whisper. “The passage widens again not much farther on. We could stumble unprepared into an equally deadly foe.”

“The creature is too big to reach us here,” Trask said, leaning against a wall. “Anyone hurt?”

Nobody responded.

“Could have been worse,” Dougan said.

“The hydra isn’t there to keep us out,” Seth said. “It’s there to trap us inside.”

“It would appear that way,” Trask agreed. “The creature didn’t show itself until all of us were past.”

“Between the narrow approach and the vulnerable ledge, we’ll have a tough exit ahead of us,” Gavin lamented, handing Trask back his crossbow.

“What was with the trash talk?” Seth inquired.

“I was trying to get some of the heads out of sync,” Gavin said. “I wanted to identify the g-g-governing head. I think we succeeded. Hespera is

ancient. Some of those heads looked unwell. Senile or nuts or something. I hoped some might resent their role as guardian. If we could take out the governing head, and incite the others, the monstrosity might end up trying to go ten different directions at once.”

“Trask got an eye,” Dougan said. “How’s that for marksmanship under pressure?”

“We injured the main head,” Gavin agreed. “Might have injured it badly. The second quarrel went in the mouth and out the top of her skull.”

Trask crouched, winding and reloading his crossbow. “We’ll deal with her when the time comes. Those shrieks alerted everything with ears to our presence. We should keep moving. Stay on your toes.”

Trask took the lead again. As Tanu had observed, the passage widened until they were advancing along a broad ravine once again. Seth paid attention to his footing on the uneven floor. The sporadic glowing stones left much of the ground in shadow.

“Who have we here?” uttered a slow, deep voice from a cave in the wall of the ravine about thirty yards ahead. The cave mouth had looked like a patch of shadow until Seth saw a huge gray head emerge.

His mind went blank. He couldn’t even clearly see the shadowy eyes, but he found himself stupefied, unable to move. Gavin grabbed his hand and placed it into Kendra’s, and the sensation passed.

“Weary travelers,” Gavin answered.

“I will give you rest,” the morose voice answered.

Opening his mouth wide, Gavin shrieked and squealed. The dragon hooted a brief response.

“Glommus!” Gavin cried. “Run! Hold your breath!”

Trask fired both arrows at the head as it came farther from the hole and swung toward them. Stumbling alongside Kendra, Seth heard a mighty whoosh, then felt a fine spray against his skin. A thick mist muted the light from the glowing stones. Gavin appeared at his side, wrestling the knapsack from Kendra and tugging open the flap.

As commanded, Seth had not inhaled. His eyes were itching, and the strength seemed to be draining out of him. He lost hold of Kendra as Gavin tried to stuff her into the knapsack. Seth had never felt so drowsy. Was there something he was supposed to be doing? Was he on the ground? How did

he get there? The rocky floor of the ravine felt like a pillow-top mattress. Wasn't he in the middle of something important?

His lungs clenched insistently. He heard another loud whoosh. His eyes felt heavy, his mind drowsy. Was he holding his breath for a reason? Seemed like it was important. He exhaled what remained in his lungs. Some instinct deep inside warned him not to inhale. But if he didn't inhale, wouldn't he suffocate? He risked a small breath, and oblivion swallowed conscious thought.



Slayings

Kendra thought she heard a fuzzy voice in the distance. The words made no sense, but the speaker sounded insistent. She wished he would go away. She felt so tired.

One word began to register. The speaker kept repeating her name. She began to notice a sharp, piquant smell. Her eyes started watering and the voice became less muddy. Somebody was slapping her gently.

Her eyes opened and she sat up with a jerk. Tanu held her steady. Her sinuses felt raw. Wetness dribbled from her nostrils. She wiped her nose on her sleeve.

Tanu moved a small bottle away from her nose and capped it.

“What’s that?” she asked.

“It’s like smelling salts,” he explained.

Kendra looked around. They were alone, in a dim ravine. She was forgetting something. “The dragon!” she exclaimed.

Tanu shushed her. “It’s all right. I killed it.”

The last thing Kendra remembered, Gavin had been trying to force her into the knapsack. She had gone limp, lost contact with him, and dreamless sleep had overwhelmed her.

“Where are the others?” Kendra asked.

“Still out cold,” Tanu said. “I dragged you well away from the fumes, but even so it took almost twenty minutes to wake you up.”

“The dragon drugged us?”

“Some kind of sleeping gas. Potent stuff. I became alerted when Tanu and Seth fell into a deep sleep at the same time in the middle of the day.”

“Tanu fell asleep? But you’re—”

Tanu was shaking his head. “Vanessa.”

Startled, Kendra reflexively scooted away.

Tanu held up his hands innocently. “Be glad I showed up. That dragon would have killed all of you. Where are we?”

Kendra hesitated. “I probably better not say. Just in case. How did you kill the dragon?”

Tanu grinned. “When they sleep, I can sense everyone I’ve ever bitten. As I mentioned, I was curious about the unusual way Tanu and Seth had suddenly lost consciousness, so I took control of Tanu, studying the situation through half-closed eyes. At first I was merely investigating a hunch, but once I glimpsed how Dougan lay sprawled next to me, I knew that something was truly wrong. Fine mist permeated the air, and I observed a dragon sniffing around. I would never label myself a dragon tamer, but I have stood in the presence of dragons and kept my wits. The fear assailed me, intense and irrational, but the dragon had not noticed me, and I managed to resist. I noticed a sword beside me on the ground. I’ve always been useful with a blade in my hand. When the great head swung over to sniff at me and Dougan, I sat up and slashed his throat. Imagine my surprise when the blade cut deep, parting his scales as if they were made of cardboard. I’ve never wielded such a sword!

“My attack caught the dragon completely off guard. When I rose to my feet and cut him with a return stroke, I left the beast nearly decapitated. The dragon reeled away, belching sweet fog and bleeding profusely. He retreated into a gloomy cave and died. I went in after him to verify his demise, and finished parting his head from his body.”

“You killed a dragon,” Kendra said in awe.

Tanu laughed. It may have been the Samoan’s voice, but the laugh belonged to Vanessa. “I suppose I did.” It was strange to hear Tanu speaking with Vanessa’s inflexions. “I may be the sole living dragon slayer. Not that I deserve to brag. That was handed to me. You don’t often find the

exposed neck of a dragon moving sluggishly overhead. And there I was, with a sharp sword in my hand. It hadn't occurred to the beast that any of us could possibly be conscious. He was carelessly taking his time."

"Should I help you get the others?" Kendra asked.

"No. The sleeping gas still hangs heavy in the air. I'll have to bring them. You can wait here and help wake them." Tanu handed Kendra the tiny bottle that had helped her snap awake. He craned his head back to study the lofty ceiling. "This is no simple dragon lair. Where are we? You place us in greater danger by not telling me."

"On what side of the ravine was the dragon's cave?" Kendra asked.

"That side," Tanu pointed. "Back that way."

The answer helped Kendra orient herself. "There's a hydra back beyond the dragon cave. And somewhere up ahead an unknown guardian awaits."

Tanu scowled. "Is this a Dragon Temple? What have you gotten yourselves into?"

"Long story," Kendra said.

"I'm sure you have your reasons," Tanu muttered. "Look, I'll collect the rest of your team. You'd better put in a good word for me with your grandparents when you get home."

"Is it far to the others?" Kendra asked.

"A good distance. The mist is widely dispersed."

"There's a knapsack. It has a room inside. If you're strong enough to carry people down into the room, it might be faster. Maybe not."

"Thanks for the tip. I'll be back."

Kendra waited alone, trying to muster her courage. They had survived a dragon. Maybe they would actually make it out of the Dragon Temple. Uncapping the small bottle, she tried a little sniff and felt a spicy tingle penetrate her sinuses, triggering tears. The invasive smell left a metallic aftertaste on the roof of her mouth. She was just beginning to wonder what was taking so long when she heard Tanu returning. He drug Trask over to her and laid him on his back. The knapsack hung from his shoulder.

"Anybody in the sack?" Kendra asked.

"Mara, Gavin, Seth, and Warren," Tanu said.

"Was Warren asleep as well?"

“And badly wounded. I found him crumpled at the bottom of the ladder.”

“He was already injured,” Kendra said. “He was inside the knapsack when the dragon put us to sleep. He must have tried to climb out and help us.”

“When he tried to emerge, the sleep gas knocked him out and he fell,” Tanu finished. “Serves him right. Warren was always so cocky. I’m not going to try to lug any of them back up the ladder.”

“Right,” Kendra said. “I’ll climb down to wake them up.”

“I’ll go back for Dougan. He was too heavy to move into the knapsack. When we’re done, I’ll relinquish my hold on Tanu and you can wake him as well.”

Tanu walked away.

Kendra squatted beside Trask, uncapping the bottle and waving it beneath his nostrils. She recalled how her name had been the first word to register. “Trask,” she said. “Trask, wake up. We’re in the temple, Trask. You have to get up. Trask. Come on, Trask.”

He did not stir. Kendra took another quick whiff from the bottle. Her eyes immediately teared up and her sinuses burned. How could he sleep through that sensation? Wiping away tears, she returned the mouth of the bottle to his nostrils. He showed no reaction. “Trask! Trask, come on, get up. Trask, dragons! Hurry, Trask, wake up!” She prodded his cheek. She pried open an eye only to see it languidly roll back. She shook him. She shouted. Nothing elicited a response.

Kendra continued to speak and shout persistently. When Tanu returned with Dougan, Trask still had not stirred.

“Is there a trick to this?” Kendra asked.

“It took a good twenty minutes to awaken you,” Tanu said. “Time away from the fumes must be part of the equation. Once you get Trask awake, I’m sure the others will rouse faster.”

“How did you know which potion to use?” Kendra asked. “Can you see Tanu’s thoughts?”

Tanu shook his head. “Trial and error. I knew he must have some compound akin to smelling salts.”

Kendra put the bottle beneath Trask's nostrils. "Wake up, Trask. Come on, get up, we have dragons to fight. Trask? Trask?" She jostled his shoulder.

"I'll wait to release Tanu until Trask wakes up," Tanu said. "I don't want to leave you here alone."

"Thanks, Vanessa. I really appreciate it."

"Don't forget to put in a good word with your grandparents."

"I will," Kendra promised. "If we ever make it out of here." She returned to trying to rouse Trask.

Kendra had no way to confirm how long it took for Trask to start awakening. It felt like more than twenty minutes. At last he began to hum and moan as she shook him. Not long after that his eyes opened. With her hand on his shoulder, she felt him tense up.

"What happened?" he asked.

Kendra explained. By the time she was done, Trask was on his feet.

"Vanessa Santoro," he said grudgingly, shaking hands with Tanu. "We're indebted."

"Believe it or not, I'm actually on your side these days," Tanu replied. "Now that you're awake, Lieutenant, I'd best return your potion master to you. I'll be watching. If you should fall asleep unnaturally again, I'll be back." Tanu reclined on the ground. "You should have good luck awakening those in the knapsack by now. Save me and Dougan for last. 'Bye, Kendra."

"Bye."

Tanu closed his eyes and his body slackened into a deep sleep.

Trask stood guard while Kendra descended into the storage room. It took only a few minutes to awaken Seth. Gavin and Mara woke even faster, and Warren sat up on his own. It turned out the fall had broken both bones in his forearm. The others carefully helped him back to his resting place.

After everyone in the storage room understood what had happened, Kendra led the way up the ladder. Using the pungent scent from the little bottle, she awoke Dougan and finally Tanu. The Samoan had a big grin on his face by the time they finished recapping what had transpired.

"Glommus was an old dragon, and blind," Gavin said. "I had heard of him. His reputation was renowned. He was truly one of a kind. Once I

understood who we were facing, I knew we were in trouble. That b-b-breath of his will put anything to sleep—even other dragons!”

“I managed to break a smoke grenade before I went down,” Tanu put in.

“Which explains why Glommus had to get so close to smell us,” Gavin said. “We really lucked out. Without that narcoblix, we would be dragon food.”

“I know Vanessa gets the credit,” Tanu said, repressing a grin, “but it’s pretty cool to think I took down a dragon. My body, at least.”

“Good thing you had one of the adamant-edged swords,” Seth observed.

“We’re not out of the woods yet,” Trask reminded them. “We have another guardian ahead of us, and the hydra behind. We’ve overcome a major obstacle, but now we have to refocus.”

They set about getting their gear in order. Tanu descended into the knapsack to check how Warren was faring and discover what additional attention he might need.

Seth wandered over to Kendra. “So why do you think Vanessa picked Tanu instead of me?”

“Would you have wanted her to pick you?” Kendra asked.

“Well, I would have sort of been a dragon slayer.”

“You know, I don’t think Vanessa meant it as an insult. She’s controlled Tanu before. Plus Tanu is bigger.”

Seth looked mooney. “She bit me too.”

Kendra rolled her eyes. “Cheer up. You may not have killed dragons, but you’ve gotten to see dragons. And who knows, you might still get eaten by one!”

“I’m glad I’ve seen some,” he admitted.

Kendra huffed. “Are you really glad? Truly? It freaks me out. We almost died.”

“Don’t get me wrong. I’m not trying to pretend I wasn’t freaked out too. I thought we were doomed. But if dragons weren’t freaky, they’d be . . . disappointing.”

Kendra patted his shoulder. “Don’t worry. There should be plenty of freaky stuff ahead of us. We still might not even survive.”

Trask decided their group had been too clustered when Glommus had attacked, so he strung them out more as they resumed their journey. He and Gavin took the lead. Mara and Tanu followed fifty yards back. Then Kendra, Seth, Mendigo, and Dougan stayed back another fifty yards at the rear.

They traveled a long distance, generally sloping upward. The ravine narrowed and widened. It became deeper and shallower. It turned several times.

Kendra scrutinized every shadow, worried about another cave or offshoot containing a hidden dragon. Up ahead, Trask and Gavin searched the walls of the ravine high and low with bright flashlights. Kendra stayed ready for disaster to strike at any step. She knew that any minute Trask and Gavin could be engulfed in a fiery inferno.

She tried to guess what the final guardian might be. Another dragon? A giant? A huge demon like Bahumat? Some more deadly creature they had never heard of? The possibilities were endless.

When they rounded another corner, steps became visible up ahead. The beige stone stairs reached from one side of the ravine to the other, leading up to a pillared structure. Bronze statues of dragons flanked the top of the steps. The massive building had no front wall, and was plenty large enough to accommodate dragons or giants.

Trask and Gavin waited for the others to catch up just short of the wide stairway. "Looks like we've reached the temple proper," Trask said. "Gavin has volunteered to scout ahead. We're assuming the third guardian awaits us inside."

"He's scouting alone?" Kendra asked.

"I'll follow twenty yards back," Trask said. "I'll keep him covered with my crossbow. Tanu, trail along behind me. The rest of you hang back and await my signal."

Kendra watched Gavin mount the steps and disappear into the gloomy building. Trask was halfway up the steps when Gavin came running back out, waving Trask away. Gavin raced down the stairs two at a time and sprinted toward Kendra. She involuntarily drew back as he came into the light of the nearest glowing stone. His skin had taken on a bluish cast, almost black around the neck and lips. He gazed at her with horribly bloodshot eyes. "The horn," he murmured, collapsing.

“He’s poisoned,” Seth realized, diving into the knapsack.

Kendra could have hugged her brother for moving so quickly. Sitting beside Gavin, she took his hand to console him. It felt cold. Black eyelids had hooded his eyes. A buttery discharge leaked from below the closed lids like gooey tears. He began to quiver and twitch. His veins were becoming increasingly visible, black lines beneath his blue, clammy skin.

Tanu knelt beside the knapsack, his head and one arm inside the storage room. She heard him call, “Throw it!” A moment later the Samoan was approaching with the unicorn horn in his fist. He touched the tip of the horn to Gavin’s blue-black throat and held it there.

The convulsions stopped instantly. The black veins faded and the blue hues drained from his skin. Gavin coughed and opened his eyes, a sweaty hand closing around the horn. “That was close,” he breathed.

“Is he all right?” Trask asked.

“The horn purifies,” Tanu said. “If it was poison, he should be fine.”

“I’m great,” Gavin said, sitting up. “It was p-p-poison. We’re in serious trouble.”

“What did you see?” Trask asked.

“Not much. I barely glimpsed her. I didn’t speak with her. Didn’t have time. The poison hit hard and moved fast. But I didn’t need a conversation to know who she was. The third guardian is Siletta.”

“The poison dragon,” Tanu groaned.

Gavin nodded. “She didn’t breathe on me or anything. The whole atmosphere in there is tainted.”

“I’ve never heard of a poison dragon,” Trask said.

“Many thought she was just a legend,” Tanu explained. “Or if not, long dead. Dark potion makers fantasize about her. She is utterly unique.”

“Poison to the core,” Gavin said. “I once spoke to a dragon who knew her anciently. Her breath, her flesh, her blood, her tears, her excretions, everything is deadly poison. You saw how I looked? That was simply from being in the same room with her. Everyone should touch the horn. Even out here we may be getting exposed.”

They all crowded together to place a hand on the horn.

“What do we do?” Tanu asked.

Gavin laughed grimly. "We give up. There is no way past Siletta. I couldn't conceive of a better guardian. Even if you held the horn to protect yourself from the poison in the air, she's still a dragon, with teeth and claws and a majestic aura of terror. She saw me. She's ready for us. Besides, who knows how long the unicorn horn would protect you? All magical items have limitations. Siletta is a living fountainhead of the most potent venoms ever known."

"We're pinned between a hydra and a poison dragon," Dougan muttered.

"We need to figure this out," Trask said. "She could emerge at any moment."

"I'll take care of her," Seth said.

"Don't be ridiculous," Tanu replied.

Seth scowled at the dismissal. "I'm not. I have a plan. I'll need Kendra."

"What do you mean?" Trask asked.

"We won't use the horn just to keep us alive while we fight Siletta," Seth said. "We'll use the horn to kill Siletta."

"How so?" Kendra asked.

"When Graulas was helping me get the horn, I suspected that he wanted it for himself. But then he told me that his diseases had become so much a part of him that curing them would probably kill him. If this dragon has poison blood and poison flesh, wouldn't the horn kill her?"

"Maybe," Gavin said thoughtfully. "But I doubt the horn contains enough energy to counteract so much poison. Unicorns possess tremendous purity, but we have no unicorn, just an old horn. You'd be pitting the power of a discarded horn against a live dragon."

"We have Kendra," Seth argued. "She's like a battery full of magical energy. If she holds the horn, she'll keep it charged. And of course I'll have to go with her or the dragon terror will freeze her."

The adults exchanged glances.

"It might work," Gavin admitted.

"They're children," Trask objected.

"Children or not," Tanu vouched, "they've done some astounding things."

“Let me take the horn,” Gavin volunteered. “It might have enough potency to d-d-defeat the dragon without jeopardizing Kendra.”

“No,” Kendra said, her voice quavering. “If anyone should use the horn, it should be me. Seth is right. We can’t risk the horn running out of energy. We’ll only get one shot at this.”

“I’ll not have children sticking their necks out for me,” Dougan said. “Neither of them are even supposed to be here. Kendra should be back at the keep, and Seth should be at Fablehaven. We can’t risk losing Gavin. We need him as our ambassador to the dragons. If Tanu can bolster me against the dragon terror with a potion, I’ll do it.”

“Let me take this risk,” Mara said. “I’m quick. I’m nimble. And I’m a dragon tamer.”

“What about Mendigo?” Tanu proposed. “The puppet won’t react to the poison. And he’s uncannily agile.”

“Mendigo could come with us,” Seth said. “You know, as backup. But Kendra has to be there to make sure the horn stays energized. We all know it probably won’t have enough power otherwise. And I have to be there for Kendra to be there.”

“You just want to kill a dragon,” Kendra accused.

Seth fought to stifle a guilty smile. “Maybe a little. But mostly I want to get that key and go home.”

“Do you really think you can do this?” Trask asked, eyes flicking back and forth from Seth to Kendra. “The dragon won’t sit still and let you touch her. If her poison doesn’t take you out, you’ll probably be clawed to death or eaten.”

“I should carry a bag of dragonsbane,” Seth said. “In case she swallows me.”

Gavin shook his head. “Siletta is composed of poison. I wouldn’t count on dragonsbane to do more than amuse her.”

“We can pull this off,” Kendra said stoutly. “Mendigo will have orders that if we fail, he’s to pick up the horn and hold it against the dragon. This is easily our best chance. Since I want to live, that means I should do this. It needs to be me. It isn’t as if Seth and I would be much safer waiting here while somebody else tries to fix the problem. Everything depends on this.”

“We won’t blow it,” Seth promised.

“They make a solid argument,” Trask said. “Objections?”

Gavin sighed. “If we mean to keep going forward, it’s our best bet.”

“If we try to retreat, Siletta may follow,” Mara warned.

“They’re so young,” Dougan protested weakly.

“All right,” Trask said. “Do it.”

“At the top of the stairs you’ll see a tremendous room with pillars throughout,” Gavin described. “Use the pillars as obstructions to keep the dragon from leaping at you easily. When you make your move, go in hard and fast. Keep hold of each other.”

“I have handcuffs in the knapsack,” Tanu said. “Should we cuff them together?”

“Yes,” Seth and Kendra answered at the same time.

Tanu climbed down into the storage room. Gavin handed Kendra the unicorn horn. Pulling Mendigo aside, Trask handed the puppet a sword and a flashlight.

“Mendigo,” Trask began, “you will enter the temple ahead of Kendra and Seth. Tanu will give you four smoke bulbs. You will smash them in different parts of the room. You will stay in motion, cavorting around the room, but keeping the flashlight on the eyes of the dragon. As needed, you will use the sword to defend Kendra and Seth. Should they get killed or otherwise lose the horn, you will retrieve the horn and hold it against the dragon. Understood?”

Mendigo nodded.

Tanu emerged from the knapsack. “We’ll put the horn in Kendra’s right hand,” Tanu said, cuffing Kendra’s right wrist to Seth’s left one.

“To avoid being poisoned, you’ll both need to keep in constant contact with the horn as well as each other,” Gavin said. He adjusted their grip until he was satisfied. Seth ended up holding the horn a little higher than Kendra, with his hand overlapping hers.

“My good hand is free,” Seth said. “Should I bring my sword?”

“No,” Trask said. “If you get close enough to use a sword, you’ll need to be using the horn. But you could bring your crossbow.”

Gavin gave Seth the weapon.

“Don’t dwell on the crossbow,” Dougan cautioned. “The horn is everything.”

“Right,” Seth agreed.

“Off you go,” Trask said.

“Good luck,” Tanu added.

“Come on,” Seth urged, tugging Kendra forward.

“Settle down,” Kendra complained.

Mendigo trotted ahead, reaching the stairs and bounding up them fluidly. Kendra glanced at Seth. “Don’t stress,” he said with a smile. “No matter how big the dragon is, all we have to do is touch her.”

“Before she touches us with her claws or teeth,” Kendra amended.

“Right. And we had better hope the horn works quickly.”

Kendra’s hand felt damp to Seth. Was it his perspiration or hers? Wouldn’t that be wonderful if the horn slipped from her grasp? He and his sister would die blue, handcuffed together.

They started up the large steps. The bronze dragons glared down from above. As Kendra and Seth cleared the highest steps, the room came into view. Glowing stones in the walls and ceiling provided dull light. Smoke billowed inside the vast chamber where Mendigo had shattered bulbs. The left and right sides of the room were forests of wide pillars, with a spacious central aisle leading to a distant doorway.

Most of the way across the room, the dragon crouched among the leftmost pillars. Mendigo pranced along a good distance away from Siletta, keeping a bright flashlight trained on the dragon, the beam interrupted at intervals when blocked by columns. Lacking visible scales, Siletta looked like a giant salamander with translucent skin. Networks of dark blue veins tangled with purple and green organs. Large enough to swallow a car, her wide mouth contained multiple rows of slim, pale teeth, sharp and slightly curved.

In a flurry of motion, the dragon scurried toward Mendigo, long body lashing. The puppet danced away from the attack. Only now that Siletta had moved closer to a luminous stone did Kendra notice her incredible length, the elongated body supported by at least ten sets of legs.

Seth led the way to the nearest pillar on the left side of the room.

“I see you two,” the dragon hissed in a voice like fierce, overlapping whispers. “Did you send this ludicrous puppet to pester me?”

Kendra shook her head at Seth, warning him not to answer.

“We’re here on vacation,” Seth yelled. “We’re touring the world’s weirdest dragons. The puppet is our guide. Do you charge for photos?”

Tugging Kendra forward, Seth ran ahead to another pillar. As they dashed across the open space, Kendra saw the dragon slinking toward them.

“Why aren’t you choking?” Siletta asked.

“We’re not in the mood,” Seth replied. “We were wondering if you could give us directions to a dragon named Glommus. All we could find was a big stupid gray dragon with its head chopped off.”

Siletta gave a rattling snarl. A purple fog filled the air. The particles smoked when they touched Kendra’s skin. Again, Seth led the way as they ran to the next pillar. Squinting through the purple haze, Kendra could barely make out the dragon crouched only two pillars away.

“What counter spell are you using?” Siletta accused.

Seth peeked around the pillar, raised his crossbow, and fired.

The dragon roared. They could hear her scuttling toward them. Peering around the pillar, Kendra saw that instead of coming straight at them, the dragon was looping around to a neighboring pillar.

Seth and Kendra adjusted to keep their pillar between themselves and the dragon. “Stop slinking around,” Siletta hissed, her voice thick with irritation.

“We’ll stop hiding when you stop being poisonous,” Seth called. “Seems like you’re the one stalling. Come on out so we can get our photo and go home.”

They heard Mendigo jingling nearby, then the great head of the dragon came around the side of the pillar not ten feet away. Kendra had heard no hint of Siletta’s stealthy approach. Apparently the dragon could move silently when it suited her. The huge mouth opened and a geyser of warm sludge sent them sprawling backwards. Kendra clung desperately to Seth and the horn as they fell. The tarlike substance spat and sizzled, vaporizing off of their skin and clothes. Kendra used her free hand to wipe the sludge away from her eyes as Seth hauled her to her feet.

Sword in hand, Mendigo was hacking at the dragon just behind the head. Twisting and snapping, Siletta trapped the limberjack in her mouth, leaving only the wooden legs hanging out.

Holding the horn out in front of them, Kendra and Seth charged. The mouth opened again, regurgitating more inky liquid. Mendigo flopped out onto the floor, but this time there was not as much pressure behind the foul outpouring. Keeping their footing, Kendra and Seth sloshed forward, the horn outstretched, reaching for the dragon's snout.

As the tip of the horn drew near, Siletta reared away. They charged her, but her long body flexed and twisted away from them. Dozens of squishy, webbed feet backpedaled. Even as the front half of her sinuous body curved out of reach, her tail swung around and whipped Kendra and Seth across the ankles, sweeping their feet out from under them. They hit the floor hard.

"Now I see," Siletta hissed angrily. "Yes, yes, the wicked children brought a nasty thorn to prick me."

Rising together, Kendra and Seth chased the retreating tail. The front of Siletta went behind a fat pillar up ahead and seemed to disappear, her tail the last part of her to vanish. Heedless of the danger, Kendra and Seth raced toward the dragon, coming around the pillar in time to see that Siletta had been climbing the far side. Her head and front legs had already reached the top and started across the ceiling. Leaping forward, Kendra and Seth raised the unicorn horn and pressed it to the end of the dragon's tail just before it rose out of reach.

The tail froze and went rigid. Kendra heard a wet, tearing sound. Looking up, she saw splayed feet peeling away from the wall. The dragon was starting to fall! Breaking contact with the tail, Kendra yanked Seth sideways. They lunged to the other side of the pillar as Siletta slapped heavily to the floor. Coming back around, they found her flapping and flailing. Pouncing toward her rear section, they stabbed the horn against her gummy body.

The writhing stopped. Siletta held very still. The horn grew hot in Kendra's hand. As the dragon began to vibrate, the horn became scorching, but Kendra and Seth kept it firmly in contact with the dragon, even after her legs went limp and her head drooped to the floor. Underneath the translucent skin, the black lines of her veins spread into inky clouds. The strangely visible organs lost their shape and blurred together. Her insides began to boil, and her skin split open, emitting rank plumes of the deepest blues and purples.

Kendra covered her mouth with her free hand and pushed the unicorn horn against the dragon. As Siletta started to shrink and wither, she and Seth adjusted to keep the horn in direct contact. After a few moments, they held the horn against a dry, shriveled husk not a tenth of the dragon's previous size. After Siletta had remained brittle and motionless for a long minute, with no new vapors steaming out of her, Seth said, "I think we're good."

Keeping their hands on the horn, they stepped back. The grotesque dragon husk did not twitch. Kendra looked over her shoulder. Some distance away, a pool of black liquid covered the ground, but she did not see Mendigo.

"Where's our puppet?" Seth asked, voicing her thoughts.

Kendra walked to the black pool, crouched, and dipped the tip of the unicorn horn in the foul fluid. Bubbling and smoking, the tarlike puddle turned to vapor. On the bare floor rested the sword, a flashlight, and numerous small golden hooks.

"What the heck?" Seth exclaimed. "He's gone!"

Kendra considered the evidence. "That black sludge must have dissolved the wood."

Seth picked up a hook, examining it closely. "Not even a splinter left." Tears shimmered in his eyes. "That sort of takes the fun out of everything. Think we could rebuild him?"

"With only hooks left? I guess we can gather them up, just in case."

Maintaining his grip on Kendra and the horn, Seth crawled around the area, meticulously collecting every hook and clasp he could find. Kendra gathered hooks as well. She told herself not to cry, that Mendigo was not a person. The puppet had no identity, no will; he was just a tool. A mindless wooden robot. When he had worked for Muriel, Mendigo had put Kendra and her family in grave danger. But since his loyalties had been altered by fairies, the puppet had saved Kendra's life multiple times. And now he had been destroyed trying to protect them. He may have only been a mechanical servant, but he had been reliable and true. She and Seth would be less safe without him. Kendra found herself wiping moisture off of her cheeks.

"Kendra!" a voice hollered from outside the chamber. "Seth? Are you all right?" It was Tanu.

"Think we got them all?" Kendra asked.

Seth scanned the floor. “Looks like it. We’d better go let them know what happened.”

Together they walked to the top of the stairs. Their companions waited not far from the bottom step.

“We killed Siletta,” Kendra announced. She and Seth started down the stairs.

The others cheered and shouted congratulations. At the bottom of the steps, she and Seth had to recount all the details. Everyone kept hugging them and clapping them on the back. By the exuberant expressions of relief, Kendra could tell that most of her comrades had doubted that she and her brother would succeed. They were all saddened to hear Mendigo had been disintegrated, but no further tears were shed. Tanu said that the magic animating Mendigo had most likely been in the wood, but that he was no expert on such things, and keeping the hooks couldn’t hurt. The Samoan used a key to remove the handcuffs.

“Do you think the horn sanitized the air in there?” Seth asked.

“Touch a unicorn horn to a pond and the whole pond will be purified,” Tanu said. “I’m not sure how the horn would affect a gas. The vapors you saw rising from the dragon and the poison pool would be harmless, but the preexisting gasses in the chamber might still have potency.”

“We’ll take no needless risks,” Trask said. “Three of us will proceed to the treasure room, each with a hand on the horn. Kendra should be one, to be certain the horn remains active. She should also be there in case Patton left another message.”

“I want to come too,” Seth said. “I remember the descriptions of the figurines.”

“And I’ll come for protection,” Trask said.

“I’m going to head back to the hydra,” Gavin announced.

Trask shook his head. “We’ll face Hespera together once we retrieve the key.”

“No, I have a p-p-p-p-plan,” Gavin insisted. “Let me borrow Seth’s crossbow. I’m going to visit the corpse of Glommus and dip my spear and some quarrels into his vital juices. I may be able to put the hydra to sleep.”

“You’ll probably just fall asleep yourself when you return to the area where Glommus lies,” Tanu cautioned.

“If I do, you guys can wake me,” Gavin insisted. “I’m inspired by Kendra and Seth. A small, focused attack has advantages. If I approach the hydra alone, I think I can soothe her and get close enough to prick her. Don’t worry, I won’t throw my life away. But if I can clear the path for our escape, why not?”

“I’ll trust your judgment,” Trask said. “You don’t want somebody to accompany you?”

“My best chance of getting close is to go in alone,” Gavin said. “If I succeed, you’ll find me waiting. If I can’t pull it off, I’ll come back. Or you’ll find me unconscious near Glommus. If you don’t find me at all, you’ll know what happened.”

“I don’t like this,” Kendra said.

“I feel good about it,” Gavin replied.

“None of our options are pleasant,” Trask said. “Gavin, I think this is worth a try. If you can get close and put the hydra to sleep, we might beat the odds and see daylight again. You’re free to go. In case Gavin can’t subdue the hydra, the rest of you should make ready to face Hespera and dash to our rendezvous with the griffins. Kendra, Seth, come with me.”



Ambush

The dragons had evidently placed a lot of confidence in their guardians. Beyond the chamber where Kendra and Seth had slain Siletta, a short, spacious hall led to the doorless treasure room. Trask took his time carefully probing and investigating, but detected no traps. With Siletta and Glommus dead, and the hydra pinned back near the entrance, the treasury was left unguarded.

Beyond the giant doorway, the treasury contained three wide aisles bounded by rows of stone tables. An endless variety of items cluttered the tables, ranging from the opulent to the primitive. Elegantly cut gemstones the size of billiard balls rested alongside rough-hewn stone mallets. Walking along one row of tables, Kendra noticed an elaborate pagoda carved from lucent jade, a rusted iron helm, a ten-foot ivory tusk inlaid with gold, a bucket of crude nails, delicate baubles of colored glass, ragged books decorated with arcane glyphs, a rotting leather birdcage, a collection of large lenses inside a compartmentalized wooden trunk, fanciful bronze masks, a tattered cape, a corroded candelabrum, and a pile of copper coins with holes in the center.

Trask, Kendra, and Seth each kept hold of the unicorn horn. Seth towed them across the aisle so he could pick up a gleaming sword.

“Pure adamant,” Trask noted reverently.

“Can I keep it?” Seth wondered.

“We should take nothing more than we must,” Trask admonished. “We don’t want dragons after us to reclaim stolen treasure.”

“They’ll already be after me for killing Siletta,” Seth said.

“We should still avoid causing any extra harm,” Trask said. “Combating the guardian dragons was unavoidable. But we don’t need to inflame the insult by pillaging their treasure. We owe Thronis the figurines, so we’ll pay that debt. If the dragons want them back, they can take it up with him. The key was never theirs to begin with, so, in a sense, we’ll have stolen nothing.”

“All right,” Seth conceded. He replaced the sword and they moved farther down the aisle.

A raised dais spanned the rear of the room, supporting an extra row of stone tables. Toward the center upon a pedestal higher than the surrounding tables rested a pair of gauntlets—lobstered steel embellished with gold and platinum scrollwork.

“Look at those gloves,” Seth said.

“Almost certainly not the Sage’s Gauntlets,” Trask surmised. “On display so prominently, they must be decoys. I wouldn’t be surprised if poisoned needles awaited unwary fingers.”

“I don’t know,” Kendra said. “Aside from the dragons and the hydra, they didn’t do much to guard the room. They may have been cocky enough to leave the gauntlets in plain view.”

“Maybe we should grab the gauntlets,” Seth proposed. “We can give them back in the end, but meanwhile we can use them to distract the dragons. If we get in a tight situation, maybe we could bargain with them.”

“Not terrible thinking in principle,” Trask acknowledged. “But to disturb the gauntlets would enrage the dragons beyond any hope of bargaining. I repeat, our best chance for success is to move quickly and take only what we came for. Kendra, did Patton leave any hint at the Fairy Queen’s shrine concerning where in the room he hid the key?”

“I didn’t see a hint,” Kendra said, being deliberately vague about not having actually read Patton’s message at the shrine. Her cheeks felt hot. She hoped she wasn’t blushing. In hindsight, she should probably have fished the tablet out of the pool in case he had included any extra tidbits. “And I haven’t noticed any writing here in the treasury either. Patton said the key looks like an iron egg the size of a pineapple, with a bunch of protuberances on the top half.”

They climbed up onto the dais.

“The figurines,” Seth said almost instantly. He led them over to where five statuettes were positioned on a circular mat. “Red dragon, white giant, jade chimera. Is onyx black?”

“Can be,” Trask said. “And the blue fishy thing is the agate leviathan.”

“Can I let go of the horn?” Seth asked.

Trask sniffed probingly. “I think so. If you start to feel ill, make sure you get a hand back on it.”

Seth opened a pouch. “Thronis gave me this,” he told Kendra. He pulled squares of silken fabric from the pouch and wrapped each figurine individually, then placed them together inside the small bag.

Trask left Kendra holding the horn alone and proceeded down the long row of elevated tables, pausing beside the glittering gauntlets. He looked behind the pedestal on which the fancy gloves were situated. “I’ve found the key,” Trask announced. “He stashed it behind the gauntlets.”

“Good job!” Kendra cheered. She and Seth joined Trask, who struggled to pick up the egg-shaped mass of black iron.

“Big pineapple,” Trask grunted. “Patton didn’t mention the key was *solid* iron. This must weigh at least eighty pounds. Tough to get a grip.”

“Use both hands,” Kendra recommended. “I’ll follow behind and keep the horn in contact with your skin.”

They shuffled in an awkward train back across the treasure room, down the hall, and through the pillared chamber, passing Siletta’s shrunken corpse. Tanu, Dougan, and Mara awaited them at the bottom of the steps.

“Success?” Dougan asked.

“We have the key and the giant’s figurines,” Trask reported.

“The key looks heavy,” Tanu remarked.

“Or I’m getting really weak,” Trask said.

“I’ll lug the key down into the storage room,” Dougan offered. “I already hauled the giant sword down there.”

Trask gratefully handed off the iron egg. “Once you’re back up, I want to move out. I hope Gavin fared all right. I’m not sure I should have let him go alone.”

Face red with exertion, Dougan managed to descend the rungs into the storage room cradling the egg in one arm. When he came up, they hurried back toward the hydra. Kendra tried not to fret about Gavin. She told herself

that he was fine, that he wouldn't have taken needless risks. But she knew how brave he was, and how deadly the hydra had appeared.

As they neared Glommus's cave, Tanu went forward alone to sample the air. He came back and reported that the air was breathable, and that he had found no sign of Gavin. "We might do well to raid the dragon's corpse ourselves," Tanu added. "We could smear our weapons with sedatives, and it would be a once-in-a-lifetime chance to acquire potion ingredients."

"We need to hurry," Trask pointed out, "but prepping our weapons could pay dividends. Mara, come with me and Tanu."

While waiting outside the cave, Kendra saw Gavin walking back to them with a slight limp. Squealing with relief, she ran to him, and he caught her in an embrace. He was soaking wet, his clothes were torn, and he bled lightly from several cuts and scrapes.

"What happened?" Kendra asked, pulling back.

"I got her," Gavin said with a shy smile. "I found a g-gland in the neck of Glommus and drenched my spear and a few quarrels. You know how Trask shot out one of the yellowish head's eyes? I pierced the other one with a tainted quarrel. The heads started to thrash, and I got in a few stabs with the spear."

"You're hurt," Kendra said.

"A couple of the heads jostled me as Hespera went down," Gavin said dismissively. "Nothing major. No bad cuts, no broken bones, at least for now. She's beneath the water. We should hurry."

Trask, Mara, and Tanu shortly emerged from the cave, and Gavin recounted his battle with the hydra as they jogged toward the lake. Trask made the others hang back as he and Gavin advanced through the narrow passage to survey the dark water. They returned promptly, and then all of them hurried through the passage and across the ledge in two separate groups.

Kendra walked quickly, ready for shrieking heads to rise from the depths at any moment, but the murky lake never stirred. With the slumbering hydra behind them, they climbed the knotted rope and hustled between the enormous stone dragons out into the late afternoon sunlight. Clouds of dragonflies drifted near the reedy pools.

"What now?" Kendra asked.

"We rush to the rendezvous," Trask said, picking up the pace. "It will take over an hour. From there, the griffins will transport us to Thronis. The

giant has given his word to help us, and he cannot lie. We'll weather the night in his mansion and then plan how to get out of Wyrmoost. Maybe some of his griffins can scout to see if Navarog is truly at the gates."

They marched single file, following a trackless route beneath tall conifers. Nobody spoke. With the woods around them quiet except for sporadic breezes rustling through the branches, Kendra supposed nobody wanted to jinx the group by disturbing the silence. They had survived the Dragon Temple. They had the key and the figurines. Now if only they could reach the griffins without attracting the notice of any passing Wyrmoost predators!

At one point Mara made them stop and crouch low as she watched a far-off dragon gliding in the sky. The creature showed no sign of having observed them and soon drifted out of view.

The trees thinned as they scaled the side of a rocky spine. About halfway up the long slope, Trask assembled the group below an overhang.

"Our griffins should await us just over this skinny ridge," Mara explained.

Trask nodded. "I'll cross over first with Gavin. If things look good, I'll whistle."

Kendra and the others huddled under the overhang and listened to loose rocks clack and shift as Trask and Gavin ascended the ridge. Not too long after they passed over the crest, a brief whistle shrilled twice. Mara took the lead as the rest of the group clambered up the stony slope. As Kendra picked her way up the loose rocks, she better understood why Trask and Gavin had climbed so noisily. No matter how she stepped, the rocks shifted and slid.

Near the top of the knifelike ridge, Kendra heard a flutter of wings. An astrid alighted on a rocky projection near the crest of the ridge, and words spilled into her mind. *This is an ambush. Two dragons lie in wait. Run!*

Cautiously regarding the expressionless human face of the golden owl, Mara held her spear ready. "What does it want?" she asked Kendra.

"He's warning us," Kendra said, placing a calming hand on the spear. Kendra studied the astrid. "Are you sure?"

Run! They will strike at any moment. Warn your friends. The astrid took wing.

"It's a trap!" Kendra yelled. She hurried to the top of the ridge and peered over at Gavin and Trask descending the far side. They had turned

toward her in response to her shout. Several griffins had emerged from the trees below, including one ridden by the dwarf. “Dragons! Run! It’s an ambush!”

The dwarf barked an order and the griffins took flight. At the same time, a pair of enormous dragons soared over the far ridge. One had green scales and a bony frill framing its angular head. The other was a monstrosity in scarlet, with lumpy knobs on its snout and a club-shaped tail. The red dragon swept low over the trees, a roiling inferno jetting from its jaws to set a long strip of pines ablaze. The green dragon wheeled out wide, curving and climbing to approach from a different angle.

The griffins scattered. Some fought to gain altitude; others stayed near the ground. They darted in every direction. The griffin with the dwarf snatched Gavin in one claw and Trask in the other. Wings beating furiously, the overburdened griffin flew up the ridge, depositing Trask and Gavin near Kendra and the others.

“We’ll come back around,” the dwarf promised, his words trailing off as his griffin carried him away.

Trask grabbed Kendra’s arm and guided her down the back side of the ridge, rocks rolling underfoot. After a few steps, he dove with her into the lee of a boulder, shielding her with his body. Overhead a dragon bellowed. Heat washed over Kendra as a fervent downpour of flame scorched a field of scree off to their right.

After the dragon had passed over, a pair of griffins streaked low along the slope. Seth sprang out from hiding and a griffin snatched him up and angled skyward. The other one grabbed Tanu. Above her and to the left, silhouetted against the setting sun, Kendra saw the green dragon diving toward a trio of griffins, fire spurting, but the griffins split up and maneuvered aggressively to evade the larger predator.

The scarlet dragon seemed to have been coming back around for another fiery pass, but then it swerved away to follow the griffin carrying Tanu. The griffin dropped into the trees for cover as the dragon released a searing stream of fire. Below the wide, red wings, the forest erupted into a raging conflagration.

“Into the bag,” Trask commanded, seizing the knapsack from Kendra. As she stepped inside, a charred, one-winged griffin crashed onto the rocks less than twenty yards down the slope. Kendra hastily descended the rungs.

Warren was propped up on one elbow. “What now?”

“There were dragons waiting when we went to meet the griffins,” Kendra said, eyeing his new splint. “How’s your arm?”

“Messed up, just like the rest of me. At least Tanu dressed it and gave me painkillers. Are we going to make it?”

“We’ll see.”

From inside the storage room, the battle seemed far away. Kendra heard the shrieks of griffins and the roars of dragons, but the stationary room remained otherwise unremarkable.

Dougan rushed down the ladder, followed by Gavin. A moment later Mara entered, but she stayed on the top rungs. “Trask found a griffin,” she reported. Mara poked her head up through the mouth of the knapsack. “We’re airborne.”

Gavin sidled up to Kendra. “How are you?”

“I don’t know.”

“We’ll be all right.” Taking her hand in his, he offered a reassuring squeeze.

“The green dragon is tailing us,” Mara called down. “It’s gaining. We’re swerving. We’re plunging. We’re close to the cliff! I think we might—” She flinched, ducking her head, then looked up after an instant. “No, we made it. This griffin can really fly!”

Staring up at Mara, Kendra and the others could see the wind whipping her long, black hair. “We’re diving,” she reported. “We’re rising. I think I know where we’re going. We’re upside down. Now we’re rolling. Rising. Oh, no. No, no, no. No! Trask is falling! We’re falling!” Tugging the flap down, Mara tucked her head and clung to the rungs.

They all heard the knapsack slap against the ground. Mara climbed up out of the room. Grabbing a sword, Gavin followed, then Dougan. Kendra scaled the rungs as well.

“You could wait in here,” Warren suggested.

“I have to see,” Kendra said.

She emerged on a long ledge near the brink of a high drop-off. Behind her rose a sheer cliff. Above her, the green dragon glided high in the sky, chasing other griffins. The red dragon pursued a distant griffin heading for Stormcrag. Mara, Gavin, and Dougan were staring upward. “What happened to Trask?” Kendra asked.

“He’s coming down,” Gavin said, pointing.

It took Kendra a moment to catch sight of the ghostly shape of Trask slowly descending toward them, his body a swirling mass of vapor. “He swallowed a gaseous potion!” Kendra exclaimed in relief.

Trask was waving for them to go.

“He wants us to head toward Sidestep Cleft,” Mara said.

“How close are we?” Dougan asked.

“Not far,” Mara said, snatching up the knapsack. “I think the griffin was trying to make it there. A griffin would fit much deeper inside the gap than a dragon. And a person could fit in deeper than any of them. The cleft is our best chance. We should be relatively safe there.” They set off at a brisk run over the rocky ground.

“What about Trask?” Kendra asked.

“He’ll try to hide,” Dougan said. “Going gaseous saved him from the fall, but now he can’t move very fast. We have to leave him. Our presence would only draw more attention to him.”

“Trask will find a place to hide,” Gavin said. “He knows we have to make it to the cleft. He and Mara are right—the dragons shouldn’t be able to reach us in there.”

Heedless of the treacherous footing, Kendra raced along the ledge. The green dragon remained in view whenever she looked back, but it seemed intent on chasing griffins. She was surprised the dragon didn’t swoop over and kill them. They were such easy prey on the ledge. Perhaps the dragon had failed to notice them.

“The cleft should be around this bend,” Mara announced.

“Here comes the dragon,” Gavin warned.

Risking a glance, Kendra saw the dragon soaring straight at them, still a good distance away. They picked up the pace to a full sprint.

“Should we put Kendra in the bag?” Dougan asked.

“No time to slow down,” Gavin replied. “We have to make it to the cleft.”

Mara pulled away from them, her long legs eating up ground like a track star. But as she rounded the bend, Mara skidded to a stop. When Kendra and the others caught up, they saw why.

A huge dragon blocked the entrance to the Sidestep Cleft. The dragon had an underbelly as pale as cream and dimpled yellow scales with a texture

almost like linoleum. A pair of forked antlers crowned the long head. The beaklike mouth opened and closed, clacking ominously.

Kendra felt the dragon terror take hold of her. Her muscles locked. Beside her Dougan had become equally immobile. Mara glanced back toward the green dragon, then ahead at the yellow, her dark eyes panicked. They were trapped. Gavin shrieked violently in the dragon language. The dragon responded sharply, prowling forward like a cat stalking a mouse. The huge creature did not seem interested in what he had to say. Despair took hold of Kendra. They had trespassed in the Dragon Temple, and now they would pay the price.

Kendra willed her muscles to move, but they refused. What a sad way to die! Cornered by dragons after enduring so much. At least Seth might escape. And Tanu. Maybe the dragons would fail to check inside the knapsack, and Warren would make it out as well. Hopefully Trask would quietly drift to a safe place.

The yellow dragon had almost reached them. The green dragon had to be closing in as well. Kendra wanted to close her eyes, but her eyelids refused to operate. Although her body would not move, she seemed to shake inside with fear.

Casting his spear aside, Gavin broke into a run, charging straight at the yellow dragon. Kendra did not want to watch the creature destroy her friend, but her head could not turn away.

And then Gavin transformed. The change was not gradual. He swelled suddenly, swiftly tripling in size again and again, sprouting wings and a tail, horns and claws, until he ballooned into an immense black dragon, abruptly dwarfing his yellow opponent. The silver collar stretched, remaining in place around his scaly neck.

A blinding holocaust of liquid fire erupted from the black dragon's mouth, blasting the yellow dragon off the ledge and bathing the whole vicinity in scorching heat. Spreading his wings, the black dragon leapt and turned to meet the green dragon overhead. The green dragon exhaled fire at Gavin, but the breath he shot back looked more like molten gold than actual flame. The green dragon veered away. The black dragon returned and landed on the ledge, rocks crumbling beneath his bulk.

Kendra still could not move. Could that really be Gavin? He was gigantic! An armor of dark, oily scales plated his sides and back, and his belly looked crusted with black jewels. Cruel spikes protruded from his

massive tail and along his spine. His claws curved like huge scythes, and his ferocious eyes burned like magma. Her friend was no dragon brother. He was an actual dragon!

Kendra saw the yellow dragon rising on the far side of the gorge. One side of the creature had been blackened, and the wing on that side looked tattered, but the dragon was still flying. The yellow dragon banked toward them. The green dragon appeared to be wheeling back around as well. The black dragon regarded the returning adversaries, then arched his great head down and swallowed Dougan in a single quick bite.



Through frozen lips, Kendra screamed in disbelief.

Mara tossed the knapsack to Kendra. It hit her shoulder and fell to the ground.

The black dragon swiped a foreleg at Mara, who failed to dodge the quick blow and went tumbling across the ledge and off the edge. The other foreleg swung at Kendra, a razor claw slicing across her chest and knocking her backwards. Wings spreading, the black dragon sprang to engage the oncoming adversaries.

With dragon roars thundering in her ears, Kendra dazedly examined the tear in her shirt. Beneath the torn material, the breastplate Seth had given her felt unscratched. Her mind reeled, trying to comprehend what had happened. Her breaths came quick and shallow. Not only was Gavin a dragon, he had turned and attacked his friends! He had eaten Dougan and killed Mara!

As her fingers rubbed the adamant breastplate, Kendra realized she could move. When Gavin had taken flight, the dragon terror had faded. As the dragons reeled and battled above, Kendra sat up. The knapsack lay beside her. And the Sidestep Cleft was now unguarded.

Shaking with adrenaline, Kendra snatched the knapsack, looped a strap over her shoulder, and ran for the cleft, avoiding the depressions where simmering pools of liquid gold had puddled. As the crack in the mountain loomed large before her, she peered up and back to where the two dragons contended with Gavin. The sun had just gone down. Fountains of flame brightened the dusky sky. Gavin's opponents stayed away from each other. No matter which way Gavin turned, one of his opponents would swoop in behind and try to roast him. Kendra lingered at the entrance to Sidestep Cleft, enthralled by the deadly dance. The difficulty of scoring a direct hit with dragon fire while attacker and target both careened through the air soon became apparent.

As the aerial combat wore on, the participating dragons became increasingly distant. But Kendra knew they could come plunging back at any moment. Turning her back on the dragon battle, she scurried into the cleft. The passage promptly grew much too narrow for any of the dragons, but, wanting to make sure she was out of range from dragon breath, Kendra continued onward, reminding herself not to proceed too far or the fiery exhalations might be able to reach her from the far side.

Kendra traced her finger along one wall until she felt she had traveled far enough. Setting down the knapsack, she lifted the flap and descended the

ladder.

“I heard a lot of commotion,” Warren said.

“Gavin is a dragon,” Kendra managed in a broken voice. Skipping the last few rungs, she dropped, landing in a crouch.

“What?”

“A huge black dragon. He ate Dougan. He killed Mara.” As she spoke, Kendra felt like she was listening to the words instead of saying them. How could those words be true? “He tried to kill me. He swiped me across the chest before he flew off to fight some other dragons. The breastplate I have under my clothes saved me.” By the light of Warren’s electric lantern, Kendra started rummaging through their gear.

“I don’t believe this,” Warren murmured.

“Believe it,” Kendra said, testing a flashlight. It worked. “We’re inside Sidestep Cleft, alone. Seth and Tanu may have gotten away with the griffins. We left Trask behind. He was gaseous.” She grabbed a primitive staff with rattles at the top.

“The rain stick from Lost Mesa?” Warren asked.

“We need bad weather,” Kendra said. “Who knows how long Gavin will be off fighting other dragons? Who knows how many other dragons could show up? I’m going to shake this thing until we have the biggest storm Wyrmoost has ever seen.” Kendra crossed the room to the ladder of rungs bolted to the wall. “I’ll be back.”

“Why not shake it down here?” Warren asked.

“I’m not sure if shaking the stick down here will count up there,” Kendra said. “I’m worried enough that Thronis might be able to offset the weather I summon.”

“Good luck,” Warren said. “At the first sign of trouble, you hide the knapsack and get down here.”

“You got it,” Kendra said, already at the top rung. Squirming out of the knapsack, she switched on the flashlight and started vigorously shaking the staff. Outside, the day had been relatively mild, with some light wind and a few nonthreatening clouds in the sky. She had no idea how long it would take to conjure up a big storm, especially if Thronis resisted. It might not work before Gavin or other enemies came for her. It might not work at all. But she was sick of hiding, sick of feeling afraid. This was much better than cowering in the knapsack.



Navarog

All Seth could do was dangle. He couldn't even hang on. The griffin had him by the shoulders. If the claws dropped him, he would fall. If the tenacious scarlet dragon killed the griffin, Seth and the griffin would fall together. If the dragon torched them with his fiery breath, Seth would get to sample the rare experience of simultaneously burning and falling.

Looking down and back, Seth had watched the red dragon chase Tanu, setting the forest ablaze. When the griffin had emerged from the trees without the Samoan, the dragon had turned to follow the griffin carrying Seth.

Legs swinging freely, Seth had shouted to the griffin that he had the figurines for Thronis in his pouch. He hoped the knowledge might give the griffin an extra reason not to drop him. He had no way to tell whether the griffin understood.

After having caught a ride with a griffin to the top of Stormcrag and then back down again the next day, Seth thought he knew something about flying. But now Seth was learning that to convince a griffin to *really* fly, you had to chase it with a dragon.

At first the griffin had resolutely climbed, wings beating hard to ascend ever higher into the cold, thin air. While they rose, drawing nearer to the steep shoulders of Stormcrag, the dragon had steadily gained. As the red dragon neared, the griffin veered close to the mountain, sometimes

climbing, sometimes diving, sometimes doubling back, always using the stony crags of the mountainside to create obstacles. As the griffin banked and swooped and soared, Seth swung back and forth in its grasp, occasionally having to lift his legs or twist his body to avoid spires of stone.

Although they sometimes plunged to avoid dragon fire, they ascended more than they fell, gradually spiraling up toward the summit. At one point, with the dragon in close pursuit, the griffin careened around a corner and ducked into an ice cave. When the dragon sailed by, they flew out, climbing in the opposite direction.

Finally, as they came within range of the highest peak of Stormcrag, the griffin soared far away from the mountain, wings beating frantically to gain altitude. Out in the empty sky, the dragon closed in. The griffin faked a dive, and the dragon took the bait, plunging to intercept them. While the dragon recovered and came back around, the griffin climbed higher. Looking back toward the mountain, Seth could see that they now sailed well above the mansion.

When the dragon came close again, the griffin tucked its wings and went into a wild dive that left Seth's stomach in his throat. Presumably fearing another feint, the dragon hesitated to follow at first. By the time the dragon realized the dive was authentic, the griffin had spread its wings and Seth was rapidly gliding toward the mansion, half blinded by the wind of their speed.

The dragon surged after them, gaining until it became clear that the massive predator would overtake them before they reached the mansion. Seth hoped his griffin was not out of evasive maneuvers. Just as the dragon was almost within range to blow fire, Seth heard a deep *thrum*. An arrow the size of a telephone pole lodged in the dragon's chest. Wings limp, the dragon rolled onto its back and plummeted from the sky like a boulder.

Gazing ahead at the mansion, Seth saw Thronis manning an enormous crossbow out on the patio. The sky giant arose and went to his front door just in time to admit Seth and the griffin. Gliding to the table in the front room, the griffin dropped Seth, then landed, trotting to a stop. Heaving sides lathered with foam, the griffin bowed its aquiline head.

"Good job," Seth told the griffin, unsure whether it could understand. He walked over and stroked the damp, red-gold fur.

“I regret your discomfiting encounter,” Thronis apologized, taking a seat by the table. “By the time I recognized the ambush, it was too late to warn you. I’m happy you won your way free, young Seth.”

“Nice shot with the crossbow.”

“Let us hope the example will motivate other dragons to think twice before venturing near my abode.”

“I have your figurines,” Seth reported, opening the pouch.

The sky giant grinned. “Then I am especially glad you survived! Set them near the edge of the table.”

Seth unwrapped the five figurines and arranged them in a line. The giant leaned in close, examining them with one eye shut. “Hmmm,” he murmured. “Well done, indeed, you have brought the figures I requested.”

“Why did you want them so badly?” Seth asked.

“I wanted three of them. If I say the proper words and put the red dragon into a fire, it will grow into a true dragon that will heed my every command. Buried in snow with the correct words spoken, the marble giant will expand into a hardy snow giant, a servant with tremendous potential. And the jade chimera can likewise be transformed into an actual chimera obedient to my desires.”

“I guess they will come in handy defending your mansion,” Seth said.

“They should prove immeasurably useful.”

“What about the tower and the fish?”

The giant cracked his knuckles. “You are welcome to keep the other figures, Seth Sorenson. Placed upon solid ground, after the designated incantation, the model tower will enlarge into an actual tower. The stronghold is designed to be inhabited by men, not giants, so it is of no use to me. Put in the sea with a few words, the fish will swell into a leviathan. I live far from the sea, with no intentions to visit.”

“Could you tell me the magic words?” Seth asked.

“I will have my dwarf write them down for you upon his return. They are not complicated. The spells necessary for the transformations are ingrained in the items. The words merely set the spells into motion, like igniting a magical fuse.”

“Could you look in your globe and check on my friends?” Seth asked.

“Absolutely,” Thronis said, rising. “I shall return promptly.”

Seth sat down, fingering the tower and the fish. Having his own tower would be pretty cool. He hoped Kendra and the others were all right. Since the red dragon had chased him and been shot from the sky, the others only had to contend with the green one. Surely most of them, if not all, would escape.

Thronis returned looking sober. "While I was away from my globe manning the ballista, Navarog joined the fight. I'm not sure when he arrived at the sanctuary. I'm afraid your friends are scattered, and it looks like some have perished. My griffins have fled. They lost track of your comrades. Three griffins have already fallen, and two others are wounded. Navarog is currently contending with a pair of dragons. And there seems to be a powerful enchantment summoning foul weather, using old magic that is foreign to me."

"Calling rain?" Seth asked.

"Essentially."

"That must be Kendra using the rain stick. She must need bad weather to help her escape the dragons."

"The dragons trust me to keep the weather relatively fair," Thronis said.

"They also trust you not to send thieves to steal from them," Seth countered. "And you trust them not to attack your griffins. This seems like a day for bending some of the rules. Why don't you help summon a big storm?"

The sky giant stroked his chin. "My griffins are nimble. They can handle harsh weather much better than the dragons. Perhaps an ugly storm is just what we need to remind the wyrms of my worth."

"If Kendra is calling one, I'd really appreciate it. Also, since you have the little statues, can we lose the chains now?"

The giant spoke a strange word and snapped his enormous fingers. The silver chain snapped and fell from Seth's neck. "We had a bargain. You have earned my appreciation. Your sister and I will call up a storm such as Wyrmoost has not seen in many a season. If you will excuse me."

Seth motioned for the giant to proceed. "Have at it."

"When the storm has been called, I shall return with some victuals."

"If that means food, count me in."

* * *

Freezing gusts howled through Sidestep Cleft, carrying the smell of snow. Thunder crackled and boomed. And Kendra relentlessly kept shaking the staff, hoping that if she shook hard enough, long enough, the dragons would be forced to seek shelter while her remaining friends got away.

Although she could see in the dark, Kendra could see farther with the flashlight lit, so she kept it on, repeatedly shining it in both directions to avoid being taken by surprise. Consequently, she identified Gavin while he was still a good distance off, approaching along the tall, narrow passageway. A dragon no longer, he bled freely from a wound on his neck and walked with a pronounced limp. Her flashlight beam reflected off the sword in his hand. As a heavy gust tore through the passage, he lifted his free hand to shield his face.

“You can stop shaking the stick,” Gavin called.

“I’d rather not,” Kendra replied.

“I was trying to be polite,” Gavin said, coming closer. “What I mean is, stop shaking the stick or I’ll kill you.”

Tears stung Kendra’s eyes. A disturbed laugh threatened to fly from her lips. Gavin had killed Dougan. He had killed Mara. “Won’t you kill me anyhow?”

“As a dragon I would,” Gavin said, limping nearer. “In this form, I’d rather not.”

“Who are you, Gavin?”

He grinned. “Haven’t you guessed? You’re no dummy. Give it a shot.”

She knew. She had tried not to admit it to herself, but she knew. “Navarog.”

“Of course.”

“How can you be Navarog?” He had been her friend! He had protected her! She had hoped he might become her boyfriend! She had held his hand and written him flirty letters! Kendra felt ill. She wanted to curl up into a ball and weep.

“A better question might be how the rest of you missed it. I thought it was obvious after Lost Mesa. I guess oftentimes we only perceive what we expect to see.”

Kendra shook her head, horrified and baffled and curious all at once. “So you were the hooded prisoner inside the Quiet Box?”

“Despite how the hood masked my senses, I can still remember the smell of your nervousness. Not unlike the scent I’m picking up at the moment. The Sphinx got me out, and then turned me loose just before he exited Fablehaven. I went and found the nail Seth had pulled from the revenant and gave it to Kurisock.”

“And then you left,” Kendra said.

“My business at Fablehaven was done. I went to a dragon sanctuary in the Himalayas.”

“You were the dragon who ate Charlie Rose. He never had a son, did he?”

“I knew you could piece this together. The Sphinx recommended I visit Chuck Rose. Chuck’s longtime friend Arlin Santos is a Knight of the Dawn and a traitor. Chuck would disappear in the wild for many months at a time. Arlin helped me find Chuck. Killing him was simple. After the deed was done, Arlin helped me pretend that his death happened longer ago than it actually had, and helped establish my avatar as Chuck’s secret son. Gavin Rose, the stuttering w-w-w-wonder.”

“I liked your stutter.”

“It served a purpose. Made me seem more human, more vulnerable.”

Kendra scowled. “What really happened at Lost Mesa?”

“What do you think?”

She knew it was bad, but there was too much to process. “You could talk to Chalize because you were a dragon.”

“Before the rest of you entered the room, I showed Chalize my true form. Scared her to death. She almost tried to fight me. Once I established my dominance, I warned her that I’d kill her if she tried to attack you guys. Then I promised that if she would let us pass, I would free her. She was so young and inexperienced that I was worried she would do something stupid. But it worked out.”

“You released Chalize? You destroyed Lost Mesa.”

Gavin grinned. “And I framed poor Javier, the guy with no legs. He wasn’t a traitor. I ate him. Then I stole the decoy artifact, slashed some tires, and moved a pickup truck. That same night I released Chalize, but

commanded her to wait until after we were gone before wreaking havoc. Freed from confinement, Chalize was powerful enough to overthrow the treaty. She breached the gate and got Mr. Lich involved freeing the zombies and animating the dead.”

“I can’t believe it,” Kendra mumbled numbly. “You’re the demon prince of dragons. And now you’re in the perfect position to help the Sphinx steal the next artifact.”

Gavin seemed to relish her astonishment. “By now you must realize that the Sphinx deliberately let your duplicate escape. The stingbulb version of you, the one you left behind. He knew she was a fake when her touch failed to restore energy to an item he wanted recharged. He had given the item to her casually, so she had no idea he knew.”

Kendra shook her head sadly. “So the phony Kendra was accidentally helping him?”

“The Sphinx made sure she knew exactly what he wanted her to know. She thought she escaped on her own, but he was deliberately sloppy. Had she failed to make a move, he would have been even sloppier. Once the stingbulb got away, he had an agent follow her to ensure she made it back to Fablehaven. You’re very resourceful, Kendra, even as a clone. The duplicate required no help. The Sphinx knew that once your grandfather heard the Society had discovered where Patton hid the key, the Knights would have to send a team to Wyrmoost to recover it. The Sphinx felt certain they would include Gavin Rose, the dragon-taming prodigy. He had it right.”

Kendra bowed her head into her hands. “We brought Navarog with us to Wyrmoost. We opened the gate and let him in.”

“A simple plan, but effective,” Gavin said. “I got nervous when we bumped into Nafia. She knows me. Fortunately, she’s a fairly dark dragon. We had met before, ages ago, and she knew my reputation, so she helped me instead of blowing my cover. When she showed up at our camp in human form, she was teasing me. At first I was scared that she meant to reveal my secret, but in the end she helped my cause, pretending I had been spotted outside the gates, further clouding my true identity.”

“We’re so stupid,” Kendra groaned miserably.

“You keep doing a lot of our work for us,” Gavin agreed. “This whole scenario has played out almost perfectly. I would have preferred to keep my

identity a secret until we had left Wyrmoost. I would have preferred to devour Trask and all of them right outside the front gates, then fly away with you, Seth, and the key. But this will serve.”

“Why spare me and Seth?” Kendra asked. “Didn’t you try to kill me?”

Gavin shrugged. “When I slashed at you outside of here earlier tonight, I was in a rush, and worried about you escaping with the key. You and your brother are very likable. Despite being young and innocent, the two of you are surprisingly capable. I could hardly believe it when you killed Siletta. I mean, she was a legend. A dragon of no small renown. I had no idea she was a guardian here. Seth pulling the nail from the revenant was another shocking coup. The shadow plague should have swallowed Fablehaven, but you stopped that as well. Together you have accomplished some astounding feats. When the moment to reveal myself arrived, I may have changed my mind, but I felt sorely tempted to spare the two of you. Naturally, I would have eaten all the others.”

“Instead you just ate Dougan,” Kendra said bitterly.

“Just him for now,” Gavin grinned. The grin looked wrong on his face. Too knowing, too sharklike. The boy she had once liked would never have grinned that way.

“Have you eaten any of the others?” Kendra asked.

“I couldn’t find them,” Gavin admitted. “Seth may have escaped to Thronis. I found the red dragon on the slopes of Stormcrag skewered by a huge arrow. Hard to guess where your storm blew Trask. Mara may have survived as well—I couldn’t locate her body. She’s an agile woman. She may have somehow caught herself after going over the edge. Or maybe I just missed her corpse. Don’t worry, none of your friends will be coming to help you. I collapsed part of the ledge outside of the cleft, and Nafia is standing guard.”

“What’s going to protect you from me?” Kendra asked, shifting her stance, clutching the rain staff like a weapon.

Gavin laughed condescendingly. “You’re brave, Kendra, but I see no need for you to humiliate yourself.” He swished his sword a few times for emphasis. “Granted, I’m more powerful as a dragon, but even in this ungainly mortal shape, I have superhuman strength and reflexes. You glimpsed what I can do when we were swept up in that battle on Lost Mesa, and even then I was holding back, trying not to blow my cover.”

Kendra lowered the staff. "You killed the dragons that were fighting you? Just now, I mean."

Gavin smirked. "They were no match for me. A third dragon joined the fight against me as well, a gray beast with curved horns. But they all fell. The wind you conjured worked to my advantage. I have always outperformed other dragons in foul weather. In the end, Nafia aided me, not that I needed her assistance."

"I had hoped the wind might prevent you from reaching me."

"With enough wind, it can get risky for the best of us to stay airborne. But we can always tuck our wings and walk."

"You must have fought the hydra as a dragon," Kendra realized.

"Why else would I have gone off alone?"

Kendra scowled. "But you said you fought her with arrows and a spear. Why didn't the collar strangle you?"

Gavin grinned. "I did fight her with arrows and a spear . . . at first. I changed to dragon form after that. The hydra was a dangerous obstacle. Even as a dragon, the outcome looked dicey for a time. She put up a good fight. The collar was a nuisance. It even stayed on in dragon form. It only fell off just before I came here, meaning Seth must have made it back to Thronis."

Relief swept through Kendra. At least her brother might make it out alive.

"Anyhow, enough reminiscing. I know the key is in the bag as well as the unicorn horn. We'll need the horn to open the gate, and of course I'm not leaving without the key."

"I'm not going with you," Kendra said firmly.

"You're mistaken," Gavin said. "You have no choice in the matter. I'd rather not knock you unconscious. As a dragon, I think I could tolerate you. As a person, I actually like you. Let's try to keep this civilized."

Kendra chuckled incredulously. "You don't like me. You want me along as your puppet in case you need to recharge any magical items."

"There's that, too."

"All right," Kendra said, slouching against the wall. "I guess I don't have much choice."

"Hand over the knapsack," Gavin said.

Kendra picked up the knapsack and held it out to Gavin. As he reached for it, she swung the staff at his head with all of her strength. He blocked the blow with the flat of his sword, wrenched the staff from her grasp, and used it to swat her on the shoulder, knocking her to the ground.

“Really, Kendra, don’t, this is embarrassing.” He opened the main flap of the knapsack. “After you.”

Kendra bent over the knapsack and screamed, “Warren, Gavin is Navarog and he—”

She managed nothing more before Gavin shoved her aside and dropped into the knapsack, ignoring the rungs on the wall. Kendra hesitated. Should she follow him and try to help Warren? Or should she run? If she ran, he would catch her. Or Nafia would catch her. Had he collapsed the ledge outside of both entrances? She probably couldn’t escape Sidestep Cleft without wings.

Kendra climbed down the rungs. By the time she reached the bottom, Warren was unconscious.

“This has been a tough week for Warren,” Gavin commented. “Should I just put him out of his misery?”

“No, please,” Kendra begged.

“Why should I heed your wishes?” Gavin asked. “You tried to club me in the head!”

“I’ll be good if you leave him alone,” Kendra promised.

“It really doesn’t matter if you behave. But, sure, I’ll spare you having to watch me kill your friend. Go on up the ladder.” He already held the unicorn horn. He crouched, easily picking up the iron egg in his other hand.

Kendra scaled the rungs. If good behavior might spare Warren, she would behave. Besides, Gavin was right. If she resisted, all he had to do was knock her out and drag her wherever he wanted.

Gavin exited the knapsack, set aside the egg and the horn, and removed a flask from a pocket. Unstopping the flask, he began drenching the knapsack with a pungent fluid.

“What are you doing?” Kendra asked, fear creeping into her voice.

Producing a lighter, Gavin set the knapsack on fire.

“No!” Kendra cried, lunging toward the burning knapsack.

Gavin grabbed her, firmly holding her back. She struggled, staring in horror as the flames rapidly consumed the backpack. Eventually the fire began to burn lower. Flinging Kendra to the ground, Gavin poured more fluid on the fire, the resurgent flames throwing devilish highlights across his features. As the fire burned down a second time, he hacked up the blackened knapsack with his sword.

“You said you wouldn’t hurt him if I behaved,” Kendra sobbed, hands trembling.

“No, I said it didn’t matter if you behaved. And I said I wouldn’t make you watch me kill your friend. Instead, you watched me trap him in an extra-dimensional space forever. He has provisions, and the room is magically ventilated. I bet Warren will get really good at Yahtzee.”

“You’re a monster!” Kendra yelled.

“You’re finally catching on. I’m much worse than most monsters, Kendra. I’m a dragon, and a demon prince.”

Kendra huffed. “And a servant of the Sphinx. How do you like taking orders from a human?”

Gavin’s face hardened. “The Sphinx may be a brilliant strategist, and it may serve my purposes to aid him for a time, but before the end, the Sphinx will learn that no mere mortal is my master.”

“Why not teach him by switching sides and helping me?”

Gavin snorted derisively. “No, Kendra, I will not be helping you. I want the demon prison open.”

We’re coming, Kendra. She did not hear the words with her ears. They were chanted in her mind. Although a thrill of hope raced through her, Kendra tried to keep her face composed. She needed to keep Gavin talking.

“You want to open the prison on your terms, not the Sphinx’s.”

“We should not be having this conversation.” Gavin turned and raised his sword. A screeching astrid flew toward him. The blade flashed, and the owl fell. A second astrid came behind the first, talons outstretched, human face set in a determined expression. Gavin cut it down as well. A third astrid streaked along the passage from the opposite direction. Gavin pivoted and slew it with a well-timed slash.

Kendra covered her eyes, unwilling to look at the three dead astrids. “Stop!” she cried. “Stop, he’ll kill you!”

“Astrids?” Gavin asked, looking up and down the passage. No other owls flapped into view. “Even as a human, I could kill astrids all day! Nowhere easier than in a narrow passage like this. Send them all and let’s be rid of them! Whose help will you summon next? Chipmunks? Snails?”

“I didn’t call them,” Kendra said.

“We had best get going.”

“If Nafia is standing guard, how did the astrids get through?”

“The same way chipmunks would get through,” Gavin said. “Nafia is guarding against threats, not pathetic owls.”

“I’m not coming willingly,” Kendra said. “You’ll have to knock me out or kill me.”

“Easily done,” Gavin said with a shrug.

Then a dragon with silvery white scales materialized behind him. The dragon was not particularly large, hardly twice as tall as Gavin, but even with its wings folded, the streamlined creature barely fit in the passageway. Raxtus stared at Kendra, then glanced from her to Gavin uncertainly.

Gavin quickly checked over his shoulder. Raxtus disappeared just in time to avoid detection, then reappeared once Gavin turned back to face Kendra.

“You’re overacting,” Gavin remarked, “but it never hurts to be sure. You can save the theatrics. If you want me to look away from you again, you’ll have to do better than comically gawking over my shoulder.”

Kendra returned her gaze to Gavin. Raxtus loomed right behind him. Gavin kept his eyes fixed on hers.

“I don’t blame you for wanting to take a swing at me,” he went on, “but try to show a bit more ingenuity. I have excellent senses. If something tried to creep up behind me, I would know.”

Raxtus shook his head.

Kendra fought the urge to stare at the dragon. He had Gavin trapped! The hallway was much too cramped for Gavin to transform. All Raxtus had to do was strike. As she watched him peripherally, the silver-white dragon looked hesitant. He leaned his head forward, mouth opening slightly, then stopped himself, pulling back a tad.

“At least now you’re looking over my shoulder more subtly,” Gavin complimented. “Had you glanced that indirectly the first time, I would

have been much more startled. You might have even earned a chance to land a cheap shot.” He snorted as if the idea of resistance were ridiculous.

Kendra had to motivate Raxtus. She had to do it without directly talking to him, and it had to happen now.

“Maybe I should stop trying to fool you,” Kendra sighed.

“Now you’re making sense,” Gavin replied. “I wish you meant it.”

“What about the other dragons?” Kendra asked. “Won’t they be mad you took the key we got from the Dragon Temple? Won’t they be angry you killed the dragons who came after us? What about Celebrant?”

Gavin chuckled. “We’ll be long gone before any of them really know what happened.”

“But Celebrant is supposed to be the toughest dragon alive,” Kendra said. “Aren’t you worried he’ll want revenge?”

Gavin shook his head. “Celebrant is the one who should be worried. After I open the demon prison, I’ll be able to descend on him with an army of such power as the world has never seen. Trust me, there will be a new king of dragons before long. Kendra, you’re staring way too obviously again.”

Raxtus bared his fangs, his brilliant eyes brimming with rage. His neck coiled slightly, then his head darted forward, teeth flashing, and with one swift bite, a large portion of Gavin went missing. The sword clattered to the ground. The dragon’s forelegs propped Gavin up, and with three more bites, he was gone.

Kendra gawked at Raxtus in stupefied wonder.

“You know,” the dragon said, still chewing, “for such a bad guy, he tastes pretty good.”

“You did it!” Kendra gasped. “Where did you come from?”

“The astrids alerted me to your predicament.” The dragon examined the dead astrids on the ground. “After so many centuries, these are the first of their kind to perish. My fault, as usual. I came here, invisibly of course, and saw Nafia standing guard. I chickened out. So three of the astrids went in. When I heard them die, something snapped, and, well, here I am. Better late than never. Sorry I hesitated. I’ve never slain a dragon before.”

Kendra remained stunned. “You must be the only dragon who can fit inside Sidestep Cleft.”

“Even I can’t squeeze through all the way. But I could hear the thoughts of the astrids, and knew you were on this side of the narrowest gap.”

“You ate Gavin. You ate Navarog.”

“Not very gentlemanly to ambush him while he was trapped in human form by a narrow cave. But then again, he was no gentleman.”

She wanted to hug Raxtus. Unable to resist, she strode forward and wrapped her arms around his neck. His scales felt hard and cold. As Kendra clung to him, the dragon began to shimmer and gleam as if sunlight were reflecting off of his bright scales.

“Whoa,” the dragon said, his voice amazed. “What are you doing?”

Kendra pulled away. “You’re shining.”

Raxtus blinked. “I feel really good.”

“I’m full of magical energy,” Kendra said. “When I touch fairies, they glow brighter.”

“Feels like you lit a fire inside of me.”

“You’ve touched me before,” Kendra said, somewhat befuddled.

“I’ve touched your clothes, like when I carried you. But never skin to scales until now. Hug me again.”

She threw her arms around him, squeezing tightly. Raxtus shone brighter and brighter. His scales began to feel warm.

“Okay, enough,” he finally said. She backed away. “I feel like I could explode.”

“I can hardly look at you,” Kendra said, eyes squinting.

Suddenly the dragon was gone. “I can still turn invisible,” he said. “We should go.”

“Let me check something.” Kendra used the rain staff to probe the smoldering remains of the knapsack, hoping some connection to the room might remain. As she prodded aside the charred remnants, she found no evidence of an opening. The mutilated knapsack had lost all shape.

“Your friend is trapped inside?” Raxtus asked.

Kendra nodded, not trusting her voice to hold if she spoke.

“I don’t think we can access the room anymore, but I’ll bring what is left of the backpack. Maybe someone smarter than me can find a way in.” He grabbed up the burned flaps of shredded leather. “Where should we go?”

“I think Seth made it back to Thronis,” Kendra said hesitantly. She knew Raxtus was afraid of the sky giant.

“The griffins proved he was on your side,” Raxtus said. “But the spells protecting his stronghold still might harm us if I try to fly there.”

“Should we just stay here?” Kendra wondered.

“No. Not counting whatever happened to the guardians, four dragons are dead. Five, including Navarog. We need to get away from the scene of the crime.”

“Where? Blackwell Keep?”

“You don’t want to get Agad involved,” Raxtus warned. “He won’t like all of these dead dragons one bit. If he sheltered you, other dragons would probably attack seeking vengeance, plunging Wyrmoost into chaos. I’ll take you to my lair. It is far from here and well hidden.”

Kendra picked up the unicorn horn, her rain staff, and her flashlight. “The egg is too heavy.”

“Not for me,” Raxtus replied. “All four of my claws are useful for grabbing. Follow me. Walk this way. Keep that light turned off. Toward the end, when the passage widens, I’ll pick you up. If the rain keeps falling, and we’re quick and lucky, we’ll slip away right under Nafia’s nose.”

Kendra followed the dragon along the passage. Once the passage grew wide, she felt his claw take hold of her waist, and then they were soaring up into the rainy night. Since she had stopped shaking the staff, the storm had lost some of its fury, but the winds continued to gust, and the rain felt icy cold against her face. How could water that cold not be frozen?

Glancing up and back, Kendra saw a looming shape through the rain that might have been Nafia perched on a craggy outcrop. The shape did not give chase.

Kendra felt like she had parachuted into a hurricane. Swirling winds buffeted them, coming from above and below. Even a small, aerodynamic dragon like Raxtus seemed overmatched by the turbulent gales. Sometimes he fought the gusts, sometimes he used them, zooming and stalling, twisting and plunging, curving and rising. As they gained altitude, the rain turned to hail, pinging off the dragon’s invisible scales. Kendra’s winter attire offered some protection against the cold and wetness, but eventually she began to shiver. She lost all sense of direction as erratic winds propelled them through the frigid darkness.

At last they alighted in a small grotto. When Raxtus made himself visible, his brightness lit up the room better than a bonfire. Flowstone covered the walls and floor like frozen caramel. On a stone shelf near a glittering patch of calcite roosted an astrid.

“Is this your lair?” Kendra asked.

“This hole in the wall?” Raxtus laughed. “No, my lair isn’t grand, but it isn’t quite this tiny and bare. The astrid summoned me.”

Your brother is well.

“Seth?” Kendra asked. “Have you seen him?”

Others in my cadre have seen him. He is with the sky giant. Now that we can speak to fairies, two of us brought a fairy to Thronis to serve as an interpreter. Your brother and the giant know you are here. They suggest you wait here until morning.

“Then what?”

The giant will slacken the weather long enough for you to dash to the exit with the other survivors from your party.

“What about Trask? And Tanu? And Mara?”

Those three are well. The giant has been using his seeing stone to locate them. Griffins are recovering them as we speak. They will take shelter around the preserve. In the morning, a griffin will come for you, and you will rendezvous with your friends at the gate.

“I’ll stay with you until morning,” Raxtus promised. He raised a wing. “You can sleep up against me. Your energy made me warm.”

“Okay,” Kendra said. “Thank the giant for me.”

I’ll stay with you as well.

Kendra crept underneath the upraised wing, and Raxtus lowered it over her like a blanket. The dragon was right—he was warm. Almost immediately she stopped shivering. It was actually quite cozy.

Closing her eyes, Kendra tried to shut down her mind. At least Seth was all right. And some of the others had lived. Even Mara, who had looked like a goner.

Kendra licked her lips. Against all odds, she had escaped Navarog. She might actually live through this. She might see her parents and grandparents again. She might grow up.

Kendra tried not to picture Navarog devouring Dougan. She tried not to envision Warren, injured and trapped in the storage room. She tried not to visualize Mendigo disintegrating. She tried to forget what she had learned about Gavin, and tried to ignore that she had seen him eaten right in front of her.

Where was sleep? When would it come for her?

She tried not to worry about what the morning would bring. She tried not to wonder what new problems would arise on the way to the gate. She tried not to stress about what might await beyond the colorful walls of Wyrmoost.

Where was a nice, strong sleep potion when she needed it?

Outside the wind howled. Beside her the dragon breathed softly. She focused on the wind, listened to the breathing, and sleep overtook her.



The New Knights

Feeling the vibrations of the road, Kendra tried to rest her eyes. Occasionally she would peek out the window at the leafless trees blurring by, or across the SUV at her brother. They would soon be back at Fablehaven.

Tanu had hinted that Grandpa had a secret he wanted to share. It had not sounded like happy news. She and Seth had pressed him for info, but the Samoan had remained tight-lipped, insisting that her grandfather wanted to relay the information in person.

Tanu sat up front at the wheel. Elise sat beside him on the passenger side. She had met up with them at the airport for added security.

Their departure from Wyrmoost had gone smoothly. The griffin had appeared on schedule, Kendra had bid farewell to Raxtus, and the others had been waiting for her after a swift flight to the gate. Mara had broken a few ribs, but Trask, Tanu, and Seth had survived relatively unscathed. When they exited, the distracter spell did not repulse them, and the horn functioned perfectly as a key.

Outside the gate, they returned to the heart-shaped clearing, where Trask contacted Aaron Stone. The helicopter had found them some time later, and, without any real hardship, they had flown back to civilization. The following morning, they started a series of airline flights that had led Kendra to her present situation.

Tanu turned the SUV into the driveway. The sky was overcast, but no snow fell. Kendra bowed her head. She did not want to see Fablehaven again. She was sick of magical creatures hunting her. She was sick of fear and betrayals. If one of her best friends had secretly been a demonic dragon, who could she trust?

Kendra glanced across the car at Seth. She could trust her brother. He might be dumb and reckless sometimes, but he was also heroic and reliable. Then again, what if the person in the SUV was not her brother? What if Thronis had replaced Seth with a stingbulb? Or some other form of duplicate, even more evil and longer lasting?

She knew she was being silly. Or was she? One of her best friends had turned out to be an evil dragon. The Society of the Evening Star had proven they would stoop to anything to set a trap. They would lie, they would steal, they would kidnap, they would kill. And they were patient. Could Tanu be biding his time, waiting for the perfect moment for the ultimate betrayal? How well did they know Elise? How could they ever place any confidence in Vanessa?

Kendra was beginning to understand why Patton had wanted to hide the artifacts beyond the reach of anyone, why he trusted only himself with their location. In a world full of traitors, how did you confide in anyone?

Of course, Patton had trusted her. Had that been wise? They had recovered the key to the vault where the Translocator had been hidden. But no matter how they tried to hide the Chronometer and the key, wasn't it just a matter of time before the Society stole them?

The SUV passed through the gate to Fablehaven and pulled to a stop in front of the house. Grandpa, Grandma, Dale, and Coulter came out to greet them. Seth jumped out of the SUV in a hurry, producing a white horn to wave at them. By telephone, Tanu had explained how Seth had stowed away, and how he had helped win the day at Wyrmoost.

"I brought it back," Seth said, rushing toward them. Reaching the cement walkway to the house, he tossed the horn into the air and caught it. When he tossed it a second time, he fumbled the catch. The horn fell and shattered against the cement.

Everyone froze. Seth looked stricken. Coulter paled. Grandpa scowled. Tiny white shards littered the walkway.

Kendra found herself choking on laughter. The look on Grandma's face was priceless. But it was unfair to prolong the prank. Kendra got out of the SUV.

"I have the real horn," Kendra said, producing the unicorn horn.

Seth was cracking up. The others looked relieved. "There was a glass unicorn head in an airport souvenir shop," Seth giggled. "The horn was just the right size. We bought the head and broke it off. So worth it!"

"For a young man on thin ice," Grandma said, "you sure enjoy stomping around."

Seth kept laughing. He couldn't seem to help himself.

Grandpa smiled. He came forward and hugged Seth. "After all you've been through, I'm glad you can still laugh. Kendra, Seth, I know you just got home, but we have a few urgent matters to discuss. Would you come with me to my office? Then you can rest."

"Should I grab our bags?" Kendra asked.

"Others will worry about your bags," Grandma said, embracing Seth after Grandpa released him.

Grandpa caught Kendra in a tight hug. "I'm glad you made it back," he whispered.

Fighting back tears, she embraced him fiercely. Grandma hugged her, and Coulter and Dale did too. Then she followed Grandpa into the house and into his office.

Kendra and Seth took seats in the big armchairs, and Grandpa sat behind his desk. She wondered for a moment whether they could be in trouble. No—Seth, probably, for stowing away, but she had done nothing wrong.

"I am so sorry for the terrible events at Wyrmoost," Grandpa said, studying Kendra. "Gavin's betrayal must have come as a horrible shock."

Kendra did not trust herself to speak. Her emotions felt too close to the surface.

"I understand you'll need time to recover," Grandpa added. "We don't need to dwell right now on the bad things that happened. Know that we will do all we can to figure out a way to recover Warren."

"What are the chances?" Seth asked.

“Honestly?” Grandpa responded. “Not good. The extra-dimensional space of the storage room is not even part of our reality. Once the connection was severed with the knapsack, the room was left adrift.”

“Can he even breathe in there?” Seth asked. “The room had air vents, right?”

“The room had vents for circulation, and we have no reason to believe the vents were damaged. They would have had a connection to the outside world separate from the mouth of the knapsack.”

“Could there be a way to rescue Warren and Bubda using the vents?”

“Possibly, if we can find where the vents connect to our world. But, by design, the connection point will be well hidden. The creators of the knapsack did not want enemies entering through the vents.”

Seth nodded. “We’ll try, though.”

“Of course we’ll try.” Grandpa did not sound optimistic. “Warren has plenty of food and healing potions. We’ll find a way to free him. Enough tragedy. I can hardly believe that I am in the presence of dragon slayers, and that another resides in the dungeon.”

“You heard what Vanessa did?” Kendra asked.

“Tanu filled me in on the phone,” Grandpa said. “She was under strict orders not to inhabit any of you, but under the circumstances it is hard to view her as anything less than a hero. Not that I am ready to trust her. She could have known she was also helping Navarog.”

“How can we ever trust anyone?” Kendra muttered.

“We experienced yet another painful betrayal at Wyrmoost,” Grandpa acknowledged. “Admittedly, none of us saw it coming. But that does not mean we lack true allies. We can trust each other. We can trust Ruth. And it would be hard to doubt Tanu, Mara, Trask, Coulter, or Dale.”

“What about stingbulbs?” Kendra asked. “Or what if more of our best allies are just really patient enemies?”

Grandpa studied Kendra thoughtfully. “We must always be on guard, I suppose. But we can’t stop trusting each other, or our enemies win. We are still in the midst of a crisis. None of us can handle it alone.”

“Am I busted?” Seth asked.

“A fair question,” Grandpa replied, shifting his attention. “What do you think?”

“I’m probably busted. But I shouldn’t be. You should have sent me along in the first place. I’m as good as any of the other Knights. Better than some. And my new abilities make me really useful.”

Grandpa folded his hands on the desk. “Would you like to join the Knights?”

“Is that a trick question?”

“No,” Grandpa said seriously.

“Of course!”

“It is hard to argue with your accomplishments,” Grandpa said. “I don’t think your judgment has fully matured, but these desperate times require courage like yours, Seth. Rise.”

Seth stood up.

“Raise your right hand,” Grandpa said.

Seth complied.

“Repeat after me: I pledge to keep the secrets of the Knights of the Dawn, and to aid my fellow Knights in their worthy goals.”

Seth repeated the words.

“Congratulations,” Grandpa said.

“You’re allowed to make me a Knight?” Seth inquired hopefully.

“I have been asked to come out of retirement,” Grandpa said.

“Considering the threats we’re facing, I consented. I am the new Captain of the Knights.”

“And now I’m a Knight,” Seth said, glancing over at Kendra, hardly able to contain his excitement.

“You have made questionable decisions in the past days,” Grandpa said. “But they were not foolish decisions. You took risks because the stakes were high, and, when challenged, you provided adequate reasons. You were right that when the fate of the world hangs in the balance, perhaps it is better to be active than passive. In some ways, the Knights as a whole have grown too conservative. To avert the coming crisis, I am afraid we may have to take some risks and go on the offensive.”

“Did they tell you Arlin Santos is a traitor?” Kendra asked.

“Trask called it in,” Grandpa said. “We moved to apprehend him, but he had already fled.”

“What is the next step?” Kendra asked.

“We have the Chronometer and the key from Wyrmoost,” Grandpa said. “Keeping the key safe will prevent our enemies from obtaining the Translocator. The question is whether we can protect the key while the Sphinx wields the Oculus. Part of our strategy must be to keep the key in motion, never at the same spot for too long. We’ll need to get decoys in motion as well. The Translocator could serve as a powerful tool in our offensive efforts. Perhaps we should put together a mission to retrieve the artifact from Obsidian Waste. I’ll be considering the issue with my top advisors, including you two, over the coming days.”

“And you’ll give back the horn to the centaurs,” Kendra said.

“We’ll do that today,” Grandpa said. “Our story will be that we managed to recover the horn from the Society. When Gavin apprehended you, it was in their power for a short while, so it won’t even be a complete falsehood.”

“What about the fifth secret preserve?” Seth asked. “The one with the final artifact.”

“We have no leads,” Grandpa lamented. “But we will keep searching. And Coulter will keep trying to figure out the Chronometer. There will be much need for urgent planning in the days and weeks to come.”

“Meanwhile, what happens to us?” Kendra wondered.

Grandpa shifted uncomfortably in his seat, averting his eyes. “The world thinks you are dead, Kendra. It might be simplest to let them persist in that belief until this crisis is over.”

“So I’ll go home alone?” Seth asked.

Grandpa looked him in the eye. “No, the two of you will have to remain here. Normally those without knowledge of magical creatures are kept out of events pertaining to the magical community. But the Society has crossed another unthinkable boundary.” Grandpa frowned at them, then sighed. “After all you’ve been through recently, I don’t know how to tell you this. I hesitated to share the news, but after giving the matter a lot of thought, your grandmother and I decided it would be both unfair and impossible to conceal the truth for long.”

Kendra felt fear awaken inside, a cold hand squeezing her throat. His tone and manner suggested that something tragic had transpired. She had an uneasy suspicion regarding what boundary Grandpa meant.

Grandpa hesitated, reluctant eyes flicking from Kendra to Seth and back again. “The Society has abducted your parents.”

Acknowledgments

An unread book does nobody any good. Stories happen in the mind of a reader, not among symbols printed on a page. I am grateful to the many readers who have been bringing Fablehaven to life in their minds. I love hearing that a whole family has embraced the series, or that an entire class has read one of the books aloud, or that a reluctant reader has used the books to discover that reading can actually be fun. As an author, the best news I get is when people are reading and enjoying the stuff I write.

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You especially have my thanks, dear reader, for sticking with the *Fablehaven* series this far. One more to go. I'm excited about it. Swing by BrandonMull.com to get on my e-mail list for news and updates. And feel free to track me down on Facebook.

Reading Guide

1. Kendra has faced multiple betrayals over the course of the series. Which do you think was the worst and why? Have you ever felt betrayed by a friend? How did you handle the situation?
2. During this story, Vanessa made some efforts at restitution for past betrayals. How much do you feel she can be trusted? Explain.
3. Why did Seth steal the unicorn horn from the centaurs? What might have happened had he failed? Do you feel he made a good choice to go after the horn? Have you ever taken a risk that made others uncomfortable? If so, what were the circumstances?
4. What makes Raxtus feel like a failure as a dragon? What makes Raxtus a good friend for humans? Are some of the things he dislikes about himself actually desirable qualities? Explain.
5. If you had possession of and could operate the Oculus—the All-Seeing Eye—how would you use it? Who would you spy on? What would you look for?
6. Why did Thronis help Seth? Do you think the giant is a good person? Why or why not?
7. If you had a stingbulb, how would you use it?
8. The key at Wyrmoost was well guarded. Why did the Knights choose to go after the key? Do you agree with their decision? Why or why not?
9. So far, three artifacts have been found, The Sands of Sanctity, the Chronometer, and the Oculus. Which do you think is most valuable? Why?
10. Grandma Sorenson is deadly with a crossbow. Perhaps your own grandparents have some secret weapons or skills you don't know about. What could they be? Use your imagination and create an adventure story

about one of your grandparents, making him or her the hero. Then send your grandparent the story.

11. Raxtus feels he can never live up to what his father expects him to be. Have you ever fallen short of the expectations others had for you? How can high expectations be helpful? How can they be hurtful?

12. If you were playing a game of Capture the Flag with your friends at night, would you rather be able to see in the dark like Kendra, or shade walk like Seth? Which might give you the better advantage?

13. Graulas tells Seth, “Choices determine character,” who we are and who we become. Can you think of a choice that you’ve made that has improved your character? How important is character? What are the most important choices you make every day?

BOOK FIVE

Fablehaven: Keys to the Demon Prison

THE NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING SERIES

FABLEHAVEN

KEYS TO THE DEMON PRISON



Fablehaven : Keys to the demon prison / Brandon Mull.

p. cm.

Summary: When Kendra and Seth go to stay at their grandparents' estate,

they discover that it is a sanctuary for magical creatures and that a battle

between good and evil is looming.

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*For the librarians, teachers, booksellers, and readers who have
madethe Fablehaven series a success!*

Chapter 1



A Dying Wish

Seth knew he should not be here. His grandparents would be furious if they found out. The dismal cave smelled more rancid than ever, like a nauseating feast of spoiled meat and fruit. Almost steamy with humidity, the wet air forced him not only to smell but also to taste the putrid sweetness. Every inhalation made him want to retch.

Graulas lay on his side, chest swelling and shrinking with labored, hitching breaths. His infected face rested against the rocky floor, inflamed flesh flattened in a sticky mass. Although the demon's wrinkly eyelids were shut, he twitched and grunted as Seth drew near. Groaning and coughing, the bulky demon peeled his face away from the floor, one curled ram horn scraping the ground. The demon did not fully arise, but managed to prop himself up on one elbow. One eye opened a fraction. The other was fused shut by congealed goo.

"Seth," Graulas rasped, his formerly rumbling voice weak and tired.

"I came," Seth acknowledged. "You said it was urgent."

The heavy head nodded slightly. "I . . . am . . . dying," he managed.

The ancient demon had been diseased and dying since Seth had first met him. "Worse than ever?"

The demon wheezed and coughed, a cloud of dust rising from his lumpy frame. After spitting out a thick wad of phlegm, he spoke again, his voice little more than a whisper. "After . . . long years . . . of dwindling . . . my final days . . . have arrived."

Seth was unsure what to say. Graulas had never tried to hide his nefarious past. Most good people would be relieved to hear of his demise. But the demon had taken a liking to Seth. After becoming intrigued by Seth's unusual exploits and successes, Graulas had helped him figure out how to stop the shadow plague, and had further assisted him in learning to use his newfound abilities as a shadow charmer. Whatever crimes Graulas may have committed in the past, the moribund demon had always treated Seth well.

"I'm sorry," Seth said, mildly surprised to find he really meant it.

The demon trembled, then his elbow collapsed and he flopped flat against the ground. His eye closed. "The pain," he moaned softly. "Exquisite pain. My kind . . . dies . . . so very slowly. I thought . . . I had sampled . . . every possible agony. But now, it burrows . . . twists . . . gnaws . . . expands. Deep inside. Relentless. Consuming. Before I can master it . . . the pain increases . . . to new plateaus of anguish."

"Can I help?" Seth asked, doubting whether anything from the medicine cabinet would do the trick.

The demon snorted. "Not likely," he panted. "I understand . . . you will leave tomorrow."

"How did you know that?" His mission the next day was supposedly a secret.

"Confide . . . no plans . . . to Newel and Doren."

Seth had not provided the satyrs with details. He had just told them he would be leaving Fablehaven for a time. He had been at the preserve for more than three months, ever since he and the others had returned from Wyrmoost. He had enjoyed several adventures with Newel and Doren in the interim, and felt he owed them a good-bye. Grandpa would only let them discuss the mission in his office with spells to help prevent spying, so Seth had shared no specifics, but he probably should not have said anything at all to the satyrs. "I didn't give them details," he told Graulas.

"No . . . but I heard them mention your departure . . . as they moved about the woods. Although . . . I can't see into your house . . . I can deduce

... you seek another artifact. Only such ... a mission ... would prompt Stan to risk ... your safety."

"I can't really talk about it," Seth apologized.

Graulas coughed wetly. "The details are unimportant. If I heard and guessed ... others may have heard. Though I cannot ... see ... beyond the preserve ... I can sense much outside attention focused here. Mighty wills straining to spy. Be on your guard."

"I'll be careful," Seth promised. "Is that why you called me here? To warn me?"

One eye cracked open and a faint smile touched the demon's desiccated lips. "Nothing so ... altruistic. I am soliciting a favor."

"What?"

"I may ... expire ... before you return. Which would render my wishes ... irrelevant. After all this time ... my days are truly numbered. Seth ... not only ... my physical pain ... troubles me. I am afraid to die."

"Me too."

Graulas grimaced. "You do not understand. Compared to me ... you have little to fear."

Seth scrunched his brow. "You mean because you were bad?"

"If I could ... evaporate ... into nothing ... I would welcome death. But this is not the case. There are other spheres awaiting us, Seth. The place prepared for my kind ... when we exit this life ... is not pleasant. Which is partly why demons cling to this life for as long as we can. After how I lived ... for thousands of years ... I will have to pay a steep price."

"But you're not the person you were," Seth said. "You've helped me a lot! I'm sure that will count for something."

Graulas huffed and coughed differently than he had before. It almost sounded like a bitter chuckle. "I meddled with your dilemmas ... from my deathbed ... to amuse myself. Such trivialities will do little to offset centuries of deliberate evil. I have not changed, Seth. I am merely powerless. I have no drive left. As much pain as I am now enduring, I fear that the afterlife ... will hold far greater agonies."

"So what can I do?" Seth wondered.

"One thing only," Graulas growled through clenched lips. His eye squinted shut and his fists tightened. Seth heard teeth grinding. The

demon's breath came in sharp, ragged bursts. "One moment," he managed, trembling. Creamy tears oozed from his eyes.

Seth turned away. It was too much to watch. He had never imagined such misery. He wanted to run from the cave and never return.

"One moment," Graulas gasped again. After a few grunts and moans, he began to breathe more deeply. "You can do one thing for me."

"Tell me," Seth said.

"I do not know the purpose of your mission . . . but should you recover the Sands of Sanctity . . . that artifact could greatly alleviate my suffering."

"But you're so diseased. Wouldn't it kill you?"

"You're thinking of . . . the unicorn horn. The horn purifies . . . and yes . . . its touch would slay me. But the Sands heal. They wouldn't just burn away my impurities. The Sands would cure my maladies and help my body survive the process. I would still be dying of old age, but the pain would be lessened, and the healing might even buy me a little more time. Forgive me, Seth. I would not ask . . . were I not desperate."

Seth stared at the pathetic ruin the demon's body had become. "The Sphinx has the Sands," he said gently.

"I know," Graulas whispered. "Even the thought . . . that there is some small chance . . . gives me something to dwell upon . . . besides . . . besides . . ."

"I understand," Seth said.

"I have nothing else to hope for."

"Of course we're trying to get the Sands back," Seth soothed. "I can't say this mission will do that, but of course we hope to recover all of the artifacts. If we can get the Sands of Sanctity, I'll bring the artifact here and heal you. I promise. Okay?"

Discolored tears gushed from the eyes of the demon. He turned his face away. "Fair enough. You have . . . my thanks . . . Seth Sorenson. Farewell."

"Is there anything else I can—"

"Go. You can do nothing more. I would rather not . . . be seen . . . like this."

"Okay. Hang in there."

Flashlight in hand, Seth exited the cave, relieved to leave behind the humid stench and the naked agony.

Chapter 2



Obsidian Waste

Kendra reclined in the comfy seat and tried to doze, but despite the hypnotically steady whine of the private jet's engines, she could not calm her mind. A string of flights had taken her, Tanu, and Seth from New York to London, then to Singapore, and finally to Perth, the capital of Western Australia, where they had boarded the private jet they currently occupied. At the various airports along the way, Tanu had them ducking into bathrooms to change outfits and taking complicated routes through the terminals. They traveled under assumed names using false identification, all in the hope of avoiding the notice of their enemies in the Society of the Evening Star.

At Perth they had met up with Trask, Mara, Elise, and a guy named Vincent. Trask sat across the aisle from Kendra, filing his nails, his dark scalp gleaming. She was glad he was leading the mission. Her past experiences with him had shown that he remained calm under duress, and he was widely considered the most seasoned field operative among the Knights of the Dawn.

Directly in front of Kendra, Tanu leaned against a window, snoring gently. The Samoan potion master had spent more time asleep than awake

on their previous flights. Despite his bulk, he had a knack for dozing on planes. Kendra wished she had asked him for a concoction to help her relax.

Elise reclined behind Kendra, listening to music on a pair of noise-canceling headphones. She had new red streaks in her hair and wore heavier makeup than when she had helped Warren guard Seth and Kendra back in December. Eyes closed, she softly tapped her fingers against her thighs to the beat.

At the front of the cabin, Mara gazed out the window. A tall, athletic woman with dramatic cheekbones, Mara hadn't been talkative even before the Lost Mesa preserve fell and her mother was killed. Since greeting them at the airport in Perth, the Native American seemed quieter than ever.

Vincent, the only member of the party Kendra had not met previously, sat across from Mara. A small man of Filipino descent, he smiled a lot and had a faint accent. Grandpa had explained that Vincent had been included on the mission because of his familiarity with the Obsidian Waste preserve.

Although she could not see him, Kendra knew that Seth was up in the cockpit with Aaron Stone, the same man who had piloted their helicopter when they went to Wyrmoost. Had that really been only three months ago? It felt like a lifetime.

She wished Warren were here with them. It felt wrong to go adventuring without him. He had been with her at the inverted tower at Fablehaven, as well as Lost Mesa and Wyrmoost. But now he was part of the reason this expedition was so urgent. At Wyrmoost, Warren had been trapped inside a magical chamber. The entrance to the room looked like a regular knapsack, but inside the unassuming mouth of the bag a series of rungs led down into a spacious storeroom heaped with junk and provisions. After Gavin had revealed himself as Navarog, he had destroyed the knapsack, stranding Warren inside the storage room along with a small hermit troll named Bubda.

The room had been well stocked with food and water, but any supply was finite, and now, after three months, Grandpa and the others had estimated that Warren would be nearly out of rations. Without prompt intervention, starvation would claim him.

Not long after Kendra had returned to Fablehaven from Wyrmoost, Coulter Dixon had embarked on a campaign to discover how the Translocator functioned. The adventure at Wyrmoost had provided them

with the key to the vault at Obsidian Waste, but obtaining the Translocator would be much more useful if they knew how it exerted power over space. Otherwise, it might end up like the Chronometer, a powerful artifact that they had little idea how to operate.

After exploiting his best contacts and hunches, the veteran relic hunter had returned with no new information. Kendra had never seen Coulter looking so old and defeated. Others kept searching for operational guidelines, but a couple of weeks ago, it was Vanessa who finally reported success. She had been mentally traveling out of Fablehaven into the sleeping minds of people she had bitten in the past. Her primary focus had been trying to figure out where Kendra's parents had been taken, but while working with one of her contacts inside the Society of the Evening Star, the narcoblix had uncovered long-guarded information about operating the Translocator. Once Coulter had verified that the intelligence seemed authentic, the Knights had started planning this mission, in the hope that the Translocator could help them rescue Warren and gain a new advantage over the Society.

Kendra also quietly hoped that an artifact as powerful as the Translocator might help in the search for her mother and father. Marla and Scott Sorenson had known nothing about disguised magical creatures existing in the real world. And yet, despite their lack of involvement in the affairs surrounding Fablehaven, contrary to all precedent, they had been abducted. Stranger still, there had been no contact from the Society about terms for their release. After Wyrmoost, the Sphinx and the Society had seemed to disappear.

Kendra tried not to dwell on her parents. The thought of them made her ache. Scott and Marla both still believed she was dead. They had held a funeral and buried a duplicate Kendra and then had been abducted before the record could be set straight. A miserable emptiness overcame Kendra whenever she remembered that her parents believed their daughter to be dead and buried. All of that futile grief! Now that her parents were prisoners, would they ever learn the truth?

To make matters worse, her parents had been taken through no fault of their own. They had never even heard of the Society of the Evening Star. Kendra, Seth, and maybe Grandma and Grandpa Sorenson were the ones to blame. The abduction had to be in retaliation for Navarog's failure at

Wyrmoost. The thought of her beloved parents paying for her decisions made Kendra want to scream her way to insanity.

To combat the grief, Kendra usually let it flare into hatred, a fiery coal bed of wrath that grew hotter over time, fueled by fear and fanned by guilt. Almost all of that hate was directed toward a single individual: the Sphinx.

It was the Sphinx who had waged war on the preserves for magical creatures, trying to steal the five secret artifacts that together could open the demon prison Zzyzx. It was the Sphinx who had introduced her to Gavin, a cute guy and a good friend who had turned out to be a scheming, demonic dragon. It was the Sphinx who had initiated the shadow plague, which had led to the death of Lena. It was the Sphinx who had kidnapped her and forced Kendra to use the Oculus, an artifact with amazing powers of sight that had almost devoured her mind. And it was the Sphinx who was still out there, unpunished, with her parents under his control, plotting further mischief that could lead to the opening of Zzyzx and the end of the world.

At least now she was an active part of the effort to deal the Sphinx a major blow and hopefully help Warren and her parents in the process. After months of wait and worry, it felt good to be doing something, even if it was dangerous. Under tutelage from Tanu, Coulter, and occasionally Vanessa, she and Seth had trained with swords, bows, and other weapons over the past few months, so she felt more empowered than ever. Nevertheless, although she and Seth were now both full-fledged Knights of the Dawn, she had been surprised when Grandpa, as Captain of the Knights, had included them on such a risky mission. In the end, the essential roles their abilities had played on past assignments had won out. Their presence underscored the desperate need for success.

Kendra yawned, trying to get her ears to pop. The plane was descending. Trask unbuckled his seat belt, rose, and retrieved Seth from the cockpit. As Seth found a seat, Trask stood at the front of the cabin to address everyone.

“We’ll be landing in about fifteen minutes,” he announced. “I’ve set up several spells to prevent outside eyes and ears from spying. The magic should divert anything short of the Oculus. Now would be an appropriate time to review our mission.”

Trask paused, brooding eyes roving the cabin. He cleared his throat. “Most of us have worked together before, so we’ll skip introductions,

except for Vincent, who is a new face to some of us, though not to me.”

“I’m Vincent,” the Filipino man said, half rising from his seat. “I’ll be your guide at Obsidian Waste. Over the past ten years, I have spent several months there.”

“How do we know you’re not a monster in disguise?” Seth asked bluntly.

Vincent gave a weak chuckle. “I know we’ve all been dealing with unprecedented betrayals lately. The Knights of the Dawn have never seen infiltration and upheaval like the past year has provided. But as Trask can attest, I’m a Knight to the core, have been since my teenage years, when my parents were murdered by the Society.”

“Trust has been running thin lately,” Trask acknowledged, “but I’d let Vincent watch my back any day. Part of the reason this particular group was assembled was because we have been through enough together to trust each other. I have no doubts or hesitations that Vincent belongs in this circle of trust.”

Kendra gazed at Vincent. She was glad her brother had spoken up. She wanted to believe Trask. But what if Trask himself was a traitor, patiently waiting for that vital, heartbreaking opportunity? Probably not. But Kendra had learned that “probably” wasn’t always good enough. From now on, she wanted to be ready for anything.

“Our object is to retrieve the Translocator,” Trask continued. “I have withheld some of the specifics until now. We believe we understand how the artifact functions. If our intelligence is correct, the device can transport an individual to anyplace he or she has visited previously.”

Elise raised a hand. “Can it take passengers?”

Trask gave a nod. “Thanks to Vanessa and Coulter, we understand it can transport up to three people, along with their belongings. The device is a platinum cylinder, set with jewels, divided into three rotating sections. The user twists the sections to bring the jewels into alignment, activating the artifact. Whoever holds the center section controls the destination, and needs to focus mentally on that location as the other sections slide into place. Each intended traveler would grasp a different section.”

“What if not all the passengers have been to the destination before?” Seth asked.

Trask shrugged. “Based on the recovered information, Coulter thinks only the person gripping the center section needs to have been to the desired location. But we won’t be sure until we test it out.”

“What if you teleport into solid rock?” Seth asked. “Or a hundred feet into the air? Or in front of a speeding train?”

The jet shuddered momentarily, and Trask raised a hand to brace himself until the turbulence passed. “The device carries unknowable risks, but given the sophistication of these artifacts, we can reasonably assume that the Translocator was designed to minimize those dangers.”

Elise raised a finger. “We’ll go into the vault tomorrow?”

“The plan is quick in, quick out,” Trask confirmed. “We’ll spend the night at the main house to get over our jet lag, then proceed to the vault in the morning. Hopefully, by tomorrow evening, we’ll be flying home.”

“If the artifact works right,” Seth pointed out, “maybe we can skip the flight home.”

Trask’s mouth twitched and his eyes smiled. “We’ll see. Our first order of business will be to make preparations at the main house tonight.”

“Do we know where the vault is located?” Kendra asked. “The vaults at Fablehaven and Lost Mesa were well hidden.”

Vincent answered. “The vault at Obsidian Waste gave the preserve its name—an immense monolith of obsidian overshadowing the surrounding plain. We know the location of the vault, and even where to place the key. But no rumors hint at what dangers await inside.”

“Since the vault is so obvious,” Trask said, “we must be prepared for the traps inside to be all the more deadly.”

“The lack of camouflage may be related to the strength of the obsidian,” Vincent observed. “We’re not talking about regular stone. Over the years, there have been numerous attempts to drill, chisel, and blast entrances to the vault. So far nobody has scratched it.”

“Why hide when you’re invincible?” Elise muttered.

The intercom from the cockpit interrupted. “We’re on final approach,” Aaron announced. “The air is a little choppy, so I’m going to recommend you all take your seats for the duration.”

“I’ll pass around some walrus butter to make sure our eyes are open to the magical creatures of Obsidian Waste,” Trask said. “We’ll speak more at

the house.” He returned to his seat as a prolonged vibration rattled the aircraft.

Kendra didn’t need magical milk or walrus butter to pierce the illusions that shielded most magical creatures from mortal eyes, so she passed it back to Elise without sampling any. Kendra checked her seat belt and peered out the window. Down below, the shadow of the jet fluttered over uneven ground. She observed mostly flat terrain, with scrubby bushes, low ridges, and shallow ravines. A pair of jeeps caught her eye, the vehicles kicking up dust as they moved along a dirt road on a diagonal course to intercept the descending jet. She was low enough to see a figure driving each open-topped jeep, but their features were unclear.

Gazing along the road behind the jeeps, Kendra noticed a wall. Actually, it was more the idea of a wall. At regular intervals, pyramids of stones stood in lonely piles, stretching away from the road in opposite directions. Nothing connected the rock piles, so they formed a boundary without creating an actual barrier. But Kendra recognized a shimmer in the air above the line formed by the rock piles, and she realized that it must be the distracter spell shielding Obsidian Waste.

Beyond the orderly stacks of stone, Kendra could see the sweeping loops of a meandering river, and, in the distance, a huge black stone shaped like a shoe box, its rectangular lines unnaturally regular. A tremor ran through the aircraft, and for a moment the jet wobbled sickeningly left and right. Kendra turned away from the window, facing forward, her hands gripping the armrests. The plane bucked and shuddered again. Kendra felt the tingling sensation that accompanies the initial plunge of a fast elevator. She had never been on a flight with this much turbulence!

Glancing across the aisle, she saw that Trask appeared unperturbed. Of course, he was tough to ruffle, and would probably wear that same impassive expression if the airplane disintegrated and his seat were plummeting alone toward the outback. The thought made Kendra smile.

Despite a few more bumps and jiggles, a minute or two later, the private jet landed smoothly. After taxiing shortly, the aircraft came to a stop. Kendra shouldered her backpack and waited while Tanu opened a door that swung out and down to become a short staircase. Kendra followed Seth down the steps. The isolated airstrip had a single runway, a ramshackle hangar, and a small office topped by a flapping wind sock.

After deplaning, Trask, Tanu, and Vincent started retrieving gear from the luggage compartment. Mara wandered off to one side and began a fluid routine of elaborate stretches. From the door of the plane, Elise studied the area through hefty binoculars. The sun hung high and bright overhead.

“Welcome to Australia,” Seth announced in his best local accent, gesturing at their barren surroundings. After surveying the area for a moment, he frowned. “I expected more koalas.”

“Which way to the baggage claim area?” Kendra asked.

Seth chuckled. “Not one of the fancier airports I’ve seen. This is more like some smuggler’s hidden landing strip.”

“What do they smuggle?”

“Boomerangs, mostly. And kangaroos. Poor little fellas.”

“Here comes the welcoming crew,” Elise reported. “Two vehicles, each with a single occupant.”

Before long a pair of jeeps rumbled into view. Painted a military green, the rugged vehicles had oversized tires and growling engines. After the jeeps pulled to a stop beside the luggage compartment, the Indigenous Australian drivers climbed down. One was a young man, the other a young woman, both in their early twenties, dark-skinned and long-limbed. The woman had white ribbons tied in her innovative hairdo.

Vincent charged over and greeted them with enthusiastic hugs. He was half a head shorter than the woman and a full head shorter than the man. Kendra and Seth drifted over for a closer look. Trask approached the drivers and shook hands with them.

“I’m Camira,” the woman said to everyone, “and this is my brother Berrigan. Don’t pay any attention to him. His head is full of pudding.”

“At least I’m not a know-it-all with a poisonous tongue,” Berrigan replied with an easy smile, one hand resting on the large knife strapped to his waist.

“We’re here to escort you to the house,” Camira went on, ignoring her brother. “I suggest the ladies ride with me, or his smell might be the end of you.”

“I recommend the guys ride with me,” Berrigan agreed, “or you’ll arrive at Obsidian Waste with no self-esteem.”

“You two never stop going at each other,” Vincent laughed. “You’re exactly as I left you!”

“And you’re still about the size of a termite,” Camira teased, rising up on her tiptoes.

Kendra noticed that Camira wore colorful sandals decorated with flashy stones. “I like your shoes.”

“These?” Camira asked, holding up a foot. “I made them myself. They say I put the ‘original’ in ‘Aboriginal.’”

“I say we should get on the road instead of chirping about footwear,” Berrigan groaned. “These people are tired.”

“Forgive my brother,” Camira apologized. “We don’t normally let him out of his cage when guests are present.”

Working together, it did not take long to transfer the luggage to the jeeps. True to the drivers’ suggestions, Trask, Tanu, Seth, and Vincent piled in with Berrigan, while Kendra, Elise, and Mara rode with Camira. Aaron stayed behind to perform maintenance on the jet.

Camira hit the gas hard, and her jeep roared onto the road first. Glancing back, Kendra saw the guys choking on their dust. Open-topped vehicles were not made for caravanning along dusty trails!

The jeep rocked and jounced as Camira sped along the imperfect road. She swerved to dodge the worst rocks and ruts, heedless of the huge plumes of dust kicked up by her wild maneuvers. The other jeep fell back, leaving room for some of the dust to dissipate before they passed through it.

Despite the bouncy ride, Kendra studied the arid landscape as best she could. The scraggly shrubs and barren rocks looked no more hospitable than the terrain surrounding the Lost Mesa preserve in Arizona. She supposed the people who had hidden these sanctuaries would have kept an eye out for unfriendly environments that might deter visitors.

Up ahead, the row of piled rocks came into view. Kendra did not mention the rocks or the shimmer in the air, because she knew that an ordinary person would not have been able to focus on them.

“Are you sure we’re going the right way?” Elise shouted over the road noise.

“You’re just feeling the effects of the distracter spell that shields the preserve,” Camira answered. “I feel it too. We’re on the right road. As long

as I focus on staying on the road, we'll be fine. The sensation will pass once we're beyond the barrier."

Kendra felt no such effects, but she knew better than to reveal her immunity to a stranger. Sure enough, once they passed the row of rock piles, everyone in the jeep relaxed.

Beyond the rocks, the terrain became more welcoming. Wildflowers brightened the ground, the shrubs looked more robust, and trees came into view. Kendra saw a few mothlike fairies flitting around on speckled gray wings. Near a muddy water hole, she spotted a pair of animals that looked like large, striped greyhounds with long tails. "What are those?" Kendra asked, pointing.

"Thylacines," Camira responded. "Tasmanian tigers. We have many of them here. They're extinct elsewhere. Some have the power of speech. Look up that slope, by those bushes."

Kendra followed Camira's gaze and saw a hairy humanoid figure. As Elise shaded her eyes, squinting up-slope, the creature withdrew from sight.

"What was that?" Elise exclaimed.

"A Yowie," Camira said. "Kind of like a Sasquatch. They're timid, but curious. Elusive creatures. You often glimpse them, but they'll flee if you show too much interest."

"It seemed sad," Mara observed.

"Their songs are mostly forlorn," Camira agreed.

As the jeep neared the top of a gradual rise, the main house of Obsidian Waste came into view off to the left. Occupying high ground, the wooden house had numerous steep gables and a generous porch. An enormous barn was visible behind the house, along with a wide stable connected to a corral.

Ahead and off to the right, the river Kendra had noticed from the plane could now be seen, and behind it loomed the geometric form of the giant obsidian block.

"I don't recall a river in the area on the maps I studied," Elise noted.

"The Rainbow River runs mostly underground," Camira replied. "But it surfaces here at Obsidian Waste, a gift from the Rainbow Serpent."

"Rainbow Serpent?" Kendra asked.

“One of our most revered benefactors,” Camira explained. “An entity of tremendous creative power.”

The engine revved, and the jeep raced across the distance to the house before sliding to a stop. The jeep with the boys had almost caught up, and it swung in to park beside them. Kendra jumped down to the ground.

“Seth says he’s hearing voices,” Trask said.

“Like dead voices?” Kendra asked. With help from the demon Graulas, Seth had become a shadow charmer, which, among other things, enabled him to hear the minds of the undead.

“Exactly,” Seth said, brow furrowed. “It’s weird. They’re not talking to me, not directly, but I can hear them murmuring, thirsting. At first the voices were distant. Now they seem to be all around us.”

“Do you have zombies buried around here?” Trask asked Camira.

She met his gaze with wide eyes. Her mouth worked for a moment without speaking. “I don’t know much about what’s buried here. I don’t like to speak of the cursed ones.”

“We don’t usually discuss such things,” Berrigan agreed.

The main door to the house opened and a woman emerged. Her honey-blond hair was tied back in a ponytail and she wore a khaki shirt with matching shorts. Her tan skin was lightly burnt, and although she had to be nearly fifty, she was very fit and walked with a spring in her step.

“Laura,” Vincent called.

“Hello, Vincent, Trask. Welcome back to Obsidian Waste. Greetings to the rest of you as well.” She joined them beside the jeeps, hands on her hips. “I trust you’re all travel weary and ready for a rest.”

Trask gestured at Seth. “Seth says he hears the undead all around us.”

Nodding, Laura shot a brief glance at Camira. “At least one of us has some intuition,” she muttered.

“Excuse me?” Trask said.

Camira scowled.

In a quick motion, Laura yanked Berrigan’s knife from its sheath and plunged it into Camira. “It’s a trap,” Laura warned. “They’re waiting for us in the house. Subdue Berrigan. Don’t kill him.”

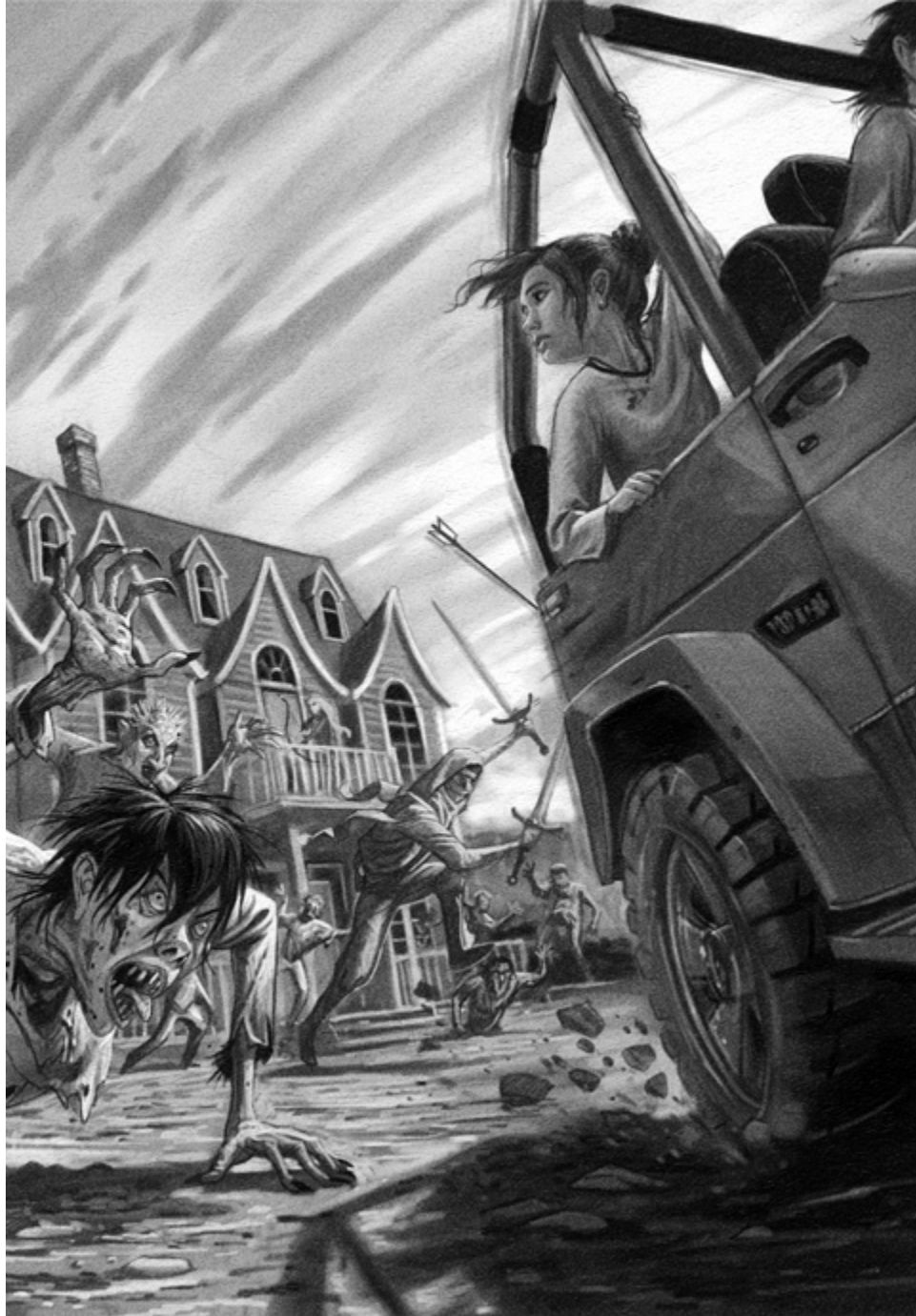
As Berrigan tried to dodge away, Trask seized the young man, whirled him around, and slammed him against the side of a jeep, levering one arm

into a painful hold behind his back. Laura withdrew her blade, and Camira crumpled to the ground.

“Into the jeeps,” Laura commanded, retrieving the keys from Camira. “Make for the Dreamstone. Don’t harm Berrigan—he’s under the control of a narcoblix.”

Trask took Berrigan’s keys, then passed the gangly young man to Tanu, who dragged him into the jeep in a head-lock. Trask and Laura started the engines while the others scrambled back into the vehicles. Kendra boosted herself over the side without opening the door, ending up in Laura’s jeep with Seth, Mara, and Vincent.

As the tires spun, spraying grit and dust, an arrow thudded into the side of the jeep, causing Kendra to look back at the house. Zombies were crashing through the windows and flooding from the door. They moved jerkily, some limping, a few on all fours. In the midst of them she recognized a tall Asian man with long, grim features: Mr. Lich.



A second arrow streaked down, lodging in a suitcase beside Vincent. Scanning the house again, Kendra saw the archer on the balcony, a striking woman with elegantly styled blonde hair. Wearing a knowing smirk, Torina, her former captor, locked eyes with Kendra for a moment before ducking into a window to avoid crossbow bolts fired by Elise and Mara.

Through the front door came a figure clad entirely in gray, his face wrapped in fabric. He dashed toward the jeeps with astonishing speed, easily outrunning the zombies, a sword gripped in each hand.

“The Gray Assassin?” Vincent exclaimed. “Who *isn’t* here to kill us? They don’t want us kind of dead, they want us extremely dead!”

Dozens of zombies came out of hiding around the yard as the jeeps accelerated away from the house. Some had been crouched in holes or trenches, others beneath bushes, one in a barrel full of water. The shambling corpses approached from all directions, their hideous bodies in various states of decomposition. Trask and Laura gunned the engines and swerved to plow directly into the zombies who were attempting to block their escape. Kendra closed her eyes as grotesque bodies went flying.

A stocky zombie with curly orange hair lunged at Laura’s jeep, catching hold of the side briefly until Vincent hacked off the freckled hand with a machete. Seth snatched up the severed, bloodless hand and chucked it out the back.

And then the zombies and the house were receding behind them. The Gray Assassin continued after them, but, quick as he was, he was no match for the jeeps once they got moving. Laura took the lead, with Trask close behind, as they raced toward the distant obsidian monolith.

Chapter 3



Dreamstone

Seth wished he had kept the zombie hand. What a perfect souvenir from his first official mission as a Knight of the Dawn! Instead he had thrown it out of the jeep almost reflexively. Hearing all of those zombie voices must have temporarily scrambled his reason.

The voices had been creepy. Hundreds of whispery, yearning zombies, eager to strike but held in restraint by a will stronger than their drive to feed. It had sounded like the zombies were all around them, but he had seen nothing. Until the monstrosities finally lurched out of hiding, Seth had worried that he might be losing it.

Mr. Lich must have been controlling them, instructing the zombies to lay low until the opportune moment. The tall Asian was a viviblix, capable of raising and controlling the dead, and also served as right-hand man to the Sphinx. If Laura hadn't helped them make a speedy escape, they would have all been zombie food.

As the jeep zoomed across a bridge spanning the Rainbow River, Seth continued to mourn for the lost hand. He could have hidden it beneath Kendra's covers. He could have tied a string around it and left it dangling from a showerhead. He could have displayed it proudly on a shelf in his

room. He quietly vowed to keep all of these possibilities in mind if a severed zombie hand ever fell into his lap again.

Enormous trees lined the far side of the river, reaching hundreds of feet into the air. “Those trees are huge!” Seth exclaimed.

“Those are karri,” Laura answered loudly. “A species of eucalyptus, one of the tallest types of tree in the world.”

“What happened back there?” Vincent asked.

“Camira betrayed us,” Laura said bitterly. “Last night she admitted several members of the Society to the preserve, along with dozens of zombies brought by that viviblix.”

“You said Berrigan is under the control of a narcoblix?” Kendra asked. “Do you know which narcoblix?”

“He’s back at the house,” Laura said. “His name is Wayne.”

Kendra looked over at Seth, relief in her eyes. He had been concerned about the same thing, wondering if Vanessa might have been helping their enemies.

They hit a spine-jarring bump, but Laura did not slow down. Looking behind them, Seth could detect no pursuers.

As they came out from under the towering karri trees, the obsidian monolith loomed back into view. The scale was amazing—the geological marvel looked like a black mountain that had been carved into a glossy brick.

“It shines like a rainbow,” Kendra said.

“I don’t see much color,” Seth disagreed.

“The stone is black,” Kendra said, “but the light reflecting off of it is very colorful.”

“Her eyes may perceive something ours can’t,” Laura said thoughtfully. “We call it the Dreamstone. It is laced with deep magic.”

Seth squinted at the obsidian monolith. It definitely had a bright sheen, but the gleam was white, not colorful. Why would Kendra see colors? Was the Dreamstone full of fairy magic or something? They drove toward the imposing block in silence.

Engine roaring, Laura finally closed in on the Dreamstone, piloting the jeep around to the far side. The monolith stood hundreds of yards tall, hundreds of yards wide, and the length exceeded the width by double. Seth

marveled at the polished smoothness of the stone and the sharp perfection of the corners. They finally skidded to a halt near the only imperfection Seth had noticed on the unblemished surface: a bowl-shaped recess about the size of half a volleyball.

Trask pulled up alongside them. Seth watched as Tanu wrestled Berrigan from the jeep and pinned the young man to the ground. Trask trotted over to Laura. "What happened?"

"We were betrayed last night by Camira," Laura said. "Members of the Society surprised us and captured the house. They thought the threat of harming their hostages was enough to convince me to lead you into their trap."

"There are no more hostages," Berrigan laughed. "Not after that little stunt! Your nephew is dead. So are your sister and her husband. Same with Corbin and Sam and Lois."

Laura's face went rigid. Her lip twitched. "You would have killed them either way. At least I managed to save some lives."

"You're still all dead," Berrigan assured her. "You're just prolonging your demise."

"Get out of him, Wayne," Laura snapped.

"I'm enjoying the ride," Berrigan replied. "How did it feel to kill your prize pupil?"

Laura glared. "I never would have suspected Camira."

"You heard the lady," Tanu said, laying his thick forearm across the back of Berrigan's neck. "Get out."

"You need to lay off the Twinkies," Berrigan gasped, his voice strangled.

"I can make things very uncomfortable for you," Tanu promised.

"You're not hurting *my* body," Berrigan panted. "Do what you want to Berrigan."

"Hold him, Trask," Tanu said.

Trask switched positions with the Samoan. Tanu withdrew a needle and a small bottle from his satchel.

"You going to sew me to death?" Berrigan chuckled.

Tanu dipped the needle into the bottle. "I can cause you plenty of pain without harming your host." Tanu touched the needle to Berrigan's neck.

A full-throated scream issued immediately from Berrigan. His eyes bulged and spittle ran from his lips.

“What are you doing?” Laura asked in distress.

Tanu removed the needle and Berrigan sagged into unconsciousness. “The potion sends a message of extreme pain to the brain,” Tanu explained. “It does no actual damage, just talks to the nerves.” He pricked the needle against Berrigan’s neck again. “The narcoblix truly has withdrawn, or he would be writhing.” Tanu rummaged in his bag and pulled out another small bottle. Unstopping it, he wafted it under Berrigan’s nostrils.

The young man convulsed and his eyes opened. He struggled against Trask, his eyes on Tanu. “Who are you?”

“They’re friends, Berrigan,” Laura soothed, crouching into view. “Be still.”

“What happened?” he asked, somewhat calmer.

Laura caressed his forehead. “That narcoblix drugged you and stole your body. This is the team we’ve been awaiting. Answer me a question or two, to make sure you’re in possession of yourself. What is your Aunt Jannali’s favorite song?”

““Moon River.””

“As a child, what did you like in your mashed potatoes?”

“Little cubes of Spam.”

“What is the farthest your Uncle Dural has thrown a spear?”

“I don’t have an Uncle Dural.”

“Welcome back, Berrigan. Ready to help?”

He nodded, and Tanu helped him sit up. Closing his eyes, Berrigan rubbed his temples. “My head is pounding.” He opened his eyes. “What about Camira?”

“She’s dead,” Laura said flatly.

Berrigan gave a single quick nod, tears welling into his eyes. “Serves her right,” he managed. His face twisted into a pained expression. “Serves her right. I can’t believe, I can’t believe she would—” He broke down into sobs.

“Grieving will have to come later,” Laura said, rising. “Our foes will be on us soon.” She regarded Trask somberly. “Your best hope is to reach the Translocator and teleport out of here. You have the key?”

“Certainly,” Trask said. “What are the chances of us taking the fight to our enemies before attempting to access the vault?”

Laura shook her head. “Very poor. The viviblix has perhaps seventy zombies under his control. Some he brought, some were acquired here. They have the Gray Assassin, a narcoblix, a viviblix, a lectoblix, a psychic, a pair of lycanthropes, and, worst of all, a wizard called Mirav.”

“I know that name,” Trask said grimly. “He’s an old one.”

“The sun is our best ally against him,” Laura said. “He cannot come out during the day. Direct sunlight would kill him. Once daybreak arrived, he was hiding in the basement.”

“Agad told me that all wizards used to be dragons,” Kendra interjected.

“Mirav is a real wizard,” Trask said, “so yes, he was once a dragon. He came out of India. He is truly evil, and a leader among the Society. His presence means the Society is putting everything they have into this mission.”

“We won’t be able to stand against a wizard and a zombie army,” Tanu said.

“Agreed,” Laura said. “Which is why you must hurry to the Translocator.”

“You won’t be joining us?” Trask wondered.

Laura shook her head. “I’ll muster what help I can and try to slow them. I’m not out of allies yet. I’m confident I can take out the bridge.”

“I’ll help you,” Berrigan offered fervently.

“No,” Laura said. “You could contribute more by helping the others reach the artifact. I’ll achieve the same ends with or without you.”

Trask scowled. “After you take action to stall our pursuers, what are the chances you might make it to the airstrip? Our pilot could fly you out of here.”

“None,” Laura said. “I was caretaker here, and I failed in my charge. I’ll do all I can to slow our enemies so you can retrieve the artifact. We all know that to lose the Translocator would be disaster. I will not abandon Obsidian Waste. I will hear no arguments. Tell your pilot to leave while he can. Quick, on your way, we haven’t a moment to spare.”

Trask began pulling gear from the back of a jeep. “You heard the lady—grab your equipment and let’s get moving. Elise, call Aaron, tell him to

take off immediately. We'll get out using the Translocator or not at all."

Elise produced a satellite phone and started dialing. Seth grabbed his suitcase, set it on the ground, and opened it up. He had not traveled with his weapons—they had been sent through other channels to Perth, where they had been loaded on the private jet. He found his sword and strapped it on, adding a knife as well. Looking over at Kendra, he saw her putting on the adamant mail he had acquired from the satyrs. Light and strong, the shirt had saved her life at Wyrmoost. He grabbed his emergency kit, which was now a leather satchel instead of a cereal box but still contained a variety of items that might come in handy. He still had the onyx tower and the agate leviathan that Thronis had given him. He made sure he also had the small metal flask from Tanu that could change him into a gaseous state. He was only to use the potion in a dire emergency, because Tanu had doubted whether the Translocator would work on him if he were gaseous. Kendra possessed a matching flask.

Glancing to one side, Seth saw Berrigan sitting cross-legged on the ground, looking shell-shocked. "You better get your stuff," Seth told him.

The young man stared at Seth. "My best stuff is back at the house. Besides, you think swords are going to help you in there?"

"Sure, if we find something to stab."

Berrigan grinned vaguely. "Who knows what we'll face inside the Dreamstone? Honestly, I'd prefer a clean death out here under the sky. In there, we won't know if we're asleep or awake. Most likely, some twisted combination of both."

"We have to go in, so we might as well be prepared."

"Prepare your mind, not your sword," Berrigan advised. "You're young."

Seth shrugged. "You're skinny."

Berrigan flashed a real grin. "I like your attitude."

"Sorry about your sister," Seth offered. "She seemed pretty funny."

"She was very funny. I can't believe she was a traitor. Could they have compromised her while she was away at her university?"

"Maybe it was mind control. Or maybe she was a stingbulb or something."

Berrigan batted at the flies circling his head. “Camira was amazing. Flighty, headstrong, annoying, but amazing. I’d prefer an alternate explanation to betrayal.”

“I once thought my sister, Kendra, was dead. I also once thought she was being disloyal. Turned out it was all trickery by the Society.”

Berrigan reached out a hand. Seth took it and hauled the young man to his feet. Berrigan squinted up at the Dreamstone. “I’ve always wondered what was inside. I guess I should at least bring a knife.”

Trask now held an egg-shaped iron object roughly the size of a pineapple, with irregular protuberances jutting from the top half. His stance suggested it was quite heavy. Laura and Vincent were inspecting the strange key with interest.

“You’d better hurry,” Laura prompted.

Trask shuffled over to the recess in the wall of the Dreamstone, heaved the top half of the egg into the indentation, and fiddled with it until the key clicked home. Trask rotated the iron egg to the right. After he had twisted it halfway around, the top half of the key detached. Still holding the bottom half of the key, Trask discovered a smaller egg-shaped key nested inside.

“It’s like a matryoshka doll,” Elise murmured.

“A what?” Seth asked.

“Those wooden Russian dolls that fit inside of each other,” she clarified.

“Oh, right.”

“Where’s the door?” Kendra asked. The key had turned, but no opening had appeared.

“I’m not sure,” Laura murmured.

Trask removed the smaller key from the bottom half of the larger one. “Is there a second keyhole? This one has teeth on top just like the first.”

Berrigan shook his head. “Everything else is smooth.”

“Or was smooth,” Tanu mused. “Opening the first lock may have created a second keyhole elsewhere.”

Mara was scanning the broad expanse of the wall. “I see nothing from here. We should examine the whole Dreamstone.”

Laura rushed back to the jeep she had driven. “I’ll go left, you guys go right. Honk if you find something.”

Trask let the empty iron shell drop to the ground, carrying the smaller egg back to the other jeep without too much effort. Everyone piled back into the jeeps they had ridden in previously.

Seth scrutinized the flawless wall for irregularities as the jeep accelerated. He scanned high and low, although if the second keyhole were up high, he had no idea how they would reach it. There were no handholds for climbing, no nearby trees, and no ladders handy.

They raced around a corner and along the side of the Dreamstone, bouncing over the uneven terrain. None of them spotted indentations, and they heard no signals from the other jeep.

Rounding the next corner to the far side of the stone, Mara pointed ahead to a large opening. The other jeep came around the far corner, and they met at the entrance to a tunnel.

“Big keyhole,” Seth said.

“The first key did open a door,” Berrigan said. “Just on the far side of the Dreamstone.”

“The next keyhole will be somewhere inside,” Trask replied. “Make ready.”

Seth and the others climbed down from the jeeps and checked their gear. Kendra came up beside Seth. “Having fun yet?” she asked.

“A little. I’m excited for the zombies to catch up. The best part so far was running them over.”

Kendra shook her head. “We should check if Tanu has a potion for curing stupidity.”

“I’m hoping to get another zombie hand. I can’t believe I threw one away!”

Kendra rolled her eyes.

Seth gazed at the shadowy entryway. It was barely large enough for a person to enter walking upright. The floor of the narrow tunnel sloped upward out of sight. He might be immune to magical fear, but natural emotions still affected him like anyone. Sick with worry and anticipation, he suppressed a shudder and composed his expression. There was no way he would let his sister see his anxiety.

Trask strode to the mouth of the tunnel and faced the others. “This is not how we planned to enter the vault. We’re rushed, we’re tired, and we’re

under duress. On the bright side, we have less time to stress out about it. We can do this. We have a perfect team assembled, and we're well equipped. I'm ready. Let's go."

Laura stood up in her jeep. "I'm leaving. Good luck."

"Laura," Trask called. "Don't throw your life away. You know this preserve. Do what you can to stall our enemies, then get away."

"I'm in no hurry to die." She swung the jeep around and started speeding away.

Tanu approached Trask. "If you're taking the lead, let me carry the key."

Trask handed the iron egg to Tanu, unslung his enormous crossbow, and led the way into the tunnel. Advancing in single file, Vincent followed, then Mara, Berrigan, Tanu, Kendra, Seth, and finally Elise.

Just like the exterior of the Dreamstone, the ceiling, walls, and floor of the passage were smooth obsidian. Seth kept glancing over his shoulder until the entrance was out of sight. Elise watched their rear, keeping her compact crossbow ready.

"Where is the light coming from?" Mara asked.

Only after the question did Seth notice that nobody had flashlights out yet, but the corridor was lit by an even glow. He could see no source for the light.

"This is an unnatural place," Berrigan said.

The corridor began to curve in different directions. First left, then right, then down, then up and to the left, then down and right, and so on. Before long, Seth lost all sense of what direction they were moving in relation to where they had entered. The corridor never branched. The only choice was forward or back.

Seth remained tense, caressing the hilt of his sword as he walked. After several minutes, Trask said, "What have we here?"

"You have to be kidding me!" Vincent added.

Seth rose to his tiptoes and leaned from side to side trying to see what they were talking about, but the corridor was too narrow and there were too many bodies between him and Trask. As he kept moving forward, the tunnel widened, allowing the others to spread out. Soon Seth had a view of the dead end.

After widening, the corridor ended with a rounded wall. Mara, Vincent, and Trask were searching the end of the corridor and the surrounding walls. Tanu clicked on a flashlight, but the added shine revealed nothing new.

“We must have missed a turnoff,” Elise suggested, looking back.

“The hall ran unbroken from the entrance,” Mara responded with calm certainty. “There were no gaps in the ceiling, walls, or floor, no alternate routes whatsoever.”

“I didn’t see another way to go,” Trask added. “There must be a secret passage.”

“Did anyone notice a keyhole?” Kendra asked.

“I saw nothing,” Mara replied. She sighed. “It may have been disguised.”

“Use your hands and your eyes,” Vincent said. “Hunt for any indentation or recess.”

They scoured the area at the end of the passage. The ceiling was low enough that most of them could reach it. They searched diligently, but found nothing.

“The keyhole could have been anywhere along the passage,” Trask finally said.

“There is nothing here,” Vincent confirmed.

“That was a long corridor,” Elise pointed out.

“Then we’d better get going,” Trask said. “Let’s not forget who is in pursuit. Keep your eyes open.”

Trask took the lead again, and the others followed in the same order as before. Seth slid his hands along the glossy wall. How might the creators of this vault have camouflaged the next keyhole? Could it be covered by a hatch? Or shielded by a distracter spell?

“Kendra?” he said.

“Yes?”

“If the keyhole is protected by some kind of distracter spell, you might be the only one who can see it.”

“That’s a good point, Seth,” Trask called back. “Keep a sharp lookout, Kendra.”

“I’m trying.”

They regressed slowly along the corridor for several minutes without finding anything suspicious. “This feels wrong,” Mara murmured.

“What do you mean?” Trask asked.

“This doesn’t feel like the reverse of the turns we took to get here.”

“The tunnel has no forks,” Trask reminded her.

“That’s what I don’t like,” Mara said.

“It just feels different because we’re going more carefully,” Vincent said.

“I disagree,” Mara replied.

Seth caressed the walls, searching for cracks, seams, anything unusual. He shuffled his feet to sort of feel the ground, even though Vincent was on his hands and knees examining the floor of the corridor much more carefully. There had to be something all of them were missing.

“Oh, no,” Trask said.

“What?” Elise asked from the back.

“Impossible,” Vincent complained.

“Another dead end,” Trask answered.

Seth felt the hair rise on the back of his neck.

“What do you mean, another dead end?” Elise challenged.

“This is an unnatural place,” Berrigan repeated, his voice unsteady.

“We’ve left the real world behind. We should not be surprised. Is this any stranger than light coming from nowhere?”

Seth kept advancing until he had the same view as the others. Once again the corridor widened and then came to an abrupt, rounded conclusion.

While Vincent and Mara scoured the walls and ceiling, Trask stood surveying the area with one hand on his waist, the other holding his huge crossbow.

“Let’s not waste time here,” Trask said. “Stay vigilant, but let’s pick up the pace. Mara, let me know if the way feels different again.”

They proceeded with greater haste. Within a minute or two, Mara said that the way felt different. A few minutes after that, they arrived at another dead end, almost identical to the first two.

“I’m starting to have my first case of claustrophobia,” Vincent declared, his face shiny with perspiration.

“Great place to start,” Trask said.

“I think we’re making progress,” Mara said, sniffing the air. “Just not the way we’re used to.”

“Then on we go,” Trask urged.

They came to several more dead ends. An occasional steep slope or odd sequence of turns made it clear to Seth that the passageway kept changing, even though they seemed to be traveling back and forth between the same endpoints.

At last, Trask let out a relieved laugh. “Look here, it seems we have found someplace else.”

The passage widened again, allowing them to spread out once more, only this time it opened into an expansive chamber. They paused in the entryway, gazing at the huge room. As in the tunnels, a steady glow illuminated the room, still lacking an apparent source. The wall across from them was curved, the floor semicircular, the ceiling half a dome.

Directly across from them a large statue stood in an alcove, flanked by a pair of granite basins. Carved from a greenish stone, the figure had a long face with exaggerated features and wielded a flat, curved club. A smooth expanse of greenish clay dominated the near portion of the floor, bordered by blue and black patterned tiles. The rest of the floor was polished obsidian, unblemished except for a circular indentation near the center.

“No doors,” Vincent said, “but the keyhole in the floor looks to be the right size.”

Seth walked forward and used his finger to mark the greenish clay. “What’s with all the clay?” Seth wondered. “It’s wet.”

“Could it be for drawing?” Kendra guessed. “A huge, prehistoric doodle pad? Like for mapmaking?”

Vincent shrugged. “Who knows? I don’t see any instruments for drawing.”

“What do you suppose would happen if we backtracked from here?” Trask asked.

“More dead ends,” Mara said. “I don’t believe this place allows us to go back. Can’t you feel it? Each dead end cuts off our retreat, luring us in deeper, as if we’re being swallowed.”

“This isn’t helping my claustrophobia,” Vincent mumbled.

“We could double back to check,” Mara continued, “but I’m not sure we’ll get another chance to reach this room. The keyhole must be the way to proceed.”

Tanu shouldered forward. “The rest of you wait here.” He walked around the bordered field of clay to the recess in the floor. Squatting, he studied the iron key, considered the round indentation, inserted the key, adjusted it, and turned it halfway around.

A faint tremor made the floor vibrate. A pair of spouts thrust from the wall near the statue and began pouring water into the basins. The statue raised the curved club high, as if preparing to strike. Tanu discarded an empty shell of the key and tucked a smaller iron egg under one arm.

Everyone watched the statue, waiting to see if it would attack, but it had stopped moving after raising the club. Seth glanced down at the clay on the floor and saw words inscribed in unfamiliar characters. “Look at the clay!” Seth shouted. “Writing!”

“Create a champion,” Kendra read. “Time is short.”

“You read Sanskrit?” Vincent asked. “Or Chinese?”

“I see English,” Kendra said. “And some scribbles, too.”

“Must be a fairy language,” Trask said. “The message repeats in several languages. What does it mean?”

“The basins must be clepsydras,” Elise said. “Water clocks.”

“The clay,” Vincent said. “It has to be the clay.” He ran forward and plunged his hands into the moist clay up to his wrists, then started digging a hole, disturbing some of the writing in the process. “This is a pool of clay. A pit. I think we are to build a champion out of clay to contend with the statue.”

“I was a failure in art class,” Trask mumbled. “Who knows how to work with clay?”

“I have some experience,” Elise said.

“As do I,” Mara offered.

“Mara and Elise will shape our warrior,” Trask directed, voice tight. “The rest of us start digging out clay for them to work with and follow their instructions. How long do we have?”

Mara dashed across the room to look into the basins. Vincent was already vigorously scooping clay out of the pool and piling it nearby.

Berrigan jumped onto the clay, sinking to his ankles. Dropping to his knees, he began heaving out armfuls. Mara considered the basins for a moment. "Ten minutes," she called. "Maybe eleven. Assuming the water keeps pouring in at the same rate."

Setting the iron egg aside, Tanu entered the clay pit, brown feet sinking deep. Seth waded into the clay along with Trask and Kendra. The top layer felt loose and slimy, but the clay got more solid about six inches down. He grabbed slurping handfuls of the mushy top layer and began hurling it toward Berrigan's rapidly growing pile.

"What do we want him to look like?" Elise asked.

Nobody answered for a moment.

"Make him like Hugo," Seth proposed. "Not pretty, just big."

"I like that," Trask agreed. "Build him sturdy. Thick arms and legs. Bigger than the other statue if we can."

"We'll have to make him lying down," Mara said. "Otherwise he won't hold together."

Berrigan had cleared most of the squishy clay from his area and was now using his knife to carve out large slabs of the firmer material. As they delved downward, it soon became apparent that the clay went quite deep. Three piles grew quickly at the edges of the clay pit. Elise and Mara stole from the largest pile to work on feet and legs. Tanu started running heavy loads of clay from the other piles to the largest one.

After several minutes, arms gray-green with clay past his elbows, Vincent ran to check the basins. "Over half full," he announced. "I better help mold the figure. Tanu, help me transfer more clay to our champion. Keep fresh clay coming!"

"You heard the man," Trask growled, using a sword to carve out another huge greenish slab.

Seth noticed that nobody dug out clay faster than Berrigan. The young man moved in tireless silence, his thin limbs carrying larger loads than Seth would have pictured. Muscles burning, Seth continued to harvest clay at his best pace, reminding himself that each dense wad would add mass to their defender. He was not as effective as Berrigan or Trask, but he was moving more material than Kendra.

Elise and Mara were now working on the arms, Tanu was adding bulk to the torso, and Vincent appeared to be fashioning a large hammer. The

clay warrior might actually take shape!

“Check the basins, Kendra,” Vincent called.

She ran across the floor. “Getting really full. Like seven-eighths. We only have a couple of minutes left.”

“Berrigan can keep digging out clay,” Vincent cried, placing the handle of the huge war hammer onto the crude right palm. “Everyone else should work on the warrior. We have lots of clay piled, get it over here! We’ll want a shield for the left arm, and thicken up those legs. Make the feet bigger for stability. Hurry!”

The clay pit had already been excavated to waist deep in most places. Seth boosted himself out and started transferring clay from the piles to beef up the legs. As he packed new clay against the existing clay, Seth wondered how long their warrior could survive. After all, the other statue was solid stone. Wouldn’t its club slash apart the clay champion without any trouble? What use was a clay hammer against stone?

Kendra remained beside the basins. The statue loomed over her, almost twice her height. “Almost full,” she called. “Maybe fifteen more seconds.”

“Get away from the statue,” Trask ordered.

“Don’t stress about the head!” Vincent directed fervently. “I like him without much neck. More sturdy. Add to the shoulders! Quickly!”

Kendra raced back across the floor from the basins. Seth added another small slab of clay to the left foot. Mara crouched over the face, hollowing out eyes and shaping a nose.

As Seth heard the water lapping over the sides of the basins, a sudden wind swept through the room with surprising force. Staggering, Seth found himself leaning against the gale to keep his balance.

The wind died as quickly as it had risen, and the statue on the other side of the room stepped out of the alcove. The bulky figure on the ground sat up, no longer composed of clay. Like the other statue, the champion they had sculpted was now made of solid, greenish stone.

“He should have a name,” Mara said.

“Goliath,” Elise suggested.

“I like it,” Vincent said.

“What should we call the other statue?” Tanu asked.

“Nancy,” Seth said quickly.

Vincent and Trask chuckled.

Goliath tottered to his feet. He had a squarish head with no neck. One bulky leg was a bit shorter than the other. The toes on the right foot were too long and shaped like carrots. Now that Goliath was standing, his arms looked a little stubby, but they were thick, with a rectangular shield attached to one forearm and a heavy stone hammer in the opposite hand. The clay had not been properly smoothed, so irregular bulges and slabs covered his surface, contributing to his rough-hewn look. Goliath was not quite as tall as Nancy, who had a long jaw and a high forehead, but his shoulders were just as high and somewhat broader.

While the statues approached each other, Trask herded everyone back toward the entryway. Tanu scooped up the egg-shaped key. Walking backwards, Seth stared as the opponents seemed to measure one another, moving cautiously, weapons held ready. As an art project, Goliath was a failure. He looked slapped together by some careless kid. But as a combatant designed for smashing enemy statues, he had potential.

“Can we help Goliath?” Seth asked.

“I don’t think arrows and swords will do much,” Trask replied. “If I had brought a sledgehammer, it might be a different story.”

“Couldn’t we provide distractions?” Elise asked.

Trask shrugged. “We might end up as the wrong kind of distractions. The guardian statue could use our welfare to bait Goliath and force mistakes. Let’s see how our champion fares. His bulk might give him a shot.”

As the statues circled each other, it became clear that Nancy was more balanced and therefore moved more fluidly. The enemy statue tested Goliath by switching direction several times and making little feints. Given his somewhat lopsided construction, Goliath did not change direction very smoothly. The first strike by Nancy came as Goliath teetered momentarily on his short leg. The enemy statue darted forward, swinging the curved, flat club in a vicious arc. Connecting fiercely with Goliath’s head, the top two-thirds of the club snapped off. In retaliation, Goliath swung his shield, which landed with a tremendous crack of stone against stone. Nancy stumbled backward with Goliath in pursuit.

Seth cupped his hands around his mouth and cheered.

Without looking over, the enemy statue flung the remaining length of his club toward Seth. Mara dove, tackling Seth to the floor as the broken club hissed over them before clattering down the passage.

From the cool, hard floor, Seth watched as Goliath swung his hammer several times, but Nancy managed to evade the blows with nimble footwork. As Goliath kept up the pursuit, hammer swinging aggressively, the enemy statue started looking for openings, sneaking in punches or kicks between strokes. The counterattacks proved ineffective, connecting weakly before Nancy had to dodge the next major blow.

Goliath relentlessly pressed his advantage, pursuing the enemy statue around the room, always maneuvering himself to keep his opponent away from the entrance to the passage. Seth watched with his hands balled into fists, his anxiety rising as Nancy proved to be impossible for Goliath to hit. What would they do if Goliath lost? There was no chance they could stand against the huge and agile statue. It would smash them into hamburger.

As Goliath swung high, rather than dodge, Nancy accepted the blow. The hammer connected, shattering the top half of Nancy's head in a gravelly spray. But even as the blow landed, the enemy statue delivered a strong, sweeping kick to the ankle of Goliath's short leg, sending Goliath sprawling.

Nancy knelt hard on the wrist of the hand that held the hammer, wrested the weapon free, and then took off Goliath's head with a fearsome blow. The crude, squarish head bounced and rolled across the floor, reminding Seth of dice. Half rising, moving with alarming speed and grace, the enemy statue brought another crushing blow down on Goliath's hip. Goliath grasped for the hammer, but Nancy skipped away.

Headless, with a web of cracks running through his right hip, Goliath arose. The enemy statue circled, the heavy hammer poised menacingly. When Nancy charged, Goliath lunged forward to meet him, shield upraised. The hammer whistled down savagely, bashing through the shield and demolishing Goliath's arm below the elbow. Goliath used his good arm to punch the enemy statue in the chest. Nancy fell backward, but rose to his knees as Goliath rushed forward. The stone hammer connected with Goliath's right hip once more, snapping the head off the weapon and breaking off Goliath's right leg. The enemy statue heaved Goliath away.

"We're dead," Vincent moaned.

“Keyhole,” Kendra said, pointing.

All eyes turned to the alcove on the far side of the room where Nancy had originally stood. Against the back of the alcove was a circular indentation a little smaller than the recess in the floor.

“Bless you,” Trask said to Kendra, setting down his crossbow and snatching the egg-shaped key from Tanu.

“I’m quicker,” Mara said.

“Not holding a forty-pound weight,” Trask replied hastily. Cradling the iron key in one arm like a football, he raced out into the room.

The enemy statue instantly took notice, turning away from Goliath and rushing to intercept Trask. Seth held his breath. As Nancy closed in, Trask cut to the right, forcing the huge statue to change course. Then Trask cut back to the left at the last second, narrowly avoiding the statue’s outstretched hands as it dove at him.

Goliath was now scuttling across the floor like a wounded crab, using his good arm, his shortened arm, and his remaining leg. As the enemy statue recovered from the fruitless dive, Trask dashed for the alcove. Nancy raced to catch up to Trask, but before the statue succeeded, Goliath pounced and wrapped his thick arms around Nancy’s legs. The enemy statue fell hard, then pounded and thrashed in an attempt to get free, but Goliath held firm.

A dozen paces away, Trask reached the alcove and jammed the iron egg into the recess. After fumbling for a moment, he got it locked into place and spun it halfway around.

Instantly, both Nancy and Goliath crumbled to dust. A grainy green cloud plumed out of the clay pit. The floor trembled as a gust of wind swept through the room, seeming to blow the dust out of existence. Trask returned from the alcove carrying a smaller iron egg.

“The clay pit is now a stairway,” Vincent reported, standing at the edge and peering down.

Holding the iron egg in his palm, Trask curled his arm. “And I’d say our key is now under thirty pounds.”

“Having fun yet?” Kendra asked Seth.

“Watching giant statues pound each other into gravel? I can think of nothing more beautiful.”

Chapter 4



Passageways

Kendra rolled her eyes. Only her brother could act upbeat after nearly getting decapitated by a primitive stone club. She supposed it was better than wallowing in pessimism.

As the others gathered near the stairway to continue onward, Kendra paused, surveying the room. The seamless perfection shared by all of the surfaces inside the Dreamstone made the place feel surreal. Nothing in here looked constructed. The thought of winding through more alien corridors made her frown. After the statues and the strange dead ends, who knew what dangers might await? Berrigan was right—the rules of reality did not seem to apply completely here.

Despite her apprehension, as Trask led the way down the stairs, Kendra fell into line between Tanu and Seth. What else could she do? There were enemies in pursuit. Not to mention that they needed the Translocator to rescue Warren and perhaps her parents.

She felt glad that she had noticed the keyhole in the alcove. Up until that moment, she had been feeling like useless baggage. Of course, a big reason she had been invited along was in case the Translocator needed recharging. If the artifact was inoperative, the magic inside of her should

bring it back to life. Still, she hoped she could find ways to help beyond serving as a spare battery.

The stairway narrowed as it descended. After the stairs ended, Kendra and the others once again meandered single file through a snug, snaking corridor until they reached a dead end. Doubling back, they arrived at a short downward stairway that promptly led to another rounded termination. When they reversed direction again, they found a long stairway that curved up and up, spiraling left and right in a disorienting climb until finally the steps ended at a wide, level corridor. As they progressed along the serpentine passage, the air became balmy and humid.

The corridor descended until they reached a cavernous, flooded room. Water simmered within a few inches of the level of the corridor, heat radiating from the burbling surface. Steam hung in the air, and moisture beaded the walls. A simple wooden canoe was secured near the entryway to the room, with two paddles resting inside. A low island in the middle of the partially submerged chamber was the only destination accessible by boat besides the bases of the high, smooth walls.

“How deep is it?” Seth asked, squinting down.

“Can’t tell,” Mara replied. “The water is too bubbly and the surrounding stone too dark. At least fifteen feet. I would guess more, perhaps much more.”

Trask leaned out over the boiling water, inspecting the room. “The next keyhole probably awaits on that island. I don’t see any on the walls or ceiling. We have any canoeing enthusiasts among us?”

“I can handle a canoe,” Vincent said.

“As can I,” Berrigan added.

“Me too,” Mara put in.

“The craft is small,” Trask said. “I wouldn’t trust it to carry more than two people. Vincent and Berrigan were the first to speak.”

“I don’t like all this superheated water,” Tanu said. “We should all take one of these.” He held up a small cylinder of fluid. “The potion is designed to make the user fire resistant. It will offer considerable protection against high temperatures.”

“This makes me feel a little better about the rickety canoe,” Vincent said, accepting a cylinder.

“You’re a miracle worker,” Trask said.

“I try to be prepared,” Tanu replied. “I originally designed these for Wyrmoost.”

Kendra unstopped a cylinder and drank the contents. The clear liquid tasted sugary at first, then spicy hot, then cool and tangy.

After everyone had downed the potion, Vincent accepted the iron egg from Trask. Tanu held the canoe steady as the two men climbed inside and got situated.

“Let’s not capsize,” Vincent recommended.

“Not in the mood for boiled Aborigine?” Berrigan asked.

“I could live with that,” Vincent replied. “It’s the side order of Filipino guy that worries me.”

Tanu gave them a gentle shove away from the entrance. Vincent and Berrigan dipped their paddles into the simmering water. Kendra estimated it was about fifty yards to the damp island. Handling their paddles with careful competence, Vincent and Berrigan guided the canoe swiftly to the destination. Vincent disembarked first, one foot sliding on the shiny black surface. He steadied himself, and then Berrigan climbed out too, remaining at the edge of the island with a brown hand on the canoe.

“Hot out here,” Vincent called. “You might end up with *steamed* Filipino guy.”

“See a keyhole?” Elise asked.

“Sure do, right here at the center of the island.” Vincent stood up straight and turned in a slow circle. “I don’t see any other options. Should I go for it?”

“Time is a critical issue,” Trask shouted back.

Vincent knelt and took out the iron egg. The island was high enough that they could not see the keyhole from the entryway, but they could see Vincent’s posture change as he turned the key. He held up a slightly smaller key to show he had accomplished the task.

The water stopped bubbling, creating a momentary silence. After the brief lull, a strong wind swept through the room. Vincent fell flat to avoid being blown off the island. Berrigan sprang into the canoe as the gust pushed it adrift. The small craft rocked severely, then capsized, dumping him into the water.

Kendra noticed when the sound of the wind changed, becoming fuller and more violent. The volume seemed to increase behind her, as if a gale were whooshing down the corridor. She turned in time to see a frothing wall of water hurtling down the tunnel toward her. Mara called out a warning. Kendra barely had time to close her eyes and tuck her head before a foamy explosion of water hurled her and the others into the searing pool.

The water felt scalding, although Kendra hardly noticed since the force of the flash flood kept her tumbling blindly. Hot water sluiced into her nostrils. As the colossal influx of water pushed Kendra farther from the tunnel, the turbulence diminished. Having lost all sense of direction, Kendra opened her eyes to verify which way was up, then stroked toward the surface, following the bubbles churned up by the flood. The weight of her sword made her progress slow, so, with her lungs beginning to burn, she unbuckled the weapon. When her head finally broke the surface, she coughed out water and gulped air in greedy gasps. Her clothes felt billowy and cumbersome, but she could keep her head above water. At least her shirt of adamant mail didn't exert too much downward pull.

The water seemed cooler than it had at first. Either the new water rushing from the tunnel was lowering the overall temperature of the pool or the potion was compensating, because although the water felt uncomfortably warm, it was endurable and did not seem to be inflicting physical harm.

Already beyond the island, Kendra treaded water, drifting toward the far wall of the room. She saw Seth and Tanu not far from her. Trask, Elise, and Berrigan had righted the canoe and clung to the sides as they swam toward her.

Suddenly Vincent's head shot out of the water, breathing hard. "I lost the key!" he spluttered.

"Where?" Trask demanded urgently.

"Right around here," Vincent said. "Below me. I think Mara dove for it."

"I'm on it," Elise said, disappearing under the water.

"Me too," Berrigan said, vanishing as well.

"Everyone grab the canoe," Trask instructed, towing it toward Kendra. "I'm worried we aren't out of the woods yet."

Kendra reached the canoe a moment before Seth and Tanu. The water level in the room surpassed the top of the entryway. Although the water continued to rise, the influx of water stopped making noise. They drifted in silence.

“Should I dive down?” Tanu asked.

“I saw you could barely stay afloat,” Trask said. “You’re like me—too much gear. Give the others a few more seconds.”

Mara came up first, taking deep, controlled breaths. “Berrigan has it,” she reported. “The key was too heavy. I could barely make upward progress with it.”

Several seconds later, Berrigan and Elise surfaced together. They swam over and heaved the iron key into the canoe.

“I don’t know how she did it,” Berrigan said, nodding at Mara. “When we found her, she was on her way up, but she still had to be forty feet under.”

“The key sank a long way before I caught up,” Mara responded. “I found it sliding down the underwater slope of the island. It was slow going.”

“Butterfingers,” Vincent lamented. “My bad. The flood caught me off guard.”

“It’s hard to swim with it,” Berrigan said. “No harm done.”

“Are we going to drown?” Seth asked, glancing up at the ceiling. The water level continued to rise.

“Good question,” Trask said. “Did any of you notice an exit down there?”

Mara shook her head. “I looked, but didn’t see any exits or keyholes. Of course, I couldn’t see everywhere.”

“Could you see the floor?” Kendra asked.

“Yes. Maybe twenty feet below the lowest point of my dive.”

“Do you feel all right?” Seth asked. “Can’t you get the bends from coming up too fast after a deep dive?”

Elise smirked. “We weren’t that deep. Plus, decompression sickness is less of a threat when free diving. You know, with only the air in your lungs.”

“Meanwhile, the water keeps rising,” Vincent pointed out.

“Let’s hunt for another keyhole,” Trask decided. “Do I have it right that Mara, Elise, and Berrigan are our best swimmers?” There were no objections. “You three explore underwater as best you can. The rest of us will look up. Let’s find an evacuation tunnel or a keyhole.”

Still holding the canoe, Kendra dipped her head under the water and watched as Berrigan, Elise, and Mara swam away and down in different directions. With her eyes below the surface, and the water no longer bubbling, the under-water scene was surprisingly clear and well-lit, although Kendra could not clearly discern whether she could see all the way to the bottom.

“The water isn’t bubbling anymore,” Kendra said after bringing her head up. “It feels cooler.”

“The temperature is dropping,” Tanu remarked. “The potion isn’t stopping you from perceiving the heat. It just helps reduce the damage.”

“This feels like a medium hot tub,” Seth said, eyes upward.

“Won’t matter what temperature it is once it fills to the ceiling,” Vincent muttered.

“The ceiling is irregular,” Trask said. “We’ve got sort of a chimney over by that corner.” He pointed at a square gap in the ceiling. “Hard to say how high the shaft goes, but we should get under it. That will be our last resort.”

Mara popped up near the wall above the submerged entryway. “Water is still flowing in. I checked around the entryway but found no keyhole.” Without awaiting a response, she ducked back under the water.

Kendra scoured the walls and ceiling, searching with increased intensity as the ceiling drew nearer. Berrigan, Elise, and Mara surfaced periodically, reporting no success. The temperature of the water continued to fall until it was barely lukewarm.

“Tiny perforations in the ceiling,” Vincent remarked. “See them?”

“I see them,” Trask confirmed.

“Those teensy holes mean this is a death trap,” Vincent said. “The air escapes through the holes so the room can fill up without forming air pockets.”

“I guess you don’t have any anti-drowning potions,” Seth said.

“Don’t I wish,” Tanu chuckled darkly. “We might try a gaseous potion, but the effects won’t work underwater, and I don’t think those holes are big enough to use as an exit, even as a gas. Your form could get too dispersed, and that would be the end of you. As a last resort, I suppose we can try. You and Kendra each have a gaseous potion, and I have three extras.”

The smooth ceiling was now within reach. Trask called Berrigan, Elise, and Mara over to the canoe the next time they surfaced. All three looked exhausted and waterlogged. They positioned the canoe under the square gap in the ceiling. Kendra stared up. The sheer chimney would accommodate the canoe if they kept it at a diagonal, from one corner to the other. She could see the ceiling at the top of the shaft, a long way up, glossy and smooth. It felt like she was gazing up from the bottom of a well.

As the water level reached the ceiling of the room, the little group drifted up into the shaft, clinging to the canoe. With considerably less volume, the shaft filled much faster than the chamber below. The canoe carried them upward at an alarming rate. The top rapidly drew near.

“I don’t see holes in this ceiling,” Tanu said. “So much for the gaseous potion.”

“I see an offshoot near the top,” Mara declared.

“You’re right,” Kendra agreed. “A little shaft branching off to the side.”

“We’d better flip the canoe,” Trask said. “It will create an air pocket. Tanu, grab the key.”

Once Tanu had snatched the iron egg, Trask flipped the canoe. They all kept hold as the ceiling approached.

“Don’t go under the canoe until you must,” Trask ordered. “We’ll deplete the oxygen soon enough.”

“I’ll explore the side tunnel,” Berrigan said. “Give me the key.” Tanu handed it over. Berrigan scrambled inside as soon as the water level reached high enough, wriggling forward on his belly due to the cramped confines. Water slurped into the little tunnel behind him. An instant later, the side shaft was flooded, and the bottom of the canoe bumped against the ceiling. Kendra raised her chin, her nose brushing the ceiling as she inhaled a final panicked breath before the water filled to the top.

Holding her breath, Kendra stared after Berrigan. He disappeared around a corner in the side shaft. The water felt cool now. Vincent swam

into the overturned canoe. Trask motioned for Kendra to follow.

Her head came up in the enclosed space beside Vincent, who was panting. The air smelled like wet wood. "This is our only air pocket," Vincent complained. "Not a bit outside. There must be holes somewhere, in the corners or something, maybe so small we can't see them." He paused as if an afterthought had occurred to him. "Or maybe the place is simply unnatural." He gave a thin chuckle. "I guess now would be a bad time to mention that drowning has always been my greatest fear."

"It was never a goal of mine," Kendra said, trying to stay brave.

Seth surfaced inside the canoe. The others surfaced as well.

"No sign of Berrigan," Mara said. "I'm going after him. There's a chance this little tunnel leads to a way out."

"Go," Trask agreed.

Mara dove into the side shaft.

Trask looked from Kendra to Seth. "Unless they return reporting a dead end, once the air goes stale, we'll follow."

Vincent had his eyes squinted shut, his lips moving soundlessly. Kendra trembled. There were too many heads inside the little air pocket under the canoe. The air would soon go bad. What would drowning feel like? Would she pass out before she inhaled water? Would inhaling liquid instead of air provide any consolation, any illusion of breathing? She didn't want to know. She tried not to think about it.

"What a way to go," Seth mumbled.

"We're not dead yet," Tanu said.

Kendra ducked under the water and stared into the shaft. Mara was already out of sight. Kendra stayed down, watching hopefully. Mara shot back into view, returning swiftly. The water level began to drop! Kendra screamed with joy, the sound distorted in the water, bubbles rising from her lips. Mara hurried forward. Kendra glimpsed Berrigan behind her. Then the water was dropping fast enough that the side shaft passed out of sight.

Kendra surfaced. Trask and Tanu righted the canoe, and everyone grabbed hold. Mara dropped from the shaft, entering the water with her toes pointed and without hitting anybody. A moment later, Berrigan hit the water the same way, plunging through a tight slot between Vincent and Trask. Soon Mara and Berrigan clutched the canoe as well.

“There was a keyhole at the end of the tunnel,” Berrigan said, holding up a smaller iron egg. “This place was designed by very cruel people.”

The canoe dropped out of the shaft, and the water level continued to fall rapidly. Despite her excitement, Kendra’s teeth began to chatter. The water was becoming truly cold.

“The water is flowing out faster than it came in,” Mara said.

“Just what I need,” Vincent griped, “to get sucked down a giant drain.”

Kendra watched the walls, hoping a new tunnel would come into view. The water level kept plummeting.

“The water’s getting really cold,” Seth said.

“Too cold,” Trask agreed. “Something is wrong.”

“It’s going to freeze,” Mara predicted.

Trask heaved Kendra into the canoe. Tanu boosted Seth. Berrigan dropped the key inside.

“To the island,” Trask ordered.

The island did not yet exist. The water level was still too high. Kendra watched as the others frantically stroked toward the center of the room. As the tip of the island came into view, a fragile skin of ice formed on the surface of the water. Tearing through the film of ice, Mara reached the island first, followed by Berrigan. The water level continued to drop, revealing more of the island. Elise scrambled onto the slick, black rock. Trask and Tanu followed, their bodies crashing through the thickening crust of ice until they lunged out of the freezing water.

As the surface became solid, the water level stopped dropping. The ice pinned Vincent. His head, shoulders, and arms stuck out of the frozen surface just a couple of yards shy of the island. As he tried to boost himself up, chuckling and gasping, the ice around him shattered. He disappeared completely under the water, and before he came up, the surface had refrozen.

Below Kendra, the canoe cracked, squeezed by the swelling ice. Mara sprawled forward onto the ice, over the place where Vincent had gone under, hatchet in hand, Berrigan gripping her ankles. The ice held her without cracking. She hacked at the surface, chopping chips of ice free.

After a moment she paused. Moving to one side, she wiped away stray wedges of ice and stared down. “It keeps freezing deeper and deeper,” she

reported. “Vincent is panicking. He keeps pushing off the ice to avoid getting trapped, which is driving him farther from the surface. There must be more than four feet of ice between us already. I can barely see him. Now I can’t.”

Kendra and Seth climbed out of the canoe onto the solid ice. Tanu, Trask, Berrigan, and Elise joined Mara in attacking the ice, using knives and swords. Seth drew his sword and chiseled at the ice as well.

Kendra had lost her sword. As the others diligently burrowed, she monitored their pathetic progress in shock, trying not to dwell upon the unseen tragedy happening below her feet. Was Vincent already encased in ice, trapped motionless? Was he conscious? Was he frantically diving deeper, seeking to escape the inevitable as his breath ran out? Were they even digging in the right spot? After passing out of sight, he could have moved off in any direction.

“This is like trying to dig through concrete,” Seth growled in frustration.

“The ice seems unnaturally hard,” Mara grunted, swinging the hatchet with urgent determination.

Kendra sank to her knees, feeling the cold of the ice through her wet pants. Minutes passed. Kendra shivered. Did the others really believe they would rescue Vincent? He was gone. Hopelessly gone. It wasn’t fair, or nice, but it was true.

Scanning the room, Kendra noticed a new passage where one had not existed before. Despite the tragedy, all she could think was that they had to hurry and move on before Torina and the zombies showed up and Vincent’s sacrifice was wasted. She felt numbly detached, watching the others scrape up ice shavings. With hysteria gnawing at her numbness, she wanted to stay detached.

At last Trask stood. They had barely carved their way two feet down. “Rescuing Vincent is a lost cause,” he sighed.

“A new tunnel has opened,” Elise said softly.

“We had better move on,” Trask advised reluctantly. “None of us would want the mission to fail in a vain attempt to retrieve our corpse.”

“I should have moved faster,” Mara hissed, still chopping with her hatchet, eyes fixed on the slowly growing crater in the ice. “He was above

the ice. He had almost made it. If I had reached for him an instant sooner —”

“You may well have plunged through the ice with him,” Trask finished. “It happened too quickly and caught all of us off balance. I should have boosted him into the canoe with Kendra and Seth.”

“Which might have swamped the canoe,” Tanu said. “We could have lost all three.”

“If we’re not going to dig, we need to get going,” Elise warned. “This trap cost us a lot of time.”

“She has a point,” Berrigan agreed, looking around as if he mistrusted the walls and ceiling. “This is a deadly place. The sooner we move on, the better.”

Tanu hustled over to the canoe and retrieved the key. Peeling her wet pants away from the hard ice, Kendra arose and crossed the room with the others to the new passage. Her soaked clothes shifted and clung as she moved. Tiny bumps erupted on her skin.

The air in the passage felt warmer than the air in the icy room. Trask led the way, crossbow in one hand, sword in the other. The passage narrowed until they had to proceed once again in single file. Kendra clenched her jaw to keep her teeth from chattering.

The passage was rarely level, sloping up or down. After they had advanced for some distance, the corridor forked. Trask called a halt.

“This could be trouble,” Elise said from the back.

“What do we do?” Trask asked.

“Experiment,” Mara answered.

“Anybody have a sense of which turn to make?” Trask asked.

“Not yet,” Mara said. She was studying the walls and peering down the corridors.

“Then I’ll choose the right,” Trask said, leading them forward. The passage wound until they reached a dead end. When they returned down the passage, they met with a second dead end. Doubling back, they paused at a wider area where the passage diverged in three directions.

“This is going to be bad,” Elise moaned.

“A magically shifting maze full of branching passageways,” Seth muttered. “Not exactly a time saver.”

“We could get lost in here forever,” Berrigan cautioned.

“I could scout ahead,” Mara said. “I could run.”

“If you found a way through, there might be no way to return to us,” Trask warned.

“Then we should all run,” Mara said. “Let me guide us. It may take some trial and error, but I can figure this out. I have a fairly good sense for where we are inside the Dreamstone. As I get a feel for these tunnels, I believe I can lead us through.”

“Any other ideas?” Trask asked.

“I could leave markers at the intersections,” Elise offered.

Mara shook her head. “That might encourage our pursuers. I certainly won’t forget any intersections. Trust me. Staying oriented is my biggest strength. I was born for this.”

Nobody spoke for a moment. “You take the lead,” Trask decided. He faced the others. “Holler if the pace gets too rough.”

Mara started loping down the center passage. Kendra was glad they were jogging. The exertion helped drive away the chill. They reached a T, and Mara went left. Then they reached three dead ends in a row without turning before arriving at a small room where the corridor branched in five directions. Mara picked a corridor without pause.

Kendra was happy that all she had to do was follow. She could not imagine how Mara could keep her bearings through these twisting, cramped passageways. The sameness of the smooth walls and floors and ceiling made it almost impossible to distinguish one tortuous corridor from another. As time went on, they continued to reach dead ends and intersections. Every now and then Mara would call back that they were in a hall they had traveled before, or at an intersection they had previously visited. Most of the time, Kendra had no idea whether Mara was correct.

Eventually, despite how the pace of the jog had flagged somewhat, and even though she was used to regular exercise, Kendra found herself out of breath. She did not want to be the weak link who begged for a slowdown. But from the way the others were panting, she judged she was not the only person running out of gas.

It was Tanu who finally called for a walk. Nobody complained. Kendra’s clothes were now damp from sweat as well as from water. They walked for several minutes before attempting another jog. They hurried

back and forth between dead ends, reaching intersections now and again. Trask, Berrigan, and Elise added comments as they recognized features in the passages or positions of the intersections, always deferring to Mara.

At length, Trask called a break to eat. Kendra sat beside Seth, munching a partly squished sandwich, her back to the cool wall. She wondered how much faster they would move if they could hear their enemies coming.

“The scary thing in here,” Seth said around a mouthful of food, “is that we could lose ground with a wrong turn and run right into the zombies.”

“We must be ready for that,” Trask said. “Let’s hope Laura managed to slow them.”

“Outside the sun is about to set,” Mara noted.

“Then we’ll have the wizard joining the chase,” Berrigan reminded them.

“Do you think we’re getting close?” Kendra asked Mara.

“Where the end may lie is hard to judge just yet,” she replied. “We’ve eliminated several routes as dead ends or pointless loops. Time will tell.”

“Time is what we lack,” Elise grumbled.

“We’ll press on as if our lives depended on it,” Trask said, “because they do. And countless other lives as well.”

“You’re a good leader,” Seth said pensively. “How do you prepare for an adventure like this?”

Trask huffed. “You can’t fully prepare. You do your best to acquire diverse skills. You try to learn from your successes and mistakes over the years. You try to assemble a team with varied talents and expertise. Mostly, you strive to stay calm enough to think clearly even under extreme pressure. You try to use the adrenaline for focus rather than panic. You stay on your toes, ready to improvise. And you hope for the best.”

They ate in silence until Trask told them it was time to move on. Again Mara jogged in the lead, and again they trotted and walked down endless passages, reversing at numberless dead ends. Mara became increasingly frustrated as it seemed she recognized nearly every intersection they reached.

Finally, when the latest corridor had led them to an intersection that forked in three directions, Mara brought them to an exasperated halt.

Kendra had trouble recognizing most intersections, but she remembered this one.

“Maybe I was wrong to lead us,” Mara apologized. “By my reckoning, all three of these halls will take us into networks of loops and dead ends that will eventually lead us back here. I must have missed something. I don’t know how to go forward.”

Kendra had never seen Mara this unsettled. An idea occurred to her. “Mara, maybe we have to treat this intersection like a dead end and go back down the passage that brought us here.”

Squinting her eyes shut, Mara rubbed her knuckles against her forehead, a grin spreading across her face. “Of course, of course, that has to be it. I’ve only experimented with doubling back from dead ends, never at intersections.”

“Good thinking, Kendra,” Trask acknowledged.

“I was about to say the same thing,” Seth complained.

Mara led them back the way they had just come, and they reached an area where the tunnel forked in two directions, one slanting up, the other down. “This is new,” Mara said with renewed vigor. “Follow me.”

They continued onward, running and walking, seldom pausing, passing some of the same intersections several times. From time to time, Mara had them double back without reaching a dead end. Kendra felt her eyes growing heavy. Her legs felt leaden. When she jogged, her muscles burned. Only fear about their urgent mission kept her from curling up on the floor to fall asleep.

When they next halted to eat and drink, Kendra guzzled water, then slumped against the wall to rest her eyes. Tanu had to wake her when it was time to proceed. He hoisted her to her feet, apologizing.

“It isn’t your fault,” Kendra said, slapping her cheeks to make herself more alert.

Not long after that, Mara started loping forward with greater vigor, claiming she could sense a change in the air. Kendra struggled to keep up. Tanu ran beside her, one supportive hand against the small of her back.

Kendra tried to let Mara’s hope become contagious. Could this be the end of the unrelenting labyrinth? Might they actually escape before collapsing from exhaustion? After a final intersection and a few dead ends, the passage opened into the largest room they had encountered so far.

“Well done,” Trask enthused, clapping Mara on the back.

“We’re in the belly of the Dreamstone,” Mara said. “The hollow center.”

The vast, empty space of the rectangular room had dimensions proportional to the Dreamstone itself. Polished expanses of dark obsidian formed the floor, walls, and ceiling, illuminated by the same mysterious light prevalent throughout the convoluted passageways. Three strange devices patrolled the far side of the otherwise vacant room: two mechanical bulls and one mechanical lion.

Composed of overlapping iron plates, the elephant-sized bulls tossed their heads as they rolled around the floor on four wheels, their metal legs dangling decoratively. The artfully rendered bronze lion, slightly larger than the bulls, prowled about on huge paws, moving with a sinuous grace inconsistent with its clockwork appearance.

“Are these the guardians of the artifact?” Seth wondered.

“I hope so,” Elise said. “I’ve had my fill of this place.”



Translocator

I don't see any keyholes," Kendra remarked, eyes roving the walls, floor, and ceiling.

"Me neither," Mara said.

"We'll find one on those animals," Trask predicted.

The mechanized bulls had turned and were rumbling toward the entryway, their bulky shapes reflecting darkly in the polished floor. The lion continued to prowl the far side of the room, copper mane gleaming.

"Let's go see what we're dealing with," Trask said, striding forward. "Judging from their design, my guess is the bulls can't turn very well. We should be able to dodge them if we keep on our toes. The lion looks like a different story. The bulls seem to be defending it, so I'd bet we'll find the keyhole on the lion. Kendra, Seth, hang back at the entrance with Elise. Who has the key?"

"Got it," Tanu said, following Trask onto the floor.

"Spread out," Trask said. "Make them work."

Mara went the farthest left, Berrigan the farthest right, while Trask and Tanu advanced across the center of the room several paces from each other. The bulls veered slightly and increased their speed, both wheeling at Tanu.

“I think they know I have the key,” Tanu said as the bulls hurtled toward him.

“How heavy is it now?” Trask asked, moving farther from Tanu.

“Maybe six or seven pounds.”

“Throw it here,” Trask said.

“I could wait until the last second?”

“No, now.”

Tanu tossed the key underhand to Trask. Having sheathed his sword and slung his crossbow over his shoulder, Trask caught the iron egg in both hands. The bulls swerved, altering their course to run down Trask rather than Tanu. Trask stood his ground as the bulls approached, wide horns lowered. Kendra gasped as he dove out of the way at the last instant, the tip of one horn missing his leg by inches.

The bulls started curving around to come at him again, careening as they turned. Trask now ran toward the lion, his long legs eating up ground. Mara ran alongside him, paralleling his course. Berrigan did likewise on the other side of the room. Tanu hustled valiantly, trying to keep up.

“They’re swinging back around,” Elise warned, as both bulls charged Trask from behind.

“Use me,” Mara called.

Without breaking stride, Trask flung the key over to Mara, who caught it one-handed, staggering a bit until she regained her balance. One bull swerved after Mara; the other stayed on Trask.

“They’re not so dumb,” Seth said.

Mara came to a standstill, facing the onrushing bull, showing little concern. As the bull drew near, she vaulted nimbly aside, performing a one-handed cartwheel. Trask managed to dodge his bull as well.

The lion roared, mechanical jaws quivering. One of the bulls went for Berrigan, who adroitly skipped out of the way. The other bull came around for Mara again, who threw the iron egg to Trask before using a lowered horn to gracefully swing astride the speeding bull. The iron bull tossed its head, metallic parts squealing, but Mara rode it effortlessly.

Kendra resisted a smile. Her friends seemed to have the situation under control. It looked like they were battling giant metal puppets.

Tanu had stopped in the middle of the room, kneeling. He pulled what looked like a large silken sheet from his pack, then swallowed the contents of a bottle. Yanking off his shoes, he began to expand, promptly shredding whatever clothing he failed to remove. The Samoan swelled to more than twice his former height, his meaty body growing broader and thicker to remain proportional. He tied the sheet around his waist. With the transformation complete, he stood head and shoulders above the lion and bulls.

Apparently sensing the threat, the bull not ridden by Mara charged Tanu. The other bull streaked toward Trask, while the lion pounced at Berrigan. Tanu stood his ground like a matador, danced aside to avoid the horns, then lunged at the side of the bull, lowering his shoulder. The impact overturned the mechanical bull, and the iron body squealed as it slid across the stone floor.

From astride the other bull, Mara called for the key, and Trask tossed it up as he leapt out of the way. When Mara leaned out precariously to catch the imperfect toss, the iron egg grazed her fingertips before falling to the floor with a resounding clack.

As Berrigan tried to flee, the bronze lion swiped him with a paw, sending him sprawling across the floor with parallel gashes in his back. Tanu rushed over to help, and the lion turned to confront the new threat.

Suddenly, beside Kendra, Seth stumbled abruptly forward. He turned to face her, his expression shocked. It took her a moment to notice the arrowhead protruding from his chest.

Elise and Kendra whirled to see Torina at the far end of the hall behind them, setting another arrow to her bowstring. Zombies staggered into view around her. One of the leading zombies was clearly recognizable as Laura, her hair disheveled, her outfit tattered and bloodied. Another was Camira.

Torina looked giddily triumphant. Back at the house, she had been too far away for Kendra to view her clearly. The lectoblix appeared even younger than when Kendra had last spoken with her, and more athletic as well, like a woman who obviously knew her way around a gym. Her sporty outfit accentuated her fit physique. She grinned as she pulled the arrow back.

Before Kendra could react, the arrow struck the center of her belly, jostling her backward as it rebounded off the adamant mail beneath her

shirt. Seth had given her that armor. It was rightfully his. Had he been wearing it, he would not have an arrow through his rib cage. Light blue eyes holding Kendra's gaze, Torina gave a disappointed pout.

After fumbling momentarily with her crossbow, Elise launched a quarrel at Torina. The lectoblix ducked behind the jumbled mass of emerging zombies, and the quarrel lodged in the hip of a rotting, balding man.

"We've got company!" Elise called, seizing Seth's shoulder and rushing him around the side of the entryway, out of sight from the passageway. Staying low, Kendra followed them out of the entryway into the huge chamber.

On the other side of the room, Tanu had wrestled the lion onto its back. Mara had dropped from the bull and recovered the iron egg. Trask faced the entryway, huge crossbow held ready, a pair of long quarrels waiting to take flight. The bull Tanu had toppled lay motionless on its side, but the other was coming back around to attack Mara again. Berrigan rose unsteadily to his feet.

"The keyhole is under his chin," Tanu boomed.

Wincing, Seth plopped down on the floor. The feathered shaft of the arrow protruded from his back, the cruel arrowhead from his front. He scrabbled in his emergency kit, withdrew a flask, then handed the satchel to Kendra. "Keep it safe," he rasped.

"You'll be all right," Kendra assured him hysterically. Everything was happening too fast!

Seth unscrewed the lid of the flask. "She got me," he wheezed. "I'm a shish kebab."

"You can't go gaseous," Kendra insisted. "You might not be able to teleport with us!"

"Better than bleeding to death or getting zombified." He fingered the arrowhead. "I'm useless like this." He coughed wetly into his fist, then chugged the contents of the flask. His body and clothes became hazy as Seth transformed into a ghostly, vaporous version of himself. The arrow in his chest became gaseous as well.

Elise grabbed Kendra, hustling her farther from the entrance. Kendra allowed herself to be led. The spectral form of her injured brother followed at a much slower pace.

Up ahead, grimacing fiercely, sweat glistening on his brow, Tanu held the squirming bronze lion in a wrestling hold as Mara drew near. The iron bull was rapidly closing in on them, but Mara reached the lion first, climbing hurriedly. She hastily stabbed the key into a socket and twisted. Both of the bulls and the lion fell apart in clangorous heaps of metal scraps. The parts from the moving bull tumbled and slid across the glossy floor, colliding with the wreckage of the lion.

As zombies shambled into the room, Trask fired a quarrel from his huge crossbow, then set the weapon down, drawing a sword. Tanu and Berrigan flung aside metallic plates and ornaments, searching frantically. Blood oozed from ragged stripes and ugly punctures on Tanu's arms and shoulders. Elise raced toward the demolished lion with Kendra.

A melodically chanting voice caused Kendra to glance over her shoulder. The zombies had parted to let a glaring man with golden skin stride into the room. The slender stranger wore a cape and a turban. Beads, bones, and bits of twine decorated his braided beard. He held up one hand clenched in a fist. With every step, he left behind a flaming footprint burning blue and green. His chant rose to a shout as he pointed across the room at Tanu. In a flash, the giant Samoan shrank back to his normal size.

"I have it!" Mara cried, holding up a platinum cylinder. "It was inside the key."

"Use it!" Trask barked.

Tanu, Mara, and Berrigan all took hold of the Translocator. Nothing happened.

Not far from where Trask stood with his sword, Kendra and Elise ran side by side, still about forty yards from the fragmented lion. Tanu took a step away from Mara and Berrigan and flung the Translocator like a desperate quarterback. The cylinder flew in a high arc toward Elise and Kendra, turning end over end. Elise stopped rushing forward, took several steps to one side, and made a diving catch.

Trask lifted his crossbow, aimed, and let loose another quarrel. The wizard waved a hand, and the quarrel turned into a harmless stream of twinkling dust. Behind the wizard, the Gray Assassin stalked confidently into the room, swords unsheathed. Trask ran toward Kendra and Elise.

Elise handed Kendra the cylinder. Symbols embossed the silvery casing. Tiny white gems sparkled. Kendra felt the Translocator hum to life

when the device came into contact with her fingers. Noting its three segmented sections, she could see where she would twist it, but she hesitated, waiting for Trask to reach them.

Back by the entrance to the chamber, the wizard was chanting again. He opened a small, samite sack, and thick-linked chains slithered out rapidly, clinking against the polished floor. The chains were much too long to have fit in the small sack without the aid of magic. Torina emerged from the entryway, bow held ready, along with a fierce creature that looked halfway between a wolf and a bear. Zombies continued to stagger forward.

Trask grabbed the middle section of the Translocator. Kendra held the left, Elise the right. They twisted the device as Torina let loose an arrow.

Kendra experienced a brief sensation like she was folding into herself, as if she were collapsing down to a single point somewhere in her midsection, and then the odd sensation passed, and she was standing in a tidy apartment. Daylight streamed through the windows. Out on the street, somebody honked a car's horn.

"Where are we?" Elise asked.

"My apartment in Manhattan," Trask said, tossing his crossbow onto a nearby couch. "First place that came to mind. Let go of the device. I have to go after the others."

Kendra and Elise released the device. Trask twisted it and vanished. For a moment, Elise and Kendra stood together in silence. The refrigerator hummed as the compressor kicked on.

"He'll be back, right?" Kendra asked.

"He'll be back."

"Is there a chance he'll get Seth?"

Elise stared with wordless sympathy. "He'll try," she finally said.

Elise started to pace. Kendra folded her arms. The apartment was stylish, with leather sofas, a sleek flat-screen television, a glass coffee table, black-and-white photographs framed on the walls, and designer lamps. Kendra disliked the suspense of waiting. "When do you—"

Trask reappeared suddenly, along with Tanu. Chains cocooned the Samoan from his ankles to the bottom of his chest. An arrow jutted from Trask's shoulder.

"Can't go back," Trask panted. "Can't lose the artifact."

“What about the others?” Elise asked.

“Mara and Berrigan are wrapped in chains,” Tanu said. “The wizard cast a spell and sucked Seth into a bottle.”

Kendra whimpered involuntarily, her hands going to her mouth. “What will happen to him?”

“Inside the bottle, he won’t be able to revert to his normal state,” Tanu explained. “He’ll be preserved as a gas until released, theoretically for years. He’s been imprisoned.”

“It could be worse,” Trask said gently. “The wizard could have scattered and destroyed him. At least this means they want him alive.”

“And as a gas, his wound won’t get any worse,” Tanu added.

Kendra nodded, trying to act brave as tears leaked down her cheeks. It felt like her heart was being squeezed. First her parents, now Seth! What else would the Sphinx take from her? Rage flared up, helping her resist the grief. She ground her teeth.

“Couldn’t I pop in, grab Mara, and pop out?” Elise asked.

Trask shook his head. “I barely made it back. They’re ready now. They’ll get you. We have to choose a better time.”

Elise turned and hugged Kendra. “Seth will be all right. We have a powerful new weapon in our war against the Society. We’ll use the Translocator to get your brother back, and your parents.”

Kendra wasn’t sure how much she believed the words, but they were nice to hear. “Warren,” Kendra said softly. “We should get Warren.”

“Shouldn’t we return to Fablehaven first?” Tanu said.

“No, in case he’s starving,” Kendra protested, wiping tears from her cheeks. “We’ve left him there long enough. It should be safe. He’s in a room cut off from the rest of the world. I’m not sure what could be less risky. I should teleport to him right now.”

“I’ll go with you,” Elise said.

“I can start treating my scratches and Trask’s shoulder,” Tanu said, unwinding the chains from his abdomen.

Trask gave a nod. “Go bring him back.”

“I just picture the room?” Kendra asked.

“I just pictured my apartment,” Trask replied, handing her the Translocator.

Elise held the left side of the Translocator. Trying to calm her fatigued mind from the shock of losing Mara, Berrigan, and her brother, Kendra envisioned the storage room, picturing the heaps of junk, the slate floor, the adobe walls. She twisted the center of the device, felt the swooning, folding sensation, and then she and Elise were standing in the very room she had visualized.

An electric lantern illuminated the scene. A small troll with an oversized head, greenish skin, and a wide, lipless mouth whirled to face Kendra and Elise, sniffing suspiciously. Near the troll sat a man in grimy clothes, his face obscured by a beard and long hair.

“How you get here?” Bubda asked, his posture becoming less aggressive.

Kendra held up the Translocator. “A magical transporter.”

Warren rose to his feet warily. “Who are you?” he asked, unsmiling.

“You know who I am,” Kendra said.

Warren narrowed his eyes, one hand straying to the knife in his belt. “Forgive me if I don’t run over and hug you. What kind of game is this?”

Kendra realized that the last time Warren had seen her, Navarog had taken her prisoner before sealing the room by destroying the knapsack. For all he knew, she and Elise might be stingbulbs. To him, their sudden arrival seemed too good to be true.

“It’s really us, Warren,” Elise said. “You won’t need that knife. We’re not holding weapons.”

Warren smiled sadly. “I’d love to believe you. How’d you escape the dragon, Kendra?”

“Raxtus ate him,” Kendra said.

“The little guy who tried to heal me?” Warren exclaimed incredulously. “Word of advice: If you’re going to lie, make it somewhat believable.”

“We were trapped in that narrow cave,” Kendra explained. “Raxtus could fit inside as a dragon, but Gavin couldn’t change to his true form.”

The corners of Warren’s mouth twitched. “I’d love to believe it. How about a quick test? The Society might be able to mimic your form, but not your abilities.” He leaned forward and grabbed the electric lantern.

“Nobody move. I’m going to shut this off.” He clicked a switch, and the light went out.

Kendra supposed that the room was in total darkness for the others. To her it just looked dim.

Warren held up four fingers. "How many fingers am I holding up?" he asked.

"Four," Bubda answered.

"Not you, Bubda," Warren complained. "I already know *you* can see in the dark. Okay, how about now?"

"Still four," Kendra said. He changed it to two fingers. "Now two. Now three."

Warren clicked the light back on. He looked hopeful.

"If the Society knew how to get in here, they wouldn't need to use subterfuge," Elise said.

"Trask and Tanu are waiting for us," Kendra said. "They're injured."

"So you got the . . ." he paused, glancing at Bubda, "the, um, thing we wanted to get with the Wyrmoost key?"

"At a dear price," Elise said. "Seth, Mara, and a man named Berrigan were taken captive. And Vincent Morales lost his life."

"I'm so sorry," Warren said.

"How are your injuries?" Kendra asked.

Warren flexed his hands. "I'm fine. Tanu left me with enough medicine that I healed up before too long. I'm a little malnourished. I've been rationing. I was getting close to trying the rancid goop Bubda lives on."

"My goop better than granola," the troll said, making a disgusted face.

"You look like you're in good shape," Elise noted, not without admiration.

"Not much to do here," Warren said. "I've been exercising. And playing Yahtzee. So much Yahtzee. I'm surprised we haven't worn the spots off the dice."

"You go now," Bubda said, making a shooing motion with one hand. "Bubda no want roommate."

Warren chuckled. "You have to come with us, Bubda. There's no way out of here. Eventually you'll run out of food, even the kind you can stomach."

"Bubda no leave. Bubda finally have peace."

Warren put his hands on his hips. "Come on, don't be like that, I wasn't so bad, was I?"

Bubda scrunched his face. "You could be worse. Not as bad as granola."

"What about all the Yahtzee we played?"

"If Bubda play alone, Bubda always win."

Warren turned to Kendra and Elise. "I got seven Yahtzees once in a single game. Seven!"

"He cheat," Bubda mumbled.

"For the millionth time, how was I supposed to cheat? You were right there! You watched me roll the dice!"

"You cheat," Bubda said. "Too much luck."

"What about that time you got five Yahtzees?" Warren reminded him.

"That skill," Bubda said smugly.

"I hate to interrupt," Elise said, "but we need to get back to Tanu and Trask."

"Lady right," Bubda said. "Lady only smart one. You go."

"Bubda, you have to come," Warren insisted.

"Bubda stay. Bubda relax. You go. Take granola."

Warren looked to Kendra and Elise for support.

"We can come back anytime," Kendra said. "Even in an hour or two. But we should get back to Trask and Tanu. We need to get them to Fablehaven."

"Where are they now?" Warren asked.

"Trask's apartment in New York."

"He have anything in his fridge?" Warren asked hopefully. He swiveled to face Bubda. "I'm not abandoning you, Mr. Hermit Troll. Enjoy your break, because I'll be back. We'll find you an even better home. Someplace with lots of moist food. Nothing dry or crunchy. No granola."

Bubda turned away, grumbling unintelligibly.

Warren walked over to Kendra. "If this is some kind of trick or trap, well played, you got me. What do I do?"

"Just grab the cylinder," Kendra instructed.

Elise held the left side, Kendra kept hold of the middle segment, and Warren gripped the right end. “Can’t say I’m going to miss this place,” he murmured.

Kendra imagined Trask’s apartment, twisted the cylinder, and a moment later they were standing between a leather sofa and a glass coffee table. Tanu crouched over Trask, applying ointment to his shoulder.

“You guys never get a break,” Warren quipped.

“All in a day’s work,” Tanu replied.

“You look like you were marooned on a desert island,” Trask said.

“I wish. I would have given anything for an ocean breeze.” Warren stroked his beard. “Kendra, how about you teleport us to a barber shop?”

“We should get to Fablehaven,” Trask said. “My apartment has certain protections, but nothing like the walls of a preserve. You three go first.”

“Want to swing by a burger joint on the way?” Warren asked out of the side of his mouth.

“I’m sure Grandma will whip up something,” Kendra replied, twisting the cylinder. A moment later, she, Warren, and Elise were at Fablehaven, standing together in the kitchen. Nobody else was in sight.

“Hello?” Kendra called.

“Kendra?” Grandpa answered. It sounded like he was in his study.

“I’ll be right back,” Kendra told Elise. Twisting the cylinder, she returned alone to Trask’s apartment.

“It worked all right?” Trask asked.

“We went straight to the kitchen,” Kendra said.

Trask nodded. “Good. I’m not surprised. But I’m more impressed that the Translocator could leap through the defenses of a preserve than I am that it can take us to the other side of the globe. Let’s go.”

Once Trask and Tanu had taken hold of the Translocator, Kendra teleported them to Fablehaven. When they appeared in the kitchen, Grandpa, Grandma, and Coulter were already there. They looked subdued.

“Get this, Stan,” Tanu said. “The key we retrieved from Wyrmoost had smaller keys inside, like a nesting doll. And guess what we found at the center? The Translocator.”

“The key was the vault,” Grandpa said.

“Elise told us about Seth and the others,” Coulter said.

Grandma caught Kendra in a tight embrace. “We’ll get him back,” she promised.

Kendra nodded, eyes stinging. She didn’t trust herself to speak.



Living Mirage

Seth could hardly think. He could hear nothing. He could smell nothing. All he saw was muted grayness, which almost seemed more like oblivion than pure blackness would have. When he tried to move, there was no physical response, no sensation, as if all his nerves had been disconnected.

Time had lost all meaning. His sense of self had begun to diminish. His mind seemed sluggish, half asleep. He did not dream, but when he focused, he could remember.

He remembered looking down at the arrowhead, remembered the horror on Kendra's face. He remembered feeling angry. What a cheap shot! Right in the back! Taking a few steps had proved that he was useless, dying.

He had instantly thought about the gaseous potion. The concoction wouldn't heal the injury, but it would put him in hibernation, prevent the wound from worsening. In the meantime, he wouldn't be a burden. They could fight without having to drag him around, perhaps killing him and themselves in the process. He recalled thinking that if his friends could somehow win the battle, maybe they could rescue him later.

Seth remembered giving Kendra his emergency kit. That was important. The tower was inside, and the leviathan, and some other less

precious items he didn't want to hand over to the enemy if he were killed or captured.

After becoming gaseous, he had moved slowly, drifting in whatever direction he chose. Having lost the ability of speech, he had watched wordlessly as Kendra used the Translocator to escape with Trask and Elise. He had watched the magician send chains after the others as zombies crowded into the room.

Then Trask had returned, trying to help Tanu, and, without warning, Seth had felt effervescent rushes of bubbles tingling through his wispy body. That was when the grayness had overtaken him and most physical sensations had ended.

Had his mind been separated from his body? Somehow stolen out of the gas? It felt that way. It was tough to focus on the present. There was nothing to focus on.

He caught himself slipping into trances. It was hard to say for how long. Whenever his mind kicked back into gear, becoming self-aware instead of coasting, he would fight the emptiness with memories, people he knew, places he had been, fun things he had done. Anything to keep his mind from shutting down and merging with the nothingness.

Thanks to his addled state, Seth could not say how long he had been adrift in gray oblivion when sensation returned in a rush. There came a sense of motion, of tiny bubbles coursing through him, and then he was flesh and blood again, lying on his side on a plush rug, his chest aflame with agony.

Turning his head, Seth looked up into the dark eyes of the Sphinx. The gaze of his enemy was warm and gentle. The Sphinx gestured to the wizard who had attacked his friends inside the Dreamstone, the man with the braided beard and the turban. The man pointed at the arrow protruding from Seth, and it dissolved into smoke, although the deep pain of the wound persisted. When the wizard waved a hand, Seth's sword and knife evaporated as well.

"Welcome back," the Sphinx said to Seth. He glanced at the wizard. "Leave us."

The gold-skinned man nodded and moved out of view. Seth heard a door open and close. The intense pain in his chest remained. He was afraid

to move, afraid blood would gush out of the wound. He could smell incense burning.

The Sphinx produced a bright copper teapot in the shape of a cat, the tail forming the spout. He upended the teapot over Seth, and dust streamed out. Seth's wounds tingled momentarily, and then the pain was gone. The Sphinx set the teapot aside.

"The artifact from Fablehaven," Seth said.

"You should be glad I have the Sands of Sanctity," the Sphinx said. "Your injury was mortal."

"Where was I? What happened?"

"While you were in your gaseous state, Mirav trapped you in a bottle. The effects would have been disorienting."

Seth stood up, groggily brushing dust from his shirt. "Kendra got away."

The Sphinx smiled. He was a handsome man with short, beaded dreadlocks and very dark skin. He wore a white ribbed shirt and loose jeans. His feet were bare. "You're taller."

"Tanu and Trask got away too, right? And Elise. What about Mara and Berrigan?"

The Sphinx regarded Seth with fathomless black eyes. "There is something different about you, Seth Sorenson." His faint accent was hard to place, but hinted at tropical islands. "You have been consorting with demons."

Seth felt his face grow warm. "I'm a shadow charmer."

"I can see. I had heard rumors. Congratulations."

Seth frowned. Getting congratulated by the Sphinx was no compliment. "Tell me about the others."

"We have Mara and Berrigan. The others got away with the Translocator. We should have had all of you. Laura, the caretaker at Obsidian Waste, demolished a bridge and led a counterattack that stalled the pursuit."

Some of the tension went out of Seth. At least the others really had escaped. The mission was a success. He glanced around the room. There were no windows, and just a single door. Filmy veils hung from the ceiling. Tapestries and other hangings softened the walls. Rich rugs blanketed the

floors. Cushions and pillows of various shape and size took the place of furniture, although Seth noticed a traditional desk in one corner, next to a divan. “Where are we?”

The Sphinx sat down on a cushion. He motioned to another cushion nearby. “Please have a seat.”

Seth sat down. “No Foosball table?”

The Sphinx smiled. “I am glad to see you again. I’ve missed you.”

“Didn’t you get my Christmas card? I drew it myself.”

“A shadow charmer is not made every day,” the Sphinx said, his demeanor growing serious. “You intrigue me as much as your sister does. I would like to have an honest conversation.”

“How about an honest answer as to where we are?” Seth pressed.

The Sphinx studied him. “When masters play chess, there often comes a point, sometimes many moves before checkmate, when the outcome is decided. Sometimes the inevitable loser will resign. Sometimes the doomed participant will continue until the final move. But beyond that pivotal point, the drama is over.”

“Is this your way of saying you’ve won?” Seth asked. “They’re not dumb enough to trade everything for me!”

“I am not yet claiming victory. Zzyzx is not yet open. I’m saying I am well beyond the point where my victory is certain.”

Seth squirmed. “What you’re trying to do is a little more complicated than a game of chess.”

“A lot more complicated.”

“I think you’ll find we still have a few tricks up our sleeves.” Seth hoped it was true.

“I’m sure you’re right. Underestimating an opponent can be lethal. Seth, I’m not trying to boast or to intimidate you. I am telling you that I am so confident of victory, and so certain that you will leave here only at my whim, that we can actually have an honest, open conversation. Ask me anything.”

“Okay, for the third time, where are we?”

“We are in Eastern Turkey on a preserve called Living Mirage. At least, that is the closest English translation. Some have dubbed it the Grand

Oasis. Your friends and family refer to it as the fifth secret preserve. I call it home.”

Seth could not conceal his astonishment. “You live at the fifth preserve? The one nobody can find?”

“I have dwelled here for a long time.”

“This is where the final artifact is hidden.”

The Sphinx smiled. “It was the first artifact I recovered, many lifetimes ago.”

Seth paled. “Then you have three. The Sands of Sanctity, the Oculus, and . . .”

“ . . . the Font of Immortality.”

“Is that how you’ve lived so long?”

“When we first met, you asked whether I was an actual sphinx. I am not the avatar of a sphinx. I am a human being who has prolonged his life through ownership of the Font of Immortality.”

Seth regarded the Sphinx skeptically. “You’re also a huge liar. A master con artist. How do I know whether a word you just told me is true?”

“Deception has been an inseparable companion,” the Sphinx conceded. “Strange. I have guarded these secrets for so long that it almost surprises me to have them disbelieved. But you’re right. We could be anywhere. I could be anyone, or anything. Keep in mind, I just healed you with the Sands of Sanctity. The Oculus rests on my desk, which is how I know nobody could possibly be overhearing this conversation. And the Font of Immortality is in this room as well, though I suppose you could dismiss it as an elaborate prop.”

“Let’s see it,” Seth said.

“Why not?” The Sphinx stood and walked to the desk. Seth followed, noticing the flawless, multifaceted crystal resting upon a cushion on the desktop, refracting light into little rainbows. The Oculus looked exactly how Kendra had described it.

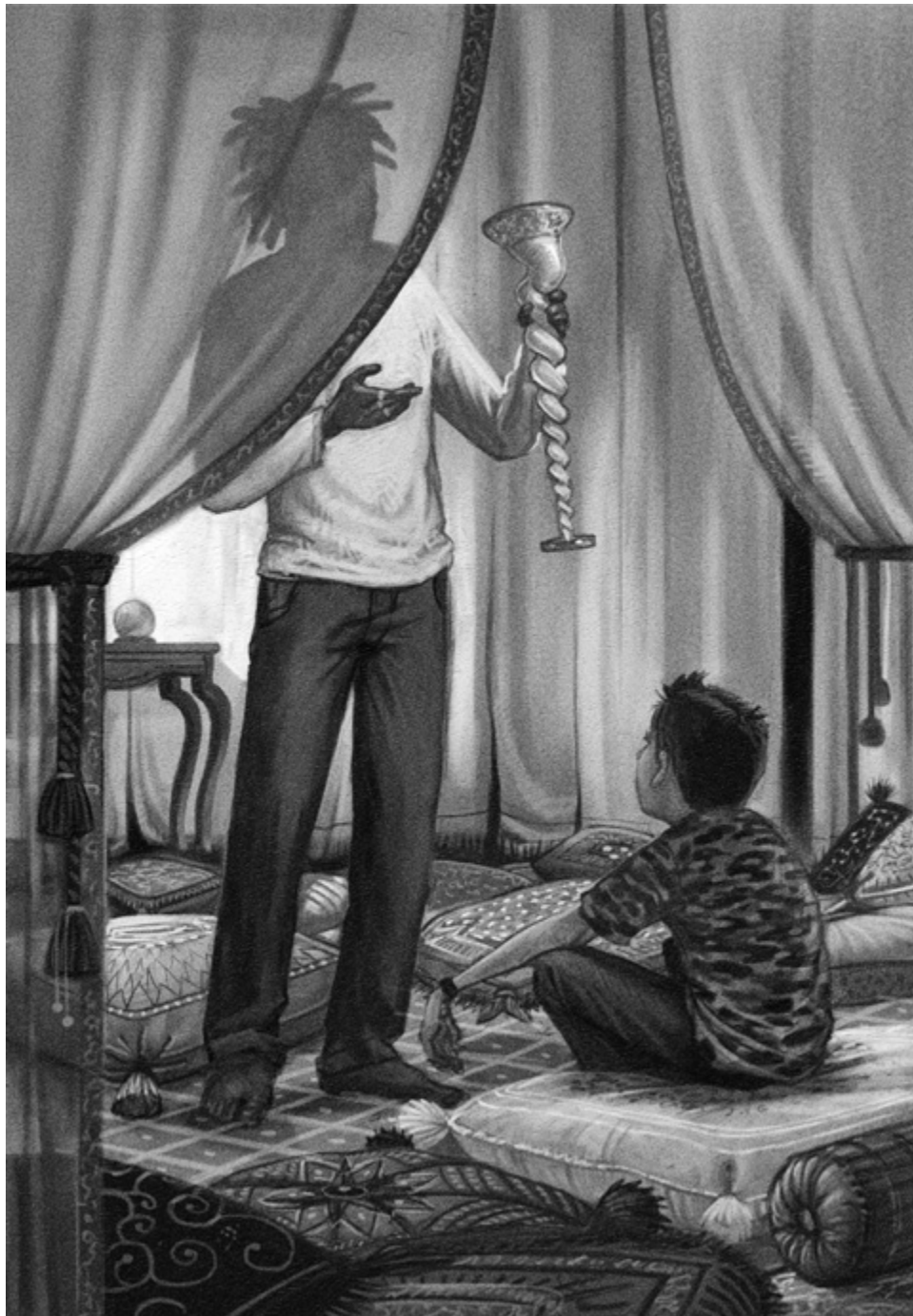
The Sphinx pulled aside a tapestry, opened a hidden cupboard in the wall, and removed a tall object. Seth recognized the straight, pearly spiral of a unicorn horn, although this one was much longer than the horn he had recovered from the centaurs. The horn served as the long stem to an

alabaster goblet, embellished with shimmering enamel. A sturdy base was attached to the other end.

“That’s the Font of Immortality?” Seth asked.

“I can’t prove it in the short term,” the Sphinx replied, “but if you sip from this goblet once a week, you will stop aging.”

“Is that a unicorn horn?” Seth asked.



“You’ve seen one before,” the Sphinx recognized. “You needed it to enter Wyrmoost. What you handled was a first horn. This is the third and final horn of a unicorn.” The Sphinx replaced the artifact in the cupboard and inclined his head toward the desk. “Unlike the Font, if you touch the Oculus, you will instantly experience its authenticity.”

“I’ll take your word for it,” Seth hedged.

“Sit,” the Sphinx invited. “I did not mean to disturb your comfort.” Seth complied. The Sphinx remained on his feet. “I can do no more to persuade you of my sincerity. It will be up to you to believe or disbelieve, as you choose. Understand, I have concealed myself for centuries. The only way to really keep a secret is to tell no one. But my identity, my life story, is no longer a secret. It is merely history. You will never escape here with this information. And if you did, it would not matter. I no longer have a motive to lie.”

“How did you find this preserve?” Seth asked.

“I did not find Living Mirage. Living Mirage found me.”

“Is that supposed to be a riddle?”

“As a child, I was brought here as a slave.”

Seth frowned. “That’s horrible. Where were you from?”

“Ethiopia.”

“The caretaker had slaves?”

The Sphinx started pacing. “This was long ago. Not all caretakers were good men like your grandfather. There were many slaves here. Through their labor, those who ran the preserve lived like kings. No, like tyrants. The preserve was deadly. Slaves were employed for many high-risk duties. When they died, it was not considered a loss of life, just a depletion of resources.”

“I can see how that would make you bitter,” Seth said.

“I was a bright child and a hard worker. I realized that, given my circumstances, the best chance for a good life was through diligent obedience to my masters. The slaves who resisted were punished and ended up with dangerous assignments. The rebellious never lasted long.

“I went out of my way to be the ideal servant. Many of the other slaves despised me for it. As my talents and devotion were recognized, my work took me indoors. My masters never loved me, but they appreciated my

usefulness, my reliability. As I grew older, I became an administrator. Head slave, if you will.

“What my masters did not know, what the other slaves could not guess, was that I was the most dangerous person at Living Mirage. Deep down, beneath the pleasant demeanor and quiet competence, in the invisible self that nobody knew, I was a rebel to the very center. Furious. Ambitious. Vengeful. But I was a patient rebel. I watched. I listened. I learned. I plotted. I did not want to rebel in some symbolic way. I had no interest in a futile act of defiance that would lead to my destruction. I wanted to turn the tables on my captors. I craved victory.

“There is great power in harboring a single goal. With my words and actions, I excelled at my daily tasks. But with my thoughts I planned my coup. I constantly sought opportunities for my eyes and ears to acquire the knowledge I required. I learned that Living Mirage was a secret preserve, known only to a few outsiders. That was important. It meant that if I could stage a coup, I might have a chance to truly take ownership of the preserve, to hide my victory from possible external enemies. When I learned about the artifact, my ambitions grew. What if I could destroy my captors, become master of Living Mirage, and then live forever? That would be vengeance indeed.

“I was a young adult when I first learned of my future mentor, the most feared demon at Living Mirage, perhaps the most feared demon in the world: Nagi Luna. The demon resided inside a Quiet Box in the lower extremity of the Living Mirage dungeon, below the great ziggurat.”

“What’s a ziggurat?” Seth interrupted.

“A huge old temple, a step pyramid.”

“Step pyramid?”

“We’re in one now. A terraced pyramid. Picture a pyramid that recedes a little at each new level.” The Sphinx pantomimed the shape of a stairway.

“Got it. Sorry, go on.” Seth reconsidered the room. Beneath the soft hangings and mellow lamplight, the walls were made of stone.

“The Quiet Box of Nagi Luna was kept in the bottommost cell of the dungeon, a room accessible only through a hatch in the ceiling. Only the chief jailer and the head caretaker had a key that could open it. Months after learning the location of Nagi Luna, I received the task of punishing an

elderly slave, a man called Funi. I clearly remembered Funi from my childhood, a crass character who mistreated the weak.

“One of my regular duties included supervising the slaves assigned to labor in the vast dungeon below the great ziggurat. In the course of those duties, I had forged a relationship with the chief jailer. He was a hard, private man, but somewhat predictable. I told him I wanted to give Funi a scare by taking him down to the catacombs where the undead were housed. The key to those catacombs was the same key to the cell where Nagi Luna languished.

“The jailer should not have let that key out of his possession. But nobody could imagine me as a threat. In addition, the jailer disliked me, and he assumed I would receive as big a scare as Funi. He knew that it was possible I would have an accident that could cost me my life or my job, and it amused him to imagine the uppity slave getting humbled. I knew the jailer would not voluntarily go anywhere near the undead prisoners. As I had expected, he lent the key to his assistant and ordered him to admit me to the catacombs.

“I brought Funi, and, with the assistant at my heels, we descended into the forbidden levels of the dungeon. When we reached the door to the catacombs, I caught the assistant in a stranglehold until he passed out. Then I made Funi help me drag the man deeper into the dungeon, until we reached the lowest cell. I opened the hatch, lowered the assistant jailer into the room with a rope, ordered Funi to climb down, then climbed down myself.

“Who did you put into the Quiet Box?” Seth asked breathlessly.

“The assistant,” the Sphinx said, his voice becoming quieter. “It was the greatest risk I have ever taken, even though a ring of constraint surrounded the Quiet Box.”

“Ring of constraint?”

“A magical prison at least as strong as the Quiet Box. It essentially marked the domain at Living Mirage where Nagi Luna was permitted to roam, a steel circle on the floor with a thirty-foot diameter.”

“Kind of like the area at Fablehaven where Graulas lives,” Seth said. “Or where Kurisock lived.”

“Much like that,” the Sphinx agreed. “But considerably stronger. I made Funi put the assistant jailer into the Quiet Box while I watched from

outside the ring. It took some effort, because he was old and frail, but Funi managed to place the unconscious body inside and close the door. The box turned slowly. The instant the Quiet Box opened, Funi turned and attacked me.”

“Mind control?” Seth asked.

“Very good. Yes, before stepping out of the box, Nagi Luna took instant control, and Funi came at me like a man possessed. Although I was ready for such an eventuality, having retained the assistant jailer’s truncheon, the vehemence of the assault nearly overwhelmed me. Funi was smaller, thinner, and older, but he fought with inhuman strength and ferocity, heedless of injuries. By the time I had quelled the attack, he was unrecognizable.”

“Gross. Then Nagi Luna came out? What did the demon look like?”

“Harmless. A tiny, toothless, hairless, hunched old woman, no taller than my waist. Her purple skin drooped in moist creases. A white chain led from a manacle on her ankle to a stone tablet inscribed with arcane characters, which she dragged along behind her. As her lips mumbled nonsense, she spoke to me with her mind, trying to lure me inside her ring of constraint. When I refused, she spoke in her actual voice, commending me for resisting her invitations. I explained my situation. She explained her hatred of her confinement. We decided to help one another.”

“What did she do?” Seth wondered.

“First she asked to see the key to her cell. After I held it up, she crouched, scraped together dirt from the floor, and transformed it into an exact replica of the metal key. She set the key at the edge of the ring of constraint, and I removed it with the truncheon. Then she produced a needle, spat on it, and gave it to me in similar fashion. She explained that whoever I pricked with the needle would die the following morning. We had a long conversation. In the end, I climbed out of the cell, hauled the remains of Funi up, and returned to the jailer.”

“You left the assistant in the Quiet Box?”

“Correct.”

“How did you explain that?”

“With a fabrication. I said the assistant jailer had joined us in the catacombs, that Funi had shoved him against a cell door, and that the wraith inside had devoured him, body and soul. I explained that I had killed Funi

as punishment. I had the needle ready, but there was no need to use it that day. The chief jailer wanted to cover up his injudicious sharing of the key, so we made some alterations to my version. We decided that Funi had attacked and killed the assistant, hurling him into a deep shaft, so I killed Funi, and that became our story. But I digress into obscure details.”

“I don’t mind,” Seth said. “It’s interesting.”

“I used my counterfeit key to visit Nagi Luna from time to time. She taught me what I needed to know to overthrow the preserve. And she made me into a shadow charmer.”

“You’re a shadow charmer?” Seth exclaimed, rising to his feet.

“There are not many of us, Seth. In fact, you and I may be the only ones who remain. My abilities as a shadow charmer, and the alliances Nagi Luna helped me forge, proved essential to my taking over Living Mirage and eventually uncovering the Font of Immortality.”

“I’m evil,” Seth said numbly, plopping back down on his cushion.

“We’re not evil,” the Sphinx said.

“Demons are evil.”

“Yes.”

“Where is Nagi Luna now?”

“Still down in her cell, hemmed in by her ring of constraint. I can’t release her yet.”

“Why not? Aren’t you the guy who wants to release all the demons in Zzyzx?”

The Sphinx sat down beside Seth, his wrists resting on his knees. “Here is what I have learned, Seth. Here is what life has taught me. The best way to avoid being the slave is to be the master.”

“Okay . . . that kind of makes sense.”

“You believe that I hate you. That I hate your grandfather.”

“Seems that way.”

The Sphinx furrowed his brow. “You must understand: I do not view Stan Sorenson as my enemy. He is merely my opponent. I like your grandfather. He is a good man. And he is an obstacle. I have to best him. We do not see eye to eye on the opening of Zzyzx.”

“You keep getting people killed,” Seth said, sick of his enemy’s pretenses.

The Sphinx sighed. "I go out of my way to avoid killing those I respect, including you and your sister. But yes, this is a bloody business, and sometimes people have to perish. To be honest, in the end, if killing Stan is what it takes to open the demon prison, I will kill him. He would do no less in order to stop me. This is not because I hate Stan, but because he stands in opposition to my cause, and I believe in my cause."

"Releasing demons? You admitted they were evil!"

"Zzyzx cannot stand forever," the Sphinx explained. "That which has a beginning must have an end. When wizards try to make anything permanent, it becomes brittle, fallible. Invincibility is impossible. Attempts to attain it always fail. So instead of creating an impregnable prison, they created a nearly impregnable prison. That made the prison as strong as possible, but it also means that eventually somebody will open it. I have spent my long life preparing myself to be the right person to release the demons on strict conditions, and rule over them. Heed my words: With or without me, eventually that prison will be opened. Where others would fail and unleash ruin upon the world, I will succeed. In time, I will use the power of my position to reinstate balance in the world so magical creatures won't have to cower in preserves and prisons. By virtue of my position, I will use evil to bring about good."

Seth lowered his face into his hands. "Let's pretend everything you're saying is straight from the heart. How can we possibly trust that you're the right person to open the prison? Wouldn't it be safer to try to make sure it never gets opened?"

"Only in the short term," the Sphinx said. "Eventually, even if it is well beyond our lifetimes, the prison will be opened. It is inevitable. And if the prison does not open on my terms, it may well mean the end of the world."

"But you can't live forever," Seth said. "Even with a Font of Immortality. It breaks your rule that everything with a beginning has to end. If you release the demons, what happens when you die?"

The Sphinx grinned. "Good thinking. I will live as long as I can. But if a full week ever passes without a sip from the Font, I turn to dust. No matter what precautions I take, given infinite time, that will eventually happen. Which is why I must set up a system, a kingdom, a new order, that can persist long after I am gone. It is all part of my plan."

“Grandpa Sorenson doesn’t trust that you’re the guy to do this. And neither do I.”

“Which is your right, and his,” the Sphinx acknowledged. “I would not trust anyone besides myself to do it, so I can understand how others might not trust me. This is why I don’t hate your grandfather, why I simply view us as being in a state of disagreement.”

Seth balled his hands into fists. “You get that he’s right, don’t you? You get that you’re overestimating yourself, that the demons will trick you or overpower you? If you succeed in opening Zzyzx, you’re going to destroy the whole world!”

“I have confronted these doubts and overcome them,” the Sphinx said calmly. “I have prepared. I am certain. I have been a slave, Seth. As master, I will release the prisoners and create a world without slaves.”

Seth shifted on his cushion. There was something disconcerting about the Sphinx’s expression, an overzealousness. “Here’s what I don’t get: if you open Zzyzx, when do you get to negotiate with the demons? Once they’re out, where’s your bargaining power?”

“A reasonable concern. There is a time before the prison fully opens when communication will be possible. If they will not agree to my terms, I will close the gate. I am fully prepared to walk away, and they will know this, and so they will compromise.”

Seth studied the Sphinx suspiciously. “How much of this is Nagi Yoma’s idea?”

“Nagi Luna. It was her aim from the start, from our first conversation, to eventually free herself and the other demons.”

Seth sat up straight. “Then how do you know she didn’t trick you into feeling so confident about it? How do you know she didn’t brainwash you?”

“I have done all the research myself,” the Sphinx said. “It has taken many lifetimes, but I am sure of my course.”

Seth shook his head. “How much do you rely on her?”

“Very little, although more lately than in a long while. She is the key to my use of the Oculus.”

“You have her look for you?”

“No. Your sister inspired my method. When Kendra gazed into the Oculus, she found a mentor who helped her awaken from the seeing trance.

She claimed it was Ruth, but I believe she was fibbing. At any rate, Nagi Luna is extremely clairvoyant, although within her prison her sight is limited. When I need to awaken from gazing, I look to her, and she brings me back.”

“You trust her that much?”

“Insofar as our goals remain aligned.”

Seth filled his cheeks with air and blew out slowly. “So this is what the guy who will destroy the world looks like.”

“After I succeed, Seth, I will be generous to those who doubted or opposed me. When I speak of a world without prisoners, that includes you and your family.”

“Sounds like a good policy. Why not start right now?”

The Sphinx smiled enigmatically. “Some ends are worth enduring any means. For now, hostages, deceit, treachery, and even killing are tools to accomplishing the greatest good for the greatest number. For the moment, Seth, you are in the way. A devoted member of my opposition. Hopefully, after I establish my new order, we can work together. You can help me manage my empire, and I can help you achieve your potential.”

“We can sit around and talk to zombies,” Seth mumbled.

“Don’t undervalue your gifts,” the Sphinx chastised. “Mr. Lich is probably the most powerful viviblix in the world. He can create and control undead servants. But he cannot hear their thoughts, their voices.”

“I guess I should count my blessings,” Seth said dryly.

“You have not yet understood the advantage of that gift. The undead feel utterly alone. Their communication with each other is limited or nonexistent. They have no communication with the living. But with you and me, they can sense our minds, as we can sense theirs. We become a link to life, and they would do anything to preserve that link.”

“I’ve had strange creatures offer to serve me,” Seth admitted.

“Creatures who would serve no other man would serve us. Commanding them must be done with caution, because any of the undead can turn on you. But whereas, at his best, Mr. Lich can issue simple commands to zombies, we can employ wraiths, shades, phantoms. Demons and their kind will pause to hear our counsel. The undead can supply us with knowledge. And that is only one aspect of our powers.”

The Sphinx raised a hand and the room plunged into darkness. The temperature began to drop. The floor tilted and spun. And then the lights came back on, and the dizzy spell passed.

“You did that?” Seth asked.

“So can you, and much more, with instruction and practice.”

Seth pressed his lips together. “I’m not going to pretend that isn’t cool.” He paused, hands folded in his lap. “All right, you’ve convinced me. I want to join your cause. I don’t agree with what you’re doing, but I don’t see how anyone will stop you. If you’re going to open that prison, for the sake of the world, you’ll need all the help you can get.”

The Sphinx licked his lips. “We both know you’re lying. I appreciate the attempt.”

“No, I’m serious. What, you think I would betray you? How? I’m barely a teenager!”

“I have told you some of my secrets,” the Sphinx said. “I asked for an honest conversation. That works two ways. I take it your grandfather has not yet discovered how to use the Chronometer?”

“They’re working on it,” Seth said vaguely. He didn’t want to reveal anything the Sphinx might find useful. “I never promised to give you secrets.”

“And the Chronometer remains at Fablehaven, correct?”

“No comment.”

“To think, both of the final artifacts are together in one place. Even if they are moved, both are now in play, and I have the Oculus.” The Sphinx studied Seth intently. “Tell me about Vanessa.”

Seth closed his eyes. “Just because you’re willing to spill your guts doesn’t mean I have to join in. I’m not like you. I don’t have this figured out like a chess game. I don’t know what information is crucial to the outcome of all this, so I’m keeping my mouth shut.”

After several seconds ticked past without a response, Seth opened his eyes. The Sphinx held his gaze with grim intensity. “Very well. You have already told me enough. More than you know. This interview is at an end. We’ll speak again after Zzyzx is open.”

“Wait,” Seth said. “Seriously, I have one more question. Where are my parents?”

The Sphinx's expression softened slightly. "They are safe, Seth."

"Why did you take them?"

"I wanted to ensure that you and your grandparents would not go into deep hiding with the Chronometer and the key to the Translocator. I wanted to motivate you to remain active and involved. And, in the event of an emergency, I wanted bargaining power. That is all I can share at the moment. You are now my prisoner. Behave, and you will not be mistreated." The Sphinx crossed the room and opened the door. "Mirav! Please escort the prisoner to his cell."

The wizard with the braided beard and golden skin came into view. The man looked wrong, not quite human. Seth tried to keep his face from revealing the apprehension he felt. He stood up, feeling tense. Was there any point in trying to fight? What if he rushed to the desk and flipped it over? Might the Oculus shatter? He doubted it. Was it worth a try? He didn't want to slink meekly to his cell like a trained poodle.

"You want to come quietly," the Sphinx assured him, as if reading his thoughts. "Any resistance you could offer would be embarrassingly futile. I do not always use Mirav to escort prisoners to the dungeon. Consider it a compliment."

Hating himself for not resisting more, Seth obeyed.



Doomsday Capsule

The fairies kept the grounds around the main house of Fablehaven in bloom all year, but as Kendra wandered the perimeter of the yard, the blossoms seemed extra bright, as if springtime lent added splendor even to enchanted gardens. The flowers looked bigger—tulips the size of coffee mugs, roses the size of soup bowls, and sunflowers larger than dinner plates. The colors seemed more vibrant, the grass shockingly green, the flower petals vividly ablaze with electric shades. Fresh perfumes mingled in the air, light and dewy. Gleaming fairies fluttered everywhere, basking in the vernal glory.

Kendra felt certain her perceptions of the garden's enhanced beauty had nothing to do with her mood. It had been three days since the group had returned from Obsidian Waste, and they still had no leads on finding Seth. Warren, Coulter, and Tanu had teleported around the globe using the Translocator, Vanessa had reached out to her best contacts, and Grandpa had tried every method he knew to hail the Sphinx, but none of their efforts had yielded results. The Translocator could take them places they had been before, but it was becoming increasingly obvious that in order to find Seth

and her parents, they would have to venture someplace none of them had ever visited.

As Kendra drank in the springtime splendor, she imagined her parents, tied up in a sunless cell, confused, hungry, and ill. While a fairy used sparkling magic to enliven the highlights of a delicate orchid, she pictured her brother, imprisoned in a bottle like some genie in a lamp. Or worse, out of the bottle, dying from a severe chest wound. How was it possible that she was roaming a glorious garden while the rest of her family suffered?

“Hey, grouchy face, is your brother around?”

The voice came from the woods. Looking up, Kendra saw Newel and Doren standing beyond the border of the lawn.

“Seth can’t play,” she informed them. “He was captured by the Society of the Evening Star.”

“The Society?” Doren said. “Oh, no!”

Newel let loose a roaring laugh, slapping his furry thigh and elbowing Doren. “Don’t be daft, Doren, it’s April Fool’s Day. Good one, Kendra!”

Kendra paused. The satyr was right, today was the first of April. Without Seth around to fill the sugar bowl with salt or stick bouillon cubes in the showerheads, she had completely forgotten. “No, I’m really not—” Kendra began, but Newel raised a hand to silence her.

“Before you go on,” Newel chuckled, “I have very important news. Doren and I were strolling past the hill where the Forgotten Chapel used to be, and it has split wide open. Muriel emerged astride Bahumat, and we tailed them as they proceeded to wake up Olloch the Glutton. They’re all heading this way! Quick, fetch Stan!” Newel grimaced with mirth, shoulders quivering with suppressed laughter.

Doren rapped Newel with the back of his hand. “I think she means it. Look at her face.”

Newel put one hand on his hip and held out the other toward Kendra. “It’s called acting, dunderhead. She’s staying in character to try to sell the joke. Which is bad form, by the way, Kendra. Once you’ve been exposed, you’re better off starting fresh with a different ploy later. Don’t try another on me, of course. Hard to kid a kidder.”

“But she was pacing the yard looking all sour before we hailed her,” Doren reminded his friend.

“Acting!” Newel shouted. “She must have seen us coming. She was laying groundwork for the joke. She’d do well on a soap opera. She’s plenty pretty. Kendra, give me a glare like I threatened your boyfriend. Why are you rolling your eyes? Give it a shot! Pretend I’m a casting director.”

“How did it happen?” Doren asked, ignoring Newel.

“A lectoblix shot him with an arrow,” Kendra said, her patience thinning. “Seth took a gaseous potion and ended up trapped in a bottle by an evil wizard. We don’t know where they took him.”

Newel winked. “A good lie is all about the details. Quirky details can help sell a tall tale, but there’s a line where quirky crosses over to ridiculous.”

“Newel would know,” Doren said. “He lives on the ridiculous side.”

Newel turned to face the other satyr, raising his fists like a boxer, hips swaying. “And you, my friend, have just crossed over to the dangerous side.”

Doren didn’t take the bait. “This isn’t an April Fool’s prank. She lost her parents to the Society, and now her brother, the very best human we know.”

“I wish it were a prank,” Kendra said.

Newel dropped out of his fighting stance, uncertainty flickering across his features. Then his knowing look returned. He pointed at both Kendra and Doren. “I get it, you’re both in on it, going for the hard sell. As soon as I soften up and buy it, you have a good laugh. Not bad—somewhat lacking in subtlety, but not bad.”

“Here comes Warren,” Doren said, gesturing toward the house. “He can settle the issue.”

“Can he, now?” Newel said knowingly. “And I suppose he isn’t in on the sham as well? You’re a devious lot, I’ll grant you that much. Next you’ll march in a notary with signed documents.”

Kendra could hardly believe she was having this conversation. She waved at Warren. He looked much better shaved and with his hair cut short. “Any news?”

“Nothing new on Seth yet,” he answered. “But your grandparents want to see us. These two hitting you up for batteries?”

“They’re reminding me that it’s April Fool’s Day,” Kendra said.

“Good day, Warren,” Newel called. “You’re just in time. The shadow plague has started up again! The centaurs are on a rampage!”

“What do Grandma and Grandpa want?” Kendra asked.

“They weren’t specific,” Warren said. “Something in the attic.”

“Sorry, guys,” Kendra said to the satyrs. “I have to go.”

“Let us know if there’s anything we can do,” Doren said.

Kendra gave a nod. “I will.”

“Are you guys filming this?” Newel chortled, eying the surrounding foliage suspiciously. “If so, you’re wasting resources. I am not going to fall for it.”

“See you later,” Kendra called, joining Warren.

“Hey, Kendra,” Newel said. “Before you go, could you lend me a handkerchief? Or some other personal token? I want to get a rise out of Verl, pretend you’ve fallen for him.”

“Oh, that could be good,” Doren snickered.

“Don’t you dare,” Kendra warned over her shoulder. “That isn’t funny, it’s cruel.”

“No crueler than pretending my best friend was kidnapped!” Newel countered.

“What am I?” Doren asked in a mildly offended undertone.

“You’re more like family,” Newel said. “I meant my best human friend. Yours too.”

“He really was kidnapped,” Doren asserted. “She’s not joking.”

“Twenty percent of me believes you,” Newel replied. “I’ll ask again tomorrow.”

“Does this have anything to do with Seth?” Kendra asked Warren as they walked toward the house. “If they heard something bad, I’d rather hear it now.”

“This isn’t bad news,” Warren said. “I think they need your help deciphering an inscription.”

Kendra followed Warren into the house, up to her grandparents’ room, and over to the bathroom closet. The heavy door to the secret side of the attic looked like it belonged on a bank vault. Warren spun the combination wheel, hauled the door open, and then pulled it shut behind them as Kendra started up the stairs.

Grandma, Grandpa, Coulter, and Tanu awaited Kendra. A workbench stretched along one wall; wooden cabinets lined the others. Unusual objects littered the room—tribal masks, a mannequin, a huge globe, a timeworn phonograph, a birdcage. Trunks, boxes, and other containers were stacked everywhere, accessible by narrow aisles.

Grandpa smiled at Kendra. They all smiled at her. They had all been smiling a lot since Obsidian Waste. Kendra appreciated their intentions, but the attention felt too much like pity, and only served to emphasize her loss.

“How are you today?” Grandpa asked.

“Is this an April Fool’s joke?” Kendra asked. “If so, don’t bother, Newel and Doren already reminded me about the holiday.”

“We’re not here to jest,” Grandpa said. He glanced at Grandma. “However, it is peculiar that we’ll be opening the capsule on April first.”

“What capsule?” Kendra wondered.

“There are a few secret doors and compartments in this attic,” Grandma explained. “One hidden door leads to a turret. Patton left a time capsule inside the turret, a secret passed down by previous caretakers.”

“Does it have a timer?” Kendra asked. “If it’s set to open today, maybe it is a joke!” Prank or not, she would love to hear from Patton. It was strange to have met him, to have worked alongside him to save Fablehaven, and to know he had passed away long before she was born.

“Patton didn’t call it a time capsule,” Grandpa said. “He called it his Doomsday Capsule. As caretaker of Fablehaven, I was left with instructions not to open it unless the end of the world appeared imminent.”

“You never mentioned this before,” Kendra said.

“It was meant to remain a secret,” Grandpa replied. “But I think the time has come to crack it open. Your grandmother agrees. We’ve run out of leads. We desperately need whatever help we can get.”

“What about Vanessa?” Kendra said. “She’s still keeping secrets.”

Grandpa sighed. “She has hinted that her big secret might be revealed soon. She insists it’s in our best interest for her to keep silent about it a little longer.”

Grandma scowled. “Whatever reasons she gives, I say she’s holding out until she gets her freedom, trying to preserve leverage—assuming there was ever a real secret to begin with.”

“She has steadily provided us with useful info,” Tanu said.

“Useful but not vital,” Coulter huffed.

Grandma took Kendra by the hand. “There are some characters on the outside of the canister that we cannot read. We believe they offer further instructions that may help us finalize our decision.”

“You need me to translate,” Kendra said. “Where is it?”

Coulter led them over to one of the many tall cabinets lining the walls, pulled open the doors, then stepped inside and opened the false back. “We normally keep this cabinet full of junk,” Coulter said. “We recently cleaned it out, since we’ve been weighing whether to open the capsule.”

Kendra passed through the cabinet and down three steps into the cramped, round room of the turret. A steel cylinder rested in the center of the floor, almost as tall as her waist. To Kendra, the writing engraved in the sides of the container looked like English.

Coulter, Grandpa, and Grandma filed into the room, filling the available space around the capsule. Warren and Tanu watched from the cabinet. “Can you read it?” Grandpa asked.

“Open only in a time of utmost crisis pertaining to Zzyzx and the end of the world,” Kendra read. *“The key to the capsule must be turned by one who shares my bloodline, and an umite candle must be burning in the room, or else the capsule will destroy itself.”*

“Anything else?” Grandpa asked.

“That’s all I see,” Kendra replied, inspecting the capsule from all directions. She ran a hand along the curved metal surface, feeling the grooves of the writing below her fingers.

“We didn’t know about the candle,” Grandma said. “That could have ended badly.”

“Nor did we know that whoever turned the key had to be related to Patton,” Grandpa said.

“Pays to read the instructions,” Coulter grumbled.

“You have the key?” Kendra asked.

Grandpa held up a long, black key with elaborate teeth. “Your grandmother will have to do the honors.”

“Or Warren,” Grandma added.

“I’ll fetch a candle,” Coulter offered, exiting the turret.

“Where’s Dale?” Kendra asked.

“Keeping the preserve running,” Grandpa said.

Grandma folded her arms. “What would we do without Dale and Hugo?”

“What do you think we’ll find inside?” Warren wondered.

Grandpa shrugged. “Information, probably. A weapon, perhaps. Nothing would surprise me. Knowing Patton, it might hold the final artifact.”

“Are you worried about whether the Sphinx will watch us open it?” Kendra asked.

“This attic is well shielded from prying eyes,” Grandpa said. “Of course, nothing can totally divert the Oculus. If the Sphinx happens to be looking hard at us right now, he’ll see what we’re doing. But we can’t let his possession of the Oculus paralyze us. He can’t possibly spy on us all the time.”

“Even if he could watch us constantly, we would need to remain active,” Grandma said. “As long as the Sphinx holds the Oculus, we’ll need to be as discreet as possible, and hope for a little luck.”

Coulter returned with the candle already lit. “Do I just hold it?”

“Stand near the capsule,” Grandpa instructed. “Ruth, would you do the honors?”

Grandma inserted the key in the top of the capsule and turned it. After hearing a click, Grandpa helped her unscrew the top of the canister. Grandma set aside the round lid. Kendra held her breath as Grandpa reached inside.

Grandpa withdrew a rolled scroll from the capsule. He peered inside, then felt around for a moment. “Looks like this is all he included.” He unrolled the scroll and raised his eyebrows. “We’ll need Kendra to read it.”

Kendra took the scroll from Grandpa. Just like the characters on the container, the message looked written in English. At the bottom was a labeled diagram of the Chronometer.

Greetings, current guardians of Fablehaven.

You may not be reading this very long after I visited you. From the evidence I beheld in your time, the Society was in the final stages of their plot to open Zzyzx. I have more information that might be of use to you, but did not want to risk writing all of it down. I will share what I can. I have learned how you can use the Chronometer to send up to five people back in time. The Chronometer will only transport mortals, and will only take you as far back as the day of your birth. To clarify, the device will transport any group of mortals as far back as the day the eldest member of the group was born. Traveling back in time, you will not be able to bring any items with you.

Below you will find instructions on how to set the Chronometer to take you to September 24, 1940, at half past eight in the evening. If Coulter remains with you, he should be just old enough to reach that day. If not, you will have to find a willing participant of the appropriate age.

Should you elect to use the Chronometer to visit my time, do so in the attic. I look forward to perhaps seeing some of you again. I would be thrilled to discover that my advice is not required.

Yours always,

Patton Burgess

Kendra read the message to the others.

“If we ever needed advice from Patton, now would be the time,” Grandpa said.

“You five go,” Tanu suggested. “Patton will want to see his relatives. I can hold down the fort.”

Coulter looked overjoyed. He had Kendra translate the Chronometer instructions and decipher the labels to the diagram. He kept smiling and nodding. Having spent months trying to figure out how to operate the Chronometer, he seemed to absorb the meaning of the instructions without hesitation, although to Kendra the directions sounded extremely confusing.

“The Chronometer is here in the attic,” he said once Kendra had finished. “No time like the present, right?”

“I see no advantage in waiting,” Grandpa agreed.

They passed out of the turret into the main part of the attic. Coulter retrieved the Chronometer, a golden orb etched with engravings and bristling with little buttons and dials. Coulter fiddled with the switches and dials, asking Kendra to retranslate a few instructions from the scroll. Applying the settings did not take him long.

“This should do it,” Coulter announced. “Everyone who is coming needs to place a hand on the device. And I need to slide this lever, then flip this little switch.”

Kendra felt her heart racing. This was all so sudden. Was she really about to see Patton again? Might he have advice that could help them out of their bleak predicament?

The others had placed their hands on the orb. Kendra added hers.

“Here goes nothing,” Coulter said. He placed a finger on what looked like an embossed symbol, slid it along a groove, then toggled a tiny switch.

Kendra felt like somebody kicked her in the stomach. She doubled over, the air violently escaping her lungs. She looked up, unable to inhale. Coulter, Grandma, and Grandpa had collapsed to the attic floor, hands around their midsections. Warren crouched with his hands on his knees. She averted her eyes, because none of them had clothes on.

Coulter made a miserable croaking sound. Warren started coughing. Kendra let out a little burp, then found she could inhale again. Her temporary panic melted as her lungs continued to function.

A robe was gently placed over her shoulders from behind. Kendra turned. It was Patton, his hair white and wispy, his head liver-spotted, a roguish smile enlivening his withered face. A faint scar that Kendra did not recall slanted diagonally across his forehead. He seemed slimmer and shorter, his frail shoulders stooped.

“Just breathe, Kendra,” he said, his voice familiar though less hearty. He gingerly patted her back.

Taking shuffling steps, Patton distributed soft white robes to the others. Warren helped Grandma and Grandpa arise. Coulter beamed as he accepted his robe. “Nice to see you again, Patton.”

Patton nodded and shuffled over to a rocking chair. Kendra did not remember the chair, but was surprised by how similar the attic looked, still cluttered, although some of the items and containers looked less timeworn. Using the armrests to brace himself, Patton sat down carefully.

“Well, I know I’ll be dead within a year,” Patton said.

“What do you mean?” Warren replied.

Patton rubbed his nose with the back of a finger. “I update the scroll every year, pushing the date when you can visit closer to your time. Since you finally made an appearance, it means I’ve made my final update. I had hoped to reach one hundred. Nice round number. I suppose I can’t complain. I’m glad I lived long enough for Coulter to bring you here. One less headache for you to worry about.”

“A few more years and I could have brought us,” Stan said.

“I didn’t explain everything in the note,” Patton said. He pulled out a pocket watch and a monocle, using the lens to check the time. Satisfied, he put them away. “We only have half an hour together. You’ll notice that the Chronometer did not travel with you. In half an hour, if you stand in approximately the same spot where you entered this time, you will be drawn home to your proper era. If not, you’ll become trapped in my time. If we need to talk longer, you’ll have to come again. Coulter, that would mean giving knob C-5 three-quarters of a turn.”

“Gotcha,” Coulter said.

Patton leaned forward. “Let’s get right into the serious stuff. Does the Sphinx have the Oculus?”

“Yes,” Grandma said.

Patton scowled. “I knew I shouldn’t have left it in Brazil. I debated about going after it, but I was already past my prime . . . well, water under the bridge. At least in this time, the Sphinx does not have it yet, so we can converse with confidence. Does he have the Translocator?”

“We have it,” Grandpa said.

Patton brightened. “You retrieved the key from Wyrmoost?”

“Wasn’t easy,” Warren said. “We have Kendra to thank more than anyone.”

Patton regarded her warmly. “Well done, my dear. The Sphinx still has the Sands of Sanctity?”

“Right,” Grandpa said.

“What about the Font of Immortality?”

“We’re not sure,” Grandma said. “We haven’t been able to find the fifth secret preserve.”

Patton scowled thoughtfully. “I never found the fifth preserve either. Or the Font of Immortality. You know, then. The Sphinx surely has been around a long time.”

“You think he already has it?” Grandpa asked.

“Can’t say for certain,” Patton admitted. “That would be my best guess. I’m downright talented at finding things. But the fifth preserve and the Font of Immortality completely eluded me. In all my days, I never heard a believable rumor about either.”

“The Sphinx captured Seth,” Kendra said, trying to keep her voice steady. “Members of the Society grabbed him at Obsidian Waste. They also kidnapped my parents.”

Patton sat up straighter. “Did your parents finally learn the truth about Fablehaven?”

“No,” Grandpa said. “Apparently the Sphinx abducted them regardless.”

Patton narrowed his eyes, fingers gripping the armrests of the rocker. “I would trade just about anything to have words with that maniac. I don’t reckon wishing will do me much good. Do you know whether he has learned to use the Oculus effectively?”

“Yes,” Kendra said. “At Wyrmoost, the Fairy Queen confirmed that she saw him using it. He needs assistance. Someone else helps him free his mind from the grip of the Oculus when he wants to quit.”

Patton gave a quick nod. He lowered his head, hands folded on his lap. For a moment, Kendra thought he had dozed off. Then he looked up. “If the Sphinx can use the Oculus, your plight is indeed dire. He will be very difficult to stop. The hardest part about opening Zzyzx is acquiring the necessary knowledge and locating the appropriate items. Mastery of the Oculus will lead the Sphinx to success.”

“What can we do?” Grandpa asked.

“Guard the artifacts you have,” Patton said. “There may be times when it would be prudent to use the Translocator, but not many. The Sphinx is

patient and intelligent. If he anticipates a location you might visit using the Translocator, and manages to steal it, all is lost.”

“Is there a better place to hide the artifacts than at Fablehaven?” Grandma asked.

“I don’t like the idea of having two artifacts in the same place,” Patton said. “But I like the idea of transporting them even less, especially since the Sphinx has the Oculus. The closest thing to a wizard I might trust is Agad at Wyrmoost. He understands the stakes. Some of you could get there instantaneously with the Translocator. Almost no location is as well defended as a dragon sanctuary. If all else fails, Wyrmoost might serve as a last resort. You’ll have to apply your best judgment.”

Patton studied their faces before going on. “In the event you lose all of the artifacts, you may need to know where to find Zzyzx. Are you aware of the exact location?”

Nobody responded at first, then Grandpa shook his head.

“Zzyzx is located in the Atlantic, on an island southwest of Bermuda. Shoreless Isle.” He recited the latitude and longitude. “As you might imagine, it is nearly impossible to find. Hence the name. Massive distracter spells drive away attention, along with other defenses. Ships have a history of vanishing in that vicinity.”

“The Bermuda Triangle,” Coulter murmured.

“Have you been there?” Grandpa asked.

One corner of Patton’s mouth quirked up into a lopsided smile. “Why would I go and do such a foolish thing? Unless there were a shrine to the Fairy Queen on that island, and I had decided to visit as many of her shrines as I could reach.”

“Can you tell us anything useful about Shoreless Isle?” Grandma asked.

“Beautiful place,” Patton said. “They should have chosen an uglier spot for the prison. Maybe the island was uglier back when the wizards founded it. What I saw was a waste of paradise. The island is bigger than you might guess. Zzyzx lies inside the central mountain, a huge dome of rock. The shrine is on the east side. Reaching the island can be problematic.”

“How did you get there?” Kendra asked.

Patton regarded her with a twinkle in his eye. "A ghost ship. But that was a one-way trip, fraught with peril. I rode home on a giant bird."

"What kind of bird?" Coulter wondered.

"Something similar to a thunderbird," Patton said. "Temperamental to ride, not highly recommended. I brought it with me on the ship."

"What else can you tell us?" Grandpa pursued.

"If the Sphinx has the Oculus, depending on his mastery and knowledge, sooner or later he'll be going after the Eternals. Have you caught wind of them yet?"

"The Eternals?" Warren asked.

"Five of them," Patton said. "One associated with each artifact. They are part of the lock that holds Zzyzx closed, debatably the final obstacle. They were once regular humans, but the wizards who founded Zzyzx made them virtually immortal. The artifacts can't open the prison until all five are dead."

"I've never heard of this," Grandpa said. "Not even a whisper."

"Me neither," Warren added, a hint of jealousy in his voice.

"Took some digging," Patton said. "Serious digging. It is one of the secrets I never wrote about. Anonymity has historically been one of their best forms of protection."

"Does anybody know where they are?" Warren asked.

"Not likely. I tried to find them. I believe I met one in Japan, years ago. A man, middle-aged, always had an exotic bird with him. He could be anywhere now. But if the Sphinx searches for them with the Oculus, anonymity will no longer shield them. They must get behind sturdy walls."

"Is there any way we could find them without the Oculus?" Grandpa asked.

Patton shrugged. "It would be tough. The trail is cold. You might pay the Singing Sisters a visit. Or take a stroll in the Hall of Whispers. Or try to get the Totem Wall to speak."

"The Singing Sisters?" Warren asked Grandpa dubiously. "The Hall of Whispers? Are those real?"

"Shady magic," Grandpa said. "The kind that usually comes with a steep price."

“I’m not claiming to have convenient solutions,” Patton said. “You asked, I’m telling what I might try.”

“How can they be killed?” Kendra asked. “You said the Eternals are nearly immortal.”

“They don’t age, they don’t get sick, and they don’t die easily,” Patton said. “From what I understand, they are somehow connected to the magic of the artifacts, especially the Sands of Sanctity and the Font of Immortality. To slay them would require dragon breath, phoenix fire, a mortal wound from a unicorn horn, or some weapon of similar potency.”

“Anything else to tell us about Zzyxz?” Grandpa probed.

Patton frowned. “Not right now. Come again if things get worse, and I might share a few truly desperate ideas. Hopefully we’ll never have that conversation. Before you go, let’s talk strategy. You have worked every angle to find Seth and his parents?”

“Everything,” Grandpa said.

“Everything short of the Singing Sisters,” Grandma added.

Patton shook his head. “Stan is right, the Sisters are dangerous and unreliable, a last resort. You have found no leads?”

“None,” Warren said. “It’s like they’ve fallen off the planet.”

Patton scratched his cheek. “Ever get that secret out of Vanessa?”

Grandpa flushed slightly. “Not yet. She claims she’ll reveal it soon.”

“Until you have that secret, you have not exhausted all leads. Get her to talk. Kendra, have you spoken with the Fairy Queen lately?”

“The shrine at Fablehaven is ruined,” Kendra reminded him.

“Might be time to find a shrine to visit,” Patton said. “Even if it takes some effort. The Fairy Queen is a mortal enemy of the Demon King. This threat will get her attention. You are in need of allies. Who knows how she might be able to help? You mentioned she could perceive the Sphinx using the Oculus?”

“Right.”

“That doesn’t seem right,” Patton said. “Even a powerful outside entity would normally have to be invited to connect to the Oculus. Using the Oculus would make the Sphinx vulnerable to powerful minds, but he would have to let down his guard for them to really gain access.”

“I might have invited her when I used it,” Kendra replied.

“You used the Oculus?” Patton exclaimed.

Kendra explained about getting kidnapped by Torina and being forced by the Sphinx to use the Oculus. She told how the Fairy Queen helped her break free from the hold the Oculus had on her mind.

“I see,” Patton said. “Through you, as you willingly reached out to her, the Fairy Queen found a link to the Oculus. If she has preserved that link, she may have new information about the Sphinx. You must follow up on this.”

“We will,” Grandpa promised.

Patton nodded. “Let’s discuss priorities. As I mentioned before, your first priority is to retain the artifacts you have. The Society cannot succeed without them. Second priority is to get the Oculus away from the Sphinx. Until that happens, destruction will constantly loom. My hunch is that if you find Seth and his folks, you’ll find the Sphinx and the Oculus. Use the possible leads we discussed, especially Vanessa. You may want to task some of the Knights with locating and protecting the Eternals. No small assignment, but worth the effort. Since stealth no longer provides the protection that the Eternals expect, you must alert them that an enemy has the Oculus and try to direct them to safety.”

Grandpa rubbed his mouth and chin, lost in thought. Raising his eyebrows, he locked eyes with Patton. “I wish we had a man like you in our time.”

“You’ve done great work, Stan,” Patton said tenderly. “You have surrounded yourself with more quality people than I’ve ever encountered.” He switched his gaze to Warren. “I would not be surprised to learn that many of you surpass my accomplishments. Let’s face it, Stan, you are dealing with greater challenges than I ever had to weather.” He gave a perturbed smile. “Most of my hardships were self-inflicted.”

“Speaking of quality people,” Kendra said, “is Lena around?”

“Lena is fantastic,” Patton replied. “More radiant than ever. How she can fake affection for an old bag of bones like me defies explanation. She is downstairs as we speak, with strict instructions not to disturb me. She has learned to indulge my senile whims.”

“We can’t see her?” Kendra asked.

“No, because time travel is rare, dangerous magic,” Patton said. “I have no reason to believe Lena ever laid eyes on you until the day you first came

to Fablehaven. In theory, I don't believe a time machine can really alter the past. I believe that anyone who tries will just discover that whatever actions they take were already part of the past. But I'm also not sure the wizards who designed the Chronometer fully understood the powers they were tampering with. I doubt paradoxes could be created, but I'm not eager to take any risks. As much as you all would enjoy seeing Lena, she knows none of you yet. She will, in due time. Perhaps it would be best to leave it that way."

"If the Chronometer can't change the past, what's the point?" Kendra asked.

"We know the Chronometer can affect the present," Patton said. "Your present. Like when I visited you during the shadow plague. And like I am trying to do now, by sharing information. The Chronometer can also make use of the past to affect the future. For those who wish to access Zzyzx, it is a necessary tool."

"You're starting to break my brain," Warren said.

Patton chuckled. "Mine too." His face took on a wistful expression, his eyes moistening. "I wish I could have done more, somehow averted all of this. I spent my life trying. I honestly gave it my best."

"You did more than we could have hoped or imagined," Grandma said, laying a hand on his.

Patton winked at Grandpa. "You married a good one."

"Course I did. She's a Burgess."

Patton pulled out his pocket watch and his monocle. "Time has a way of slipping by. You should have a few minutes still, but it might not hurt for you to move toward your original positions. You remember the latitude and longitude of Zzyzx?"

Coulter repeated the coordinates. Kendra went and stood where she had been when she had crossed into this time period. The others did likewise.

"Anything else you want to review?" Patton asked.

"We may visit you again," Coulter said. "If we want to come again, I'd give knob C-5 a three-quarter turn."

"You got it," Patton said. "I should have had Lena make refreshments. I did that for the first few years I waited for you. I guess I started to believe I might really make it to a hundred."

“It was good to see you,” Kendra said, trying to keep from choking up. Her emotions were a mess lately.

Patton rocked himself to his feet, came over, and gave her a hug. “That brother of yours will be fine. Don’t be surprised if he shows up on your doorstep with the Oculus in his hip pocket.”

Kendra hugged Patton back. He felt bony.

“Not too tight,” Patton laughed. “I’ve gotten brittle. I’m glad I got to see all of you again. Sorry it took the end of the world to provoke a reunion.”

Warren and Coulter chuckled bitterly.

“Do something nice to Lena for me,” Kendra said.

“I’ll think of something special,” Patton promised, stepping away.

“Thanks, Patton,” Grandma said.

“My pleasure, Ruth.”

They stood in silence. Kendra hated the tension, waiting for Patton to be gone. Part of her wanted to stay, to somehow hide from all the heartache waiting back in the present.

“Seth is going to be mad he missed this,” Kendra said.

“Send him my very best,” Patton said.

“I think he—”

All the breath went out of Kendra. The robe was gone, her clothes were back, and she was doubled over, trying to breathe. Once again, Grandpa, Grandma, and Coulter had fallen down.

“Are you all right?” Tanu asked. “What happened? Did it work?”

Warren got his breath back first. “We spoke with Patton for half an hour.”

Tanu shook his head, helping Grandma up. “You guys didn’t even flicker. Coulter flipped the switch, and you all crumpled like somebody slugged you in the gut. Was it productive?”

Grandpa gave a curt nod. “We have work to do.”

Chapter 8



Bracken

Seth sat on the rickety cot in his gloomy cell, watching faint torchlight flicker through the barred peephole in the door. On the far side of the stone enclosure, water dripped with the regularity of a metronome, forming a puddle that slowly seeped into the cracks of the floor, perhaps to drip down to a deeper cell. Beside him sat the latest meal, a brick of tough meat, a wedge of moldy cheese, and a greasy mound of purple mush. He had gnawed at the scabby meat, unsure what he was eating. The stinky cheese had a sharp flavor. He had failed to convince himself that the mold was supposed to be there. The purple pulp had not tasted bad, almost sweet, but the texture was unbearably stringy, as if long, coarse hairs had been a deliberate ingredient.

This was not the dungeon at Fablehaven. This was the real thing. They had marched him along dank passageways, down crumbling stairs, and through a series of guarded iron doors. The smells were earthy and old, pungent odors of rot, mildew, filth, and stone. The wooden door to his cell was five or six inches thick. Meals arrived on woven mats through a slot at the bottom. A new meal did not come unless he made the previous mat accessible.

From time to time the echoes of distant screams interrupted the monotonous dripping. Less often, a deep voice would croak sad songs about the sea. Occasionally he would hear footfalls and see a torch pass by his peephole, the direct firelight seeming very bright.

Seth had not seen another person since he was locked in his cell. He longed for a conversation. How many days had it been? Several meals. He wondered how many times a day he received food.

Climbing off the cot, Seth crawled across the rough stone floor to the flimsy pan of water near the door. Without a cup, he had to drink on all fours like a dog. The pan was so broad that lifting it meant he would almost certainly spill, and he only got a refill with each meal. He had discovered that puckering his lips and sucking worked best. The water tasted flat and gritty, but it was wet and, together with whatever food he could stomach, would hopefully keep him alive.

Seth visited the small hole in the front left corner of his cell. The smell rising from it made him want to retch. After a brief hesitation, he decided to relieve himself later.

Alone with his thoughts, he returned to his cot. He wondered if the Sphinx had truly convinced himself that opening Zzyzx was a good thing. It had to be an excuse he gave to others. Nobody could really believe something so insane.

Seth wondered about his family. His parents might be imprisoned in this same dungeon. Judging by the many halls he had passed and the several levels he had descended on his way to his cell, the dungeon was immense. He tried to imagine the deepest cell, where Nagi Luna still lurked.

He tried not to imagine getting rescued. What were the chances that Kendra or Grandpa or anyone would ever find this place? People had been looking for the fifth preserve for hundreds of years. A rescue was highly unlikely. He would do better simply to hope that the others would not be captured as well.

How long would this cell be his home? It really might be for the rest of his life. Then again, if the Sphinx opened Zzyzx, the rest of his life might not be very long.

He picked up the brick of meat, nibbling at a salty corner. Would he learn to tolerate this food? Look forward to it?

Seth wondered if he could convince the Sphinx he wanted to be his apprentice. If he served him, eventually he might find a chance to escape, maybe even swipe an artifact or two. It would be worth a try, although the Sphinx seemed too clever to be conned that way.

The creepiness of his surroundings was his only defense against boredom. Over time, as worry and fear distracted him less, his boredom grew. Yes, the cell was miserable, but he was getting used to it. He wondered if eventually he might actually die of boredom.

A rumble from behind startled him. This was new! From the back wall of his cell came the low, heavy grating of stone grinding against stone. A portion of the wall slid open, and a mellow white light shed soft luminance into the room. A young man stepped through the opening, holding the white light in his hand.

Seth picked up the brick of meat, the closest thing he had to a weapon. The intruder froze in the doorway, a hand held up defensively. "Please, don't assault me with that meat amalgam," the stranger said. "It would surely cause an infection."

Seth lowered the mystery meat. The young man wore ragged clothing. Improvised moccasins covered his dirty feet. The white light in his hand was clearly magical, some kind of glowing stone. The illumination gave his grime-streaked skin a pearly sheen. Tall and lean, he had silver-white hair down to his shoulders and a handsome, open face.

"Who are you?" Seth asked.

"A fellow prisoner," the young man answered. Seth estimated he was around eighteen. "May I come in?"

Seth considered the stranger. What kind of prison had secret passages that allowed inmates to visit each other? This guy had to be an enemy sent by the Sphinx to squeeze information out of him. Still, at the moment, Seth would be willing to talk with just about anyone. Anything to relieve the loneliness. "Sure, I guess."

Turning, the young man retrieved a small three-legged stool from the corridor. He brought it into the cell and sat down. "Welcome to Living Mirage."

"Am I really supposed to believe you're another prisoner?" Seth said.

"I don't blame you for doubting," the young man said. "I have a similar concern about you. I'm Bracken."

“Seth.”

“They stashed you down deep. That means either you’re dangerous and they’re done with you for the foreseeable future, or else you’re a spy.”

Seth fidgeted with the brick of meat, turning it in his hands. “And how am I supposed to know you’re not a spy? What sort of prison has secret passages between cells?”

“This dungeon is old,” Bracken said. “It has been expanded and rebuilt so many times that nobody knows all the half-buried corridors and sealed-up chambers. Centuries of tunneling prisoners have added to the abandoned shafts and forgotten cavities. I helped excavate some of these passages personally, but most existed long before I came here. Nothing leads out, mind you. Not even close. But we’ve connected many of the deep rooms.”

“Nobody has caught on?” Seth said incredulously.

“We’re not fooling anybody,” Bracken replied. “If we’re really obvious about our activities, they seal up some of our excavations and administer punishments, but later we chip our way through again. Our tunneling is relatively harmless, and it keeps us occupied, so if we stay quiet about it, our captors mostly look the other way.”

“You talk like you’ve been here a long time,” Seth said. “How old are you? Like seventeen?”

Bracken gave a wry smile. “I’m a tad older than I look. You would weep for me if you knew how long I’d been here.”

“So when are you going to start investigating my secrets?”

“Still don’t trust me? At least you’re not stupid.”

“Don’t give me too much credit. I’m here, aren’t I?”

Bracken studied him shrewdly. “Yes, you are here. And you are clearly a shadow charmer, which makes you such an obvious spy that I wonder why the Sphinx would bother.”

“How can you tell I’m a shadow charmer?”

“I can tell more than that,” Bracken said, moving the stool closer to the cot. “Mind if I conduct a little test?”

“Depends on the test.”

“Nothing painful,” Bracken assured him. He tossed the glowing rock onto the cot. “Just take my hands.” He held them out, palms up.

“This is weird,” Seth said, keeping his hands in his lap.

“I just want to ask you a couple of questions. If I ask something you don’t like, go ahead and punch me in the face.”

Seth set his meat brick aside and took Bracken’s hands. Bracken gazed into his eyes. “Tell me your name.”

“Seth Sorenson.”

“Tell me a lie.”

“The food here is terrific.”

Bracken grinned. “Tell me something true.”

“Centaurs are jerks.”

The grin broadened. “Are you a friend of the Society of the Evening Star?”

“Nope. I’m the opposite. A Knight of the Dawn.”

Bracken released his hands and scooted the stool back. “I believe you. In fact, I know some things about you. You have friends here.”

“My parents?” Seth said hopefully.

“Your parents might be here, but not in a cell we can access.”

“So what are you, a human lie detector?”

“I’m good at reading people. I wanted a close look at you. They’ve sent down stingbulbs before. Now I know you’re not a stingbulb, or a changeling. More important, your friends might have been mistaken about your allegiances. Hard to believe a shadow charmer could be on our side. But now I’m convinced.”

Seth folded his arms. “I’m glad I passed your test. Do you have something I can hang on my fridge?”

“I left my stickers in my cell.”

Seth rubbed his hands together. “It still doesn’t prove whether I should trust you.”

“Agreed. I’d question your judgment if you did. For starters, why don’t I take you to visit one of your friends?”

“Sure. Do I have lots of friends here?”

“A few.” Bracken grabbed the glowing stone.

“Where did you get the light?”

“I made it.” He led the way to the gap in the back wall of the cell. “I’m pretty close to powerless these days, but I still know a trick or two.”

“What are you, a wizard?”

Bracken chuckled, closing the gap in the wall. Then he started along a narrow corridor. “A wizard stuck in cells like these would be a sorry wizard indeed. I’ll tell you more about myself once you know you can trust me. Let’s go quiet for a stretch. The walls are thin up here, and a guard is posted nearby.”

Bracken closed his fist around the stone so that only a little light escaped. Seth followed him up an incline, treading lightly. The floor felt slick.

The narrow passage eventually tapered to an end. “This part is a little tricky,” Bracken whispered. He put the glowing stone in a pocket and pointed up. A tiny globe of light the size of a ping-pong ball leapt from his fingertip, hovering upward. The ball rose into a hole in the ceiling, which turned out to be a tall shaft.

Bracing himself against opposite sides of the passage, Bracken spidered up until his feet were well above Seth’s reach. The sure swiftness of his movements made the maneuver look simple. “There are rungs in the shaft,” he stage-whispered down, pulling himself into the vertical crawl space.

Seth chimneyed up toward the hole in the ceiling, bracing himself and then scooting upward in increments. The walls were spaced too wide to make the ascent comfortable. Arms quivering, he gained only a few inches with each movement. When he reached the mouth of the shaft, he braced with his legs and quickly reached up to a rung, then followed Bracken upward. At the top of the damp shaft, Bracken raised a wooden hatch. Seth followed Bracken out into the new passageway. The top of the hatch was disguised to match the floor after Bracken carefully closed it.

Bracken recalled the floating ball of light, snuffed it out, and took the stone from his pocket. Seth followed him down the passage, through a hidden door, and along another passage until Bracken stopped.

“Here we are,” Bracken said, his voice less hushed. “This character keeps his cell locked from the inside.” Bracken used the rock to tap against the wall—four slow beats, two quick ones, a pause, and then three quick strikes. A moment later, an arrangement of stone blocks pulled inward, leaving a space large enough to crawl through. Bracken entered first.

“You bring him?” inquired a familiar voice as Seth crawled through. “There he is!”

Seth looked up in surprise. “Maddox?”

The burly fairy trader beamed down at him. “I’m sorry you’re here, Seth, but it’s good to see you.” Offering a meaty hand, Maddox hauled Seth to his feet.

“You’re alive!” Seth said. “The last time I saw you, it was an impostor.”

“A stingbulb,” Maddox said gravely. “I hoped you all would manage to see through the charade.”

“Not at first,” Seth said. “It did a good job. But we figured it out before any real harm was done.”

“The stingbulbs come from here, you know,” Maddox said. “The last known stingbulb trees are on this preserve. I’ll be honest, if I ever managed to bust out of this dungeon, I’d be tempted to stick around and explore. This is an ancient preserve. Who knows what supposedly extinct species I might encounter!”

Seth scrunched his brow. “How can I be sure you’re not a stingbulb?”

“Good boy!” Maddox bellowed. He glanced over to Bracken. “This one thinks like a survivor.”

“My sentiments exactly,” Bracken agreed.

“Bracken can tell,” Maddox told Seth. “But I’ll wager you don’t trust him yet, either.”

“I want to trust you guys,” Seth said. “I just don’t want to be an idiot.”

“A stingbulb would have my memories,” Maddox said. “There isn’t much I can do to prove my authenticity. For now, it’ll have to suffice that we won’t press you for secrets.”

“I’m not sure I have any in the first place,” Seth said. “The Society already knows everything I do.”

“Now, don’t think like that,” Maddox said. “You never know what odd detail might offer the Society an advantage. Keep those lips sealed.”

“All right.”

Bracken picked up Maddox’s empty meal mat. “Cleaned your plate again, I see!”

Maddox gave an awkward smile. “I’ll be honest, I’ve eaten worse.”

“Worse?” Bracken laughed. “Where? Was it uncooked and decomposing? Seth, this guy wolfs down everything they serve here. He’s put on a good twenty pounds since they brought him in.”

Maddox reddened, smoothing his hands over the ratty skins covering his belly. “I’m not saying I would choose this grub over home-cooked lasagna. I was starving when they brought me here.”

“I can’t even bite the meat,” Seth said.

“It’s like a salt lick,” Bracken said. He jerked a thumb at Maddox. “This guy chews it up.”

“You can find fracture points if you probe for weaknesses,” Maddox said.

“What about the hairy paste?” Seth asked.

“I’m not sure those are hairs,” Bracken said solemnly. “Might be veins.”

“Laugh it up,” Maddox grumbled, waving both arms at them. “Mind my words. Best to store up a little extra when given the chance. You can’t be sure when you’ll see your next meal.”

“I know when I will see it and what it will be,” Bracken challenged. “I’ve been here a long time. Twice a day, like clockwork, we’re served a compressed blend of dog, rat, and hobgoblin.”

Seth laughed and gagged at the same time. “I hope you’re kidding.”

“Torch coming,” Bracken said, crouching and covering the light from his stone. He stealthily backed toward the gap through which he had entered, and Seth did the same.

“It’s not mealtime,” Maddox whispered.

The faint light through the barred peephole shifted as footsteps approached. A torch swept past the small, rectangular opening, and the heavy footsteps continued along the corridor.

Bracken remained tense and quiet until the footfalls passed out of hearing. “They almost never come into the cells,” Bracken said. “But with my luck, I try to be ready for exceptions.”

“Say, Seth,” Maddox began awkwardly, “I know I shouldn’t press you, but have you had any non-secretive word from my brother, Dougan?”

Seth’s face fell. Maddox didn’t know about his brother.

“Uh-oh,” Maddox said. “Bad news?”

“The worst news,” Seth said.

Maddox’s mouth twisted and trembled. He gave a quick nod. “Right. Did he go bravely?”

Seth nodded vigorously. “It was at Wyrmoost. A dragon got him. Dougan helped to save Kendra and the mission.”

Maddox drew a ragged breath. “What dragon?” Despite his grief, he was already thinking about vengeance.

“Navarog. But then Navarog got killed while in human form.”

“Navarog is dead?” Bracken exclaimed. Glancing at Maddox, he managed to restrain his obvious excitement.

Maddox plopped down on his creaky cot. He seemed to have suddenly aged. “We play a deadly game. Something like this was bound to happen.”

Seth thought about Vincent. He worried about Kendra and his grandparents. Spending time in a dungeon might be safer than what they would face in the coming days and weeks. He had to find a way to help them.

“What are our chances of busting out of here?” Seth asked.

“Bleak,” Bracken replied. “I’ve been trying for hundreds of years.”

“Hundreds of years?” Seth exclaimed.

“Some of us never get used to the food,” Bracken lamented.

“We can move around down here,” Maddox said, “but we’ve found no way to the upper levels, nothing close to a way out.”

“I’ve searched long and hard,” Bracken assured them. “Tunneled plenty as well.”

“What about beating up a guard?” Seth asked.

“Even though our doors rarely open, I’ve tried a few times,” Bracken said. “There are too many checkpoints on the way up, too many locked doors. And once the alarm sounds, the Sphinx musters too many powerful servants.”

“What if we mobilized a bunch of prisoners?” Seth asked. “A big group effort?”

Bracken shrugged. “That probably has the most potential. It has been decades since I’ve orchestrated a big, riot-style breakout. Both of my prior attempts ended badly. The way up just has too many bottlenecks. One time they kept a magically reinforced iron door locked until we surrendered due

to starvation. Another time we were subdued with noxious gas. As you might imagine, our captors are not kind to us after such attempts.”

“You can make stuff glow and read people,” Seth said. “Do you have other magic that could help?”

“Not much,” Bracken said. “I could help run communications. And I have some skill at healing. My powers are relatively weak. What about you, shadow charmer? You might have more useful skills than mine. Can you shade walk? Quench fire? Disengage locks?”

“I can shade walk,” Seth said. “Some shadow charmers can open locks?”

“With their minds,” Bracken said. “You’d have to be a real pro, though. Several of the main doors are secured with spells.”

“Is he really a shadow charmer?” Maddox asked.

“Undoubtedly,” Bracken replied.

“I don’t know much about it,” Seth confessed. “It happened by accident.” He explained about the grove with the nail and the revenant, and then how Graulas had sealed his powers.

“I’ve heard of Graulas,” Bracken said. “Never crossed paths with him.”

“He’s right on the brink of death,” Seth said. “Because his death is so near, he doesn’t care about allegiances anymore, so he sometimes helps me out of boredom.”

Bracken looked pensive. “Graulas may have been of service in the past, but don’t let yourself get comfortable around him. Demons are evil to the center. It is their nature to take advantage of others. Good never comes from them.”

“You sound like Grandpa Sorenson,” Seth said. “Graulas doesn’t pretend to be good, but he really did help me.”

“He’s just saying to be careful,” Maddox said kindly. “Bracken has some experience with demons. They may offer help when they see a selfish advantage in it, but they’re always scheming. In the end, bad trees tend to give bad fruit.”

“Well, he might be dead by now anyhow,” Seth said. “He was pretty far gone last time I saw him. Tell me your story, Bracken. What powers did you used to have? Why do you know so much about demons?”

“We’ll get into it some other time,” Bracken said, averting his gaze.

“No need for modesty!” Maddox bellowed. “Tell the boy what you are!”

Bracken stared at the ceiling, as if wishing he were elsewhere. “He doesn’t even know whether he should trust us yet. This is premature.”

“I won’t be spilling sensitive information anytime soon,” Seth said, “but I think I trust you enough. My instincts say we’re on the same side. By the way, you said you could show me other friends.”

“I barely met your friend Mara,” Bracken said. “She doesn’t know me any better than you do. And I know how to reach your friend Berrigan as well. It’s kind of a tricky climb. He’s injured. I’ve been helping him heal.”

“You have to tell me who you are,” Seth insisted. “I’m really curious. You can’t dangle stuff like this and then take it back. You’re torturing me!”

“I’m a unicorn,” Bracken said.

Seth laughed. “No, seriously.”

“He’s serious,” Maddox said.

Seth considered Bracken skeptically. “Don’t unicorns usually have horns? And, you know, hooves and fur and all that?”

“This is my human form,” Bracken said.

“Some unicorns have avatars,” Maddox said. “You know, like dragons.”

“Can you switch back into your horse shape?” Seth asked. “My sister would be so jealous.”

“I can’t,” Bracken said. “I surrendered my horn, and thus am stuck as a human.”

“Don’t unicorns have three horns?” Seth asked.

“Right,” Bracken replied, appraising Seth as if impressed by his knowledge. “Sort of like humans with baby teeth. We have one horn as a child, then shed it for a larger horn in adolescence, and in turn shed that for our permanent adult horn.”

“But yours wasn’t permanent,” Seth said.

“It should have been, but I surrendered it.”

“Why? Did somebody defeat you or something?”

Bracken’s eyes flashed dangerously. “I would never have surrendered my third horn to an enemy!”

“Steady,” Maddox soothed.

Bracken calmed, his shoulders sagging slightly. "I gave up my third horn on purpose. I surrendered it to the wizards who made the demon prison."

"Wait," Seth said, forming a connection. "So the Font of Immortality is made from your horn?"

Bracken glanced at Maddox. "Not bad."

"He's a bright kid."

Bracken returned his focus to Seth. "That is correct. How did you know the Font is fashioned from a unicorn horn?"

"The Sphinx showed it to me," Seth replied.

"He what?" Maddox spluttered.

Bracken looked skeptical. "Voluntarily?"

"Yeah, after he healed me with the Sands of Sanctity."

"He used the Sands on you!" Maddox shouted.

"A little less enthusiasm," Bracken scolded. "We don't need to tell the whole dungeon. I get it now. It makes sense. You're a shadow charmer, so the Sphinx hopes to groom you. He wants to win your trust."

Maddox balled his hands into fists. "I wouldn't trust that skunk to scrub my toilet."

"Me neither," Seth promised. "But we were talking about Bracken."

Bracken cleared his throat self-consciously. "Right. Well, after I gave up my third horn, I could no longer revert to my true shape. I still had my second horn, which I could use as a weapon, and which helped me retain many of my powers. But in the end, the Sphinx trapped me, forcibly took my remaining horn, and cast me into this dungeon."

"You must really hate the demons to have given up your permanent horn to those wizards," Seth observed.

"My kind exist in opposition to demonkind. We are protectors and creators. They are exploiters and destroyers. Where we would bring light, they bring darkness. In addition, I had . . . personal motivations. The wizards convinced me that my horn was essential to make the demon prison as impervious as possible. They were not lying to me, but you can imagine my distress that my sacrifice might soon be all for naught."

Seth pounded a fist into his palm. "Which brings us back to my goal. We have to find a way out of here. You may have tried in the past, but it has

never been more urgent.”

Bracken and Maddox exchanged a glance.

“What do you think?” Maddox asked.

Bracken sighed. “All right. Since the world is about to end, why not give an impossible jailbreak one last try?”

Chapter 9



Assignments

Kendra knew the sun was up, but she hid under her covers nonetheless. She missed Lena. She missed Patton. She missed her parents. She missed her brother. And she was hesitant to confront a new day.

The conversation with Patton the day before had galvanized her grandparents. Grandpa had been contacting Knights of the Dawn, Grandma had been researching in the attic, and everybody was busy making plans.

Kendra had a role to play in those plans. She had put on a brave face, enthusiastically accepting her responsibilities, but they made her nervous. What if she failed? There was so much riding on her participation.

This morning after breakfast, Kendra, Warren, and Tanu would use the Translocator to visit a Scottish preserve called Stony Vale. Both Warren and Tanu had been there before. As Patton had prompted, Grandpa wanted Kendra to have a conversation with the Fairy Queen, and, thanks to the Translocator, the shrine at Stony Vale was readily accessible.

The others seemed to take for granted that Kendra and the Fairy Queen were Best Friends Forever. In reality, the Fairy Queen might very well strike Kendra down for treading on hallowed ground if she found the intrusion unwarranted. Of course, Kendra had been cautioned to trust her

instincts on the matter of whether a visit was appropriate, and she felt confident the Fairy Queen would agree that this was a genuine crisis. As an archenemy of the Demon King, the Fairy Queen would be anxious to keep Zzyzx intact.

But just because Kendra might have access to the Fairy Queen, that did not mean she could cajole the mysterious personage to provide actual help, as her family expected. Kendra worried that she would let everyone down, including herself.

Her second assignment made Kendra even more nervous than the first. The others had determined that she had the closest relationship with Vanessa, and hoped that Kendra's genuine grief over the abduction of Seth and her parents might finally persuade the narcoblix to divulge her big secret. Again, Kendra understood the reasoning behind the task, but it was too much pressure! She was supposed to speak with Vanessa after returning from Stony Vale.

Within the close space beneath her covers, Kendra reluctantly accepted that procrastinating these challenges would not make them go away. If she tried, she might fail, but hiding in her bed would certainly not bring her family home. Still, if she stole a few more minutes of sleep, her problems might temporarily melt from her mind . . .

No! She kicked off her covers and rolled out of bed. The mere act of standing up helped her feel a little more ready to tackle her upcoming obligations.

After showering and getting dressed, Kendra found Warren and Tanu enjoying a pancake breakfast. Spatula in hand, Grandpa hovered over the griddle, and he encouraged Kendra to have a seat.

"Nobody came and got me?" Kendra asked, taking a couple of pancakes from the stack and placing them on her plate.

"We heard you in the shower," Grandpa explained. "I have some hot ones coming if you want to wait a second."

Kendra tested the spongy surface with her finger. "These are still warm." She poured maple syrup over them.

Coulter strolled into the room. "Uh-oh, Stan is fixing pancakes! Must be time for another death-defying mission!"

"Way to ease the tension," Warren muttered.

“Can I have some?” Coulter asked. “Or are they only for the condemned?”

“No pessimistic geezers allowed,” Warren declared.

Chuckling quietly, Coulter took a seat at the table. Tanu tried to pass him some pancakes, but Coulter held up a dismissive hand. “I’ll wait for those hot ones.”

Kendra cut into her pancakes with the side of her fork, speared two pieces, put them in her mouth, and relished the sweet, fluffy perfection. “Good job, Grandpa,” she said. “These are delicious.”

Warren smeared homemade jam on a pancake and took a bite. “You’ll like Stony Vale, Kendra.”

“It’s very picturesque,” Tanu agreed.

“The caretaker is one of our most reliable Knights,” Coulter said, accepting fresh pancakes from Grandpa’s spatula.

“He won’t know we’re coming,” Warren clarified. “This is a secret operation, in and out, quick and quiet. We’ll teleport away at the first sign of trouble.”

“If you have to travel,” Coulter said, “I can’t think of a better way than the Translocator.”

“I know, I’m getting spoiled,” Warren replied. “I’m not sure I’ll be able to do airports ever again.”

Tanu nodded. “No customs, no checked bags, no tiny seats for ten hours at a time.”

“What are you griping about?” Warren said. “You hibernate like a grizzly on those long flights.”

“I sleep to escape the torture,” Tanu maintained.

“There’s my problem,” Warren said, tossing up his hands. “I haven’t learned to sleep during torture.”

Tanu grinned. “Helps if you’re a potion master.”

Kendra ate quietly, content to enjoy the banter. Hearing the others joke and tease helped the day feel more normal. To make the meal last, she tried to pace herself, but after a few pancakes and some orange juice, she could stomach no more.

Warren checked his wristwatch. “It’s five hours later in Scotland. We might as well get rolling.”

“You ready, Kendra?” Tanu asked.

Kendra took a deep breath. Part of her wished they had opted to spring this assignment on her at the last minute. Planning it yesterday had given her too much time to worry. She tried to shake off her insecurities. “Ready as I’m going to get.”

“Relax, Kendra,” Grandpa said. “If anything feels wrong, just have them bring you right back here. That’s the beauty of instantaneous travel.”

“We’ll watch your back,” Warren assured her, buckling a sword around his waist. “You’ll do great.”

Grandpa opened a drawer and took out the Translocator.

“You’re keeping it in a kitchen drawer?” Kendra asked.

Grandpa shrugged. “Just for this morning. I wanted it handy.”

“He wants you in Scotland before the post-pancake euphoria wears off,” Coulter said, wiping his chin with a napkin.

“Something like that,” Grandpa admitted, passing the Translocator to Tanu.

“Are we going straight to the shrine?” Kendra asked.

“We’ve both seen the shrine at Stony Vale,” Warren said. “We’ve never actually approached it, or we wouldn’t be here. But I’ve stood as near as any sane mortal would dare. We’ll start you out very close.”

“I haven’t been quite as close as Warren,” Tanu said. “Probably because I’m a little saner.”

“Considerable thought went into this,” Grandpa assured Kendra. “We selected Stony Vale because the preserve is secure and you’ll have extremely convenient access to the shrine.”

Kendra stood beside Warren. “Let’s get this over with.”

Tanu gripped one side of the Translocator, Kendra the other, and Warren twisted the middle. Kendra felt like she was folding in on herself. When the vertigo passed, she was standing in tall grass surrounded by knobby, gray trees. She realized she had been braced for her breath to get knocked out of her, but of course this was the Translocator, not the Chronometer.

Ahead through the trees, she beheld a large, glassy pond wrapped like a horseshoe around a narrow peninsula that gradually widened as it stretched farther from the shore. At the end of the peninsula were two rough,

rectangular standing stones spanned by a third heavy stone. The formation instantly brought to mind pictures of Stonehenge.

Kendra heard the ring of steel as Warren drew his sword. Tanu clutched a crossbow in one hand, the Translocator in the other. It was past noon in Scotland, but the sun was still high, shining through a partly overcast sky. The still air felt cool but not cold. Beyond the pond and the surrounding trees, Kendra glimpsed low, rolling hills.

“Is the shrine on that peninsula?” Kendra asked softly.

Tanu gave a nod. “We can’t venture out there with you, but we’ll stand guard near the shore.”

Flanked by Warren and Tanu, Kendra started forward. As she neared the peninsula, her companions hung back. She felt generally peaceful about proceeding, and decided the absence of an identifiable warning meant the Fairy Queen would welcome her visit.

A pair of tall women stepped out from behind the trees, blocking her path. One had flowers braided into her auburn hair; the other had leafy vines twisted into her dark plaits. Their layered gowns reminded Kendra of springtime foliage shimmering with dew. Each woman held a heavy wooden staff.

“Where did you come from?” asked the woman with dark hair, her voice a resonant alto.

“You tread on sacred ground,” warned the other.

Warren and Tanu hustled up beside Kendra. Tanu was a large man, but these women stood half a head taller.

The woman with dark hair arched an eyebrow. “Would you threaten us with weapons?”

From both sides and behind, other dryads emerged from the trees.

“We are friends,” Kendra said. “I have urgent business with the Fairy Queen.”

“This one has a queer aspect,” whispered the dryad with the auburn hair.

“Indeed,” the other dryad whispered back, “and she speaks our tongue.”

“I speak many languages,” Kendra said.

The dryads looked stricken. “Even our secret dialect?” asked the one with auburn hair.

Kendra stared up at them, hoping her eyes displayed more confidence than she felt. “I am fairykind, a servant of the Fairy Queen. These are my companions.”

The dryad with the dark hair narrowed her green eyes. After a moment, her posture became less threatening. “I apologize for our abrupt greeting. These are troubled times, and it has long been our task to protect this shrine. We’ve heard of you, but did not recognize you. We have never encountered a mortal quite like you. We now see that you belong among us.”

“Thank you,” Kendra said. “My friends can’t come to the shrine with me.”

The dryads stepped aside. “We will see to it that no harm befalls them,” said the dryad with the auburn hair.

“I couldn’t really follow the conversation,” Warren whispered. “But good job.”

“They won’t bother you,” Kendra told them. “I’ll be back in a minute.”

Tanu lowered his crossbow, Warren sheathed his sword, and the dryads assumed more relaxed stances. Kendra passed between the tall dryads and strolled out onto the peninsula. She sensed many eyes following her progress but did not look back.

Kendra studied the ground, looking for the tiny shrine, not wanting to miss it and be forced to double back. She found nothing until she reached the stacked megaliths at the end of the peninsula. Beneath the primitive structure, beside a burbling spring, rested a carved wooden bowl and a tiny fairy shaped from pink, speckled stone.

As Kendra knelt beside the spring, a sudden gust of wind disturbed the still air, bringing rich smells of freshly turned earth, ripe fruit, damp bark, and a hint of the sea. The Fairy Queen spoke with the familiar voice that Kendra heard with her mind rather than her ears. *I am pleased you came.*

“The Society is getting nearer to opening Zzyzx,” Kendra said quietly, not wanting the dryads to overhear her end of the conversation. “The Sphinx has kidnapped my parents and my brother. We’re worried the Sphinx will use the Oculus to collect everything else he needs. Do you know what we should do? Can you help us?”

My connection to the Oculus has waned. The Sphinx and his mentor, a demon called Nagi Luna, became aware of my prying and shut me out. They possess firm minds. Now, only when they turn their gaze to the realm where I dwell can I glimpse their thoughts. Aware of this, they have refrained from directing their attention toward me. Yet I have felt how they covet the realm I protect, and I fear for all creatures of light.

“What have you learned since we last spoke?” Kendra asked. “Tell me about Nagi Luna.”

Nagi Luna is the entity who helps the Sphinx wield the Oculus. Her heart and mind are black. Darkness overcame Kendra, as if she had been struck blind. With the darkness came deep, abiding despair. Her ability to see returned as quickly as it had departed. It was always an adjustment getting used to how the Fairy Queen communicated with words, images, and emotions. Before their minds closed to me, I sensed certain aspects of the relationship between Nagi Luna and the Sphinx. She is confined somehow, her powers constrained. While guiding the Sphinx from her confinement, Nagi Luna has been using him to connect to the Oculus and expand her mental reach. Her communications were inscrutable to me, for she used the secret language of demons, but I am sure she conversed with others of her kind. With the aid of the Oculus, she may even have reached some of those fell entities inside of Zzyzx.

A feeling of wrath swept over Kendra, vengeful and furious. For a moment, she felt as though she could level the surrounding forest with a sweep of her hand, or split open the ground with a shout. After a moment, the outrage passed. Kendra struggled to remind herself that these emotions were not her own.

Both the Sphinx and Nagi Luna feel certain that victory is near, but their versions of victory are not aligned. Each seeks to use the other to different ends. The Sphinx has a tightly woven plan to release the demons of Zzyzx on his terms. I failed to uncover the particulars, but I feel certain that to some degree he means well, misguided as his intentions may be. But Nagi Luna has a scheme of her own, a vision of unbridled darkness and mayhem like the world has never known. The Sphinx is no fool, but I fear her cunning may be superior.

“Could you tell where they are?” Kendra asked.

It was unclear. Too much was unclear. But I have seen enough to believe the opening of Zzyzx is imminent. Whether it is the Sphinx or Nagi Luna who succeeds, we fail. The consequences will be cataclysmic.

“We have two of the artifacts,” Kendra said.

Safeguard them, if you can. I will seek to lend aid. My feud with the demons is ancient and eternal.

“Raxtus told me they destroyed your husband.”

Grief washed over Kendra, so deep and forlorn that she felt she would drown in it. When the sensation passed, she gasped for breath.

My struggle against the demons predates the downfall of my consort. Our enmity is fundamental to our natures. I will always oppose Gorgrog and his minions, as they will always oppose me. My first priority is to protect my realm and my followers. This includes defending your world. The connection my realm has to your world gives it life. If your world should fall, my realm would essentially become a prison, unattached to any living sphere. For both of our sakes, we must thwart the opening of Zzyzx.

“I’m willing to do anything to help,” Kendra said. “My friends and family feel the same. What do you recommend?”

There came a pause. The world seemed utterly at rest, no wind, no sound. When communication resumed, the words came slowly.

Three of my astrids perished to protect you at Wyrmoost. For ages, they have clamored for the chance to redeem themselves for failing my consort. Perhaps that day has come at last. I will reestablish communication with them. Drink from the spring.

Kendra took the wooden bowl, dipped it in the water, and drank. Sunlight gleamed off the surface of the water, dazzling her. The clear liquid tasted thick as honey, light as bubbles, rich as cream, tart as berries, and fresh as dew. For a moment, Kendra felt conscious of the tremendous reservoir of magical energy inside of her. She felt like a thundercloud charged to release a blazing onslaught of lightning.

Then a breeze wafted over her, calming, soothing. A profound emotion of comfort and well-being made her drowsy with serenity.

As you encounter my astrids in the world, touch them and command them to be restored. I abolished three of my shrines to grant you this power.

“Don’t destroy your shrines!” Kendra cried.

The hour has come to unite and make sacrifices. We must oppose the release of the Demon King and his unsavory followers from their confinement. The fate of our worlds hangs in the balance. Go, Kendra. Be brave. Be wise.

With a final nudge of hope and peace, the presence of the Fairy Queen withdrew, and Kendra found herself alone, kneeling on soggy turf. Rising, she returned along the peninsula to where the dryads waited with her friends. The regal women regarded Kendra with solemn reverence.

“Any luck?” Warren asked, wary gaze shifting from dryad to dryad.

“She didn’t know where the Sphinx has my family,” Kendra said. “But she understands the danger if Zzyzx gets opened, and she wants to help.” Kendra turned to the dryad with auburn hair. “Are there astrids on this preserve?”

The dryad stepped forward. “A few migrate through from time to time, but we have not seen one here for many years.”

Kendra nodded and turned to Tanu. “Do we have some at Fablehaven?”

“Astrids go where they please,” Tanu said. “They’re odd creatures. I haven’t seen any at Fablehaven since the shrine lost its power.”

“We should go home,” Kendra said. She waved to the dryads. “Thanks for welcoming us. Good luck protecting the shrine.”

The dryads gave slight bows in response.

Kendra, Warren, and Tanu laid hands on the Translocator, twisted it, and, after the folding sensation, they were back in the kitchen at Fablehaven. Grandma had joined Grandpa and Coulter.

“You’re all right?” Grandma asked anxiously.

“No problems,” Warren said.

Grandma looked relieved. “I’m sorry I missed seeing you off.”

“How did it go?” Grandpa asked.

Kendra related her conversation with the Fairy Queen, including what she had learned about Nagi Luna, and her new mission to restore the astrids. The others listened intently until she finished.

“I’ve never heard of this Nagi Luna,” Grandma said with a scowl. “I’ll try to uncover what I can.”

“It might be difficult,” Grandpa said. “I’m sure she’ll be ancient.”

“Who would have guessed we would ever end up chasing astrids?” Warren said.

“I always knew they had some significance to the Fairy Queen,” Grandpa said. “But until Kendra reported her conversations at Wyrmoost, I had no idea they were once her most prized soldiers.”

“The Fairy Queen had a major grudge against them,” Kendra said. “The fact that she is restoring them means she’s really worried about the Sphinx succeeding.”

“Can’t you call the astrids telepathically?” Warren asked.

“I can hear their thoughts,” Kendra replied, “but I’m not sure how close I need to be.”

“How many astrids are we talking about?” Tanu asked.

“There are eighty-seven good ones left,” Kendra said. “Six gave up on the Fairy Queen, and three died protecting me from Navarog.”

Tanu whistled. “Eighty-seven, huh? It’s a big world.”

“There were twelve at Wyrmoost,” Kendra said.

“When last you checked,” Coulter said. “Astrids move around capriciously.”

“I got a sense those twelve had been there for some time,” Kendra insisted. “It might be worth transporting to the shrine at Wyrmoost. They seemed to stay near it.”

Grandpa frowned. “Let’s reserve outings to dragon sanctuaries for another day. Tanu and Warren can run the preliminary investigations for tracking the astrids.”

Kendra took a steadying breath. “Then I had better go speak with Vanessa.”

Warren gave her half a grin. “You know, you’ve earned a short break. Have a snack! An apple, maybe?”

Kendra shook her head. “I’m feeling good after talking with the Fairy Queen. I want to talk to Vanessa while I’m on a roll, before I psych myself out.”

“I’ll take her down,” Grandma offered.

“I’ll tag along,” Coulter said.

“Very well,” Grandpa agreed.

Kendra followed Grandma Sorenson down the stairs and waited while she unlocked the door to the dungeon. Grandma rested a hand on her shoulder. "This will work best if we leave you alone with her."

Kendra nodded. If Grandma hadn't made that suggestion, she would have asked. Grandma got along with Vanessa worse than anyone.

"We'll be right outside the door," Coulter assured Kendra. "Call out if you need us."

"She'll behave," Grandma said. "Whether friend or foe, Vanessa doesn't want to resume her stay in the Quiet Box."

"I'll be fine," Kendra said, almost meaning it. She had not spoken with Vanessa alone for some time. At the moment, the prospect of social awkwardness daunted her more than anything.

Grandma led her to the nearby cell, inserted the key, and opened the door. Kendra entered. The door closed behind her.

Vanessa was on the floor doing complicated sit-ups, hands laced behind her head as she touched alternate elbows to the opposite knees, her legs bending and extending without ever quite touching the floor. "Be with you in a moment," Vanessa panted.

Her cell looked cozy. Thick carpeting covered the floor, shaded lamps shed gentle light, and impressionist paintings brightened the walls. Potted plants of various sizes served to further soften the atmosphere. Vanessa had a refrigerator, an exercise bike, a suede beanbag chair, and an impressive sound system. Grandma and Grandpa had clearly gone out of their way to make her comfortable.

Vanessa finished her exercises and rolled to her feet. "Here for some calisthenics?" she asked. Even sweaty and dressed in boyish exercise clothes, she had an effortless, exotic beauty.

"Your room gets better every time I visit," Kendra said.

"As prisons go, it could be worse." Vanessa walked over and took a seat behind the desk by her bed. "You here to wrench my secret out of me?"

"Could it help me find my family?"

"Are we playing twenty questions? Yes, it could."

"What is the secret?" Kendra blurted desperately.

"Haven't you played twenty questions before?" Vanessa scolded gently. "You can't ask what the secret is, just questions about it."

“Is it bigger than a bread box?”

Vanessa laughed lightly. “Now you get the idea. Actually, yes it is.”

“How big is a bread box?”

“That would be relevant. Picture a container for holding a few loaves.”

“Animal, vegetable, or mineral?”

“Animal.”

Kendra folded her arms. “Is your secret a person?”

Vanessa returned her gaze intently. “This game is over.”

“It is! Why do you have to be so secretive about it?”

Vanessa leaned back in her chair. “Hard to say. Maybe because the Sphinx could be watching us right now, and if this secret gets out, we will have no chance of stopping him.”

“Is it really that important?” Kendra asked, not daring to believe it.

“You’ll know soon.”

“How soon?”

“It would be dangerous to say.” Vanessa leaned forward. “Kendra, I’m not trying to torture you. I’m not even trying to torture your grandparents, who I like a lot less. At first I held on to this secret because it mattered, and I knew it might provide leverage to get me out of here. But ever since the Sphinx recovered the Oculus, I have been so grateful that I kept my mouth shut. My silence just might save us all. My secret represents our last, best chance to stop the Sphinx and recover your family. That will have to suffice.”

“We could use the Chronometer,” Kendra said. “Talk to Patton about your secret in a time the Sphinx can’t see.”

“You’ve figured out how to use the Chronometer to journey back in time?” Vanessa exclaimed. “Good news! We may do just that when the right moment arrives. Until then, letting others know the secret merely provides opportunities for somebody to slip up. Believe me, I’m on your side. This is for the greater good.”

Kendra sighed in frustration. “All you care about is getting out of here.”

Vanessa’s expression hardened. For a moment, Kendra thought she might lose her temper. Then the narcoblix relaxed, brushing back an errant strand of hair. A forced smile appeared.

“I understand your frustration and your distrust. In fact, you have reason to trust me far less than you do. But please realize, if all I cared about was getting out of here, I have missed literally dozens of opportunities. You think this cell could hold me when I can control Tanu in his sleep? Fortunately for you, I truly am on your side, and most of what I can do to help can be done from here as well as anywhere. That may not always be true. The current situation is dire. At some point, your grandparents should release me so I can provide more active assistance.”

Kendra had no reply.

Vanessa stood up. “I have been patient this long. I can wait a while longer. So can you, believe it or not. Knowing the secret will hasten nothing.” Vanessa raised her arms and stretched. “By the time I reveal all I know, I might even earn Ruth’s trust.”

“I’m not getting anything else out of you, am I?”

“Sorry, Kendra. Vanessa Santoro may not be perfect, but she knows how to keep a secret.”

Chapter 10



Nagi Luna

The coin flared bright enough to awaken Seth. Temporarily disoriented, wiping sleep from his eyes, he pawed for the source of the blinding light. As his fingers closed around the coin, the brilliance dimmed, and words sprang to mind.

There you are! I was just alerted that the Sphinx is descending into our section of the dungeon. All things considered, he's probably coming for you. Don't relax around him. Keep your guard up. I'll extinguish the coin.

"Thanks," Seth whispered, trying to push the answer mentally toward Bracken.

Don't mention it. And you don't have to concentrate so hard, just let your thoughts flow to me. We'll talk later.

The coin went dark, and the connection to Bracken's mind dissolved. After the recent brightness, the cell seemed pitch-black. Seth smacked his lips, trying to get the sleepy taste out of his mouth. His eyes began to adjust. The coin remained in his hand. It had been a gift at the end of his previous meeting with Bracken. Not only did the coin normally serve as a light source, it also functioned like a magical walkie-talkie.

Seth still did not wholly trust the supposed unicorn, but deep down he would be shocked to learn that his new friend was a fraud. Bracken hadn't

tried to ferret any information out of Seth, and, by all appearances, he had been busily planning an uprising with Maddox and others.

Seth absently rubbed his thumb against the foreign coin. It felt good in his hand, somewhat larger and thicker than a quarter. More like a half-dollar. Minted from silvery metal, the tarnished currency displayed a griffin framed by unfamiliar glyphs. With the Sphinx coming, he should hide the coin. Relying on touch as much as sight, Seth lifted his cot and set the coin under one of the legs.

What could the Sphinx want with him? Had he arranged some sort of prisoner exchange? Was that too much to hope? Did the Sphinx want to grill him for information? Torture him?

The sound of approaching footsteps increased his anxiety. Maybe the Sphinx had other business down here. Bracken could not know for certain that the Sphinx was coming for Seth.

A guttering torch appeared outside Seth's peephole. A key rattled in the lock. The door opened. The Sphinx entered, surveying the room.

"Not the grandest accommodations," the Sphinx said.

"Great toilet, though," Seth responded.

"You are, after all, a prisoner," the Sphinx said. "Come with me. Somebody wishes to speak with you."

"I'm not feeling very chatty today," Seth said. "Rain check?"

"Not a good day for jokes," the Sphinx said. "Don't make this less pleasant than it has to be."

The Sphinx sounded serious. Deciding he would rather walk than get dragged to their destination, Seth followed the Sphinx out of the room. A pair of torchbearers accompanied them, large men dressed in leather armor studded with iron. Unless Seth was mistaken, the direction they were taking would lead them deeper into the dungeon.

"Where are we going?" Seth inquired.

"Nagi Luna wishes to meet you in person," the Sphinx said.

Seth slowed. "That sounds bad."

The Sphinx shrugged. "I see little value in the exercise, but she insisted."

"She's still in the same place?" Seth asked. "In the bottommost cell?"

"She has resided there a long time," the Sphinx said.

They reached a filthy iron door. One of the torchbearers thrust in a key. The hinges protested as it opened.

“Do you come down here much?” Seth asked.

“While at Living Mirage, I can speak with Nagi Luna mind to mind, so there is little need.”

“Is she always in your head?”

“No more than I allow.”

They descended a long staircase and passed down a hall, around a corner, and through a formidable iron door with three locks. After another flight of stairs, the corridor grew narrow and winding. They passed many tangled intersections, the floor sloping constantly downward. At last they reached a squalid chamber with a grate in the floor.

“Leave us,” the Sphinx told the guards, accepting a torch from one of them. Both guards looked pale. One was shivering. Both men hurriedly retreated down the hallway out of sight.

“Is this the place?” Seth asked.

The Sphinx spoke with quiet gravity. “For your sake, be polite, and say no more than you must. You are about to address an ancient being of incomprehensible power. Although I have dealt with her for centuries, I never enter her presence lightly.”

Seth nodded. Even without the warning, he already felt apprehensive. As the Sphinx unlocked the grate, Seth fought to suppress a queasy nervousness.

The Sphinx lifted the heavy grate and unrolled a rope ladder. He started down first, the torch in one hand. Seth struggled a little getting onto the ladder, but once he started moving, the descent was no problem. Dust fumed up from where his feet landed. The cool room smelled musty. Several sets of oxidized manacles dangled from the rough stone walls.

Seth’s eyes were drawn to the Quiet Box. Although it looked older than the Quiet Box at Fablehaven, the knothole-riddled wood unvarnished and unornamented, the cabinet appeared solid. On the flagstone floor, a metal circle, half obscured by dust, created a perimeter around the Quiet Box.

“Where is she?” Seth whispered, eyes sweeping the room.

The Sphinx nodded toward the Quiet Box. A small, shriveled woman shuffled out from behind it, a woolen shawl draped over her hunched

shoulders. She did not look quite human. Her blotchy skin was purple and maroon. Thin earlobes sagged almost to her shoulders. Gray claws tipped her gnarled hands, and her yellow eyes had a strangely slanted shape.

Nagi Luna tottered to the near edge of the circular boundary. Only then did she fix her fierce eyes on Seth. “What are you called, boy?” she croaked, her voice a hoarse whisper.

“Seth.”

She sucked her withered lips against her gums, making an unpleasant, wet sound. “Do I frighten you?”

“Sort of.”

She grinned, showing ragged, inflamed gums. Her eyes darted to the Sphinx. “We were right, of course. This one is most unusual.”

She glared at Seth, nose wrinkled, lips twisted. *What business do you have as a shadow charmer?* The venomous shout struck his mind with unnerving force.

“It was an accident,” Seth said.

It was profane! It was lunacy! Seth took a step back. He wished he could block out her awful telepathic shouting. The snarling words jarred his thinking. *This is clearly the work of Graulas. His mark lingers upon you. The lackwit always showed an unbalanced interest in humans.*

“Stop yelling at me,” Seth demanded.

Or what?

“Or I’ll throw rocks at you.”

Seth heard the sharp intake of breath from the Sphinx. Nagi Luna cackled, a shiny strand of saliva connecting her top and bottom lip. The wild, throaty laughter echoed insanely in the large room.

You have courage, I will concede that much. The words remained abrasive, but they came with less force. She gestured toward the Sphinx. *This one disgusts me. His naked fear makes me ill. Come, we are both prisoners here, run to me. Enter my circle and we will unite against him.*

Seth shook his head.

Grant me permission to hear your thoughts. I will forge a connection so we can confer in private.

“No way.”

You would deny my aid? The words arrived more forcefully than ever. Seth put his hands over his ears, but it did nothing to muffle the mental tirade. Darkness seemed to gather around her. *Some of the greatest figures in history have knelt before me! I have drowned navies! I have founded plagues! I have toppled monarchies! Who are you to deny me?*

“I’m the guy outside your circle,” Seth said, resisting the urge to crouch and start gathering stones to throw.

The voice in his mind became gentle and slippery. *Very well, you have a will of your own, I can respect that. How is Graulas? I expected he would have perished by now.*

“He’s dying.”

In his season, he was quite powerful. What a waste. He became so pathetic. So soft. An embarrassment to his kind, fascinated by an inferior species, a student of their trite philosophies. He doted on his human pets, at times favoring them over demons! The weakling deserves a miserable demise. Nagi Luna glanced at the Sphinx. *I do not want our captor eavesdropping on our conversation. He cannot hear my current thoughts. I can open and close my mind to him. Answer me with only yes or no. Let Nagi Luna do the talking.*

“I can’t imagine what we would talk about,” Seth said, watching her cautiously.

Perhaps we should not converse. Perhaps I should speak with our captor, tell him a tale of passageways and glowing coins.

Seth tried to keep his worry from showing. “No.”

When I condescend to speak with a mortal, he had better listen. More especially a hapless whelp like yourself. I made our captor everything he has become. I could do much more for you. You could eclipse him. You have more native potential. There is great power inside of you, but you do not know how to use it. You want out of here. So do I. We can work together to overthrow our jailer.

“Then what?”

A world without boundaries and cages. You could lead that world. Rule it.

“Not interested.”

You could free your family. Protect them. You could keep Zzyzx locked forever.

Seth scowled. He glanced at the Sphinx, who was staring at the floor, hands behind his back. "That doesn't make sense. Why would you help me that way?"

You think I care about opening the prison? Ha! That is the dream of our captor! You know what dwells inside of that prison? Competition! If I had my freedom, I would be the most powerful demon in the world! Why would I want to spoil an advantage like that?

"You'd be my biggest enemy," Seth said.

No, no, no. You lack understanding. Before either of us goes free, I will train you. As you mature into your powers, you will find I am no threat. We will protect one another, link our destinies. You will become the greatest hero the world has known.

"You might as well save it, lady. I may be young, I may even be stupid, but not this stupid."

Fool! Ingrate! The barbed words lashed his mind, full of spite. Men a hundred times your superior would trade everything for an offer like this! You imagine that you matter, that your sister matters, that your family and your friends matter! You are inconsequential, and doomed to remain so. Go! Away with you! Take whatever smug pride you can muster in denying me! You have sentenced your family to death and your cause to failure!

Seth kept his composure. He said nothing else. Nagi Luna was dangerous. Not the type of person to provoke more than necessary. The idea of having someone like her as a partner or teacher filled him with horror. He couldn't stand her in his mind for a few minutes, let alone a lifetime. By contrast she made Graulas seem like a big teddy bear. He glanced at the Sphinx, who impassively stared at the wilted demon. She returned his gaze with raw malevolence. Seth assumed they were communicating.

Seth tried to imagine himself as a miserable slave with no options. Under those circumstances, might he have accepted Nagi Luna's offer? He hoped not.

"No," the Sphinx said with finality. He turned to Seth. "This interview is over."

Nagi Luna flailed a frustrated hand at the Sphinx, as if bidding him good riddance. Hissing and gurgling, she spat on the floor. The Sphinx

climbed the ladder first. Seth followed.

At the top, he helped the Sphinx shut the grate.

“She wanted your help to overthrow me?” the Sphinx asked.

“She made all sorts of offers,” Seth said. “I don’t see how she hasn’t driven you crazy.”

“Nagi Luna is a manipulator,” the Sphinx said. “She employs every available tactic to find leverage. What she most desired was access to your mind.”

“Were you rooting for her?” Seth asked.

“Had you been foolish enough to offer such access, I would have taken advantage of the opportunity.”

“She seemed mad at you.”

“She has her reasons.”

“Like what?”

The Sphinx switched the torch to his other hand. “She wanted me to force you into her ring of constraint.”

“Why didn’t you?”

“That was not my purpose. She thought meeting you might yield useful information. I was willing to give her an opportunity to study you. But not to destroy you.”

“Do I have to go back to my cell?”

“I’m afraid so.”

Seth said nothing more as the Sphinx rejoined the torchbearers and they caravanned back to his cell. One of the guards opened the thick door and Seth entered.

“Home sweet home,” Seth said, rubbing his hands together. “This was fun, we should do it again.”

“Stay out of trouble,” the Sphinx said. He gave a nod, and the guard closed the door.

Seth approached the peephole as the torches moved away. He cupped a hand beside his mouth. “Hey, I don’t know who does your maintenance, but I’ve got a leaky roof in here.” No response came. “You might want to pass that along.” Still no answer. “I’m not sure where the water keeps coming from. Seems to be a limitless supply.”

The torches were growing distant. A moment later, he heard a door open and clang closed. Only the indirect glow from a single unseen torch threw illumination into his cell.

Seth stepped away from the door. “Back to normal,” he mumbled, patting his hands against his sides. He felt alone. “Hello, cell. How are you? Still dank and horrible? Sorry to hear it. Me? I’ve decided to take up a new hobby. Talking to my room. It’s a lot like talking to myself, but slightly more pathetic.”

As if in response, the wall at the back of the cell rumbled. A moment later, Bracken came through, bringing a white glow.

“Did you hear me?” Seth asked.

“Hear what?”

“Talking to myself?”

“No,” Bracken said. “But don’t worry, most of us end up chatting with ourselves on occasion. All part of the fun. How did it go?”

“He took me to meet Nagi Luna.”

“You’re teasing.”

“I wish.”

“Are you all right?”

Seth shrugged. “They didn’t beat me or anything. She kept screaming in my mind. She can talk like you, telepathically. She acted like she wanted to team up against the Sphinx. What she really wanted was to get inside my head. Wait a minute.”

“What?”

“When I use that coin, you can read my thoughts, can’t you?”

“Yes. Mostly just the thoughts you send to me.”

Seth went and plopped on the cot. It swayed and creaked beneath his weight. “How do I know that’s true? How do I know you’re not scouring my brain for secrets?”

“I guess you don’t,” Bracken said. “You don’t have to use it.”

“What’s with everybody reading minds around here?”

“You could hear her, but she couldn’t read your mind unless you let her.”

“Like I let you.”

“I see your concern.”

Seth leaned back on his cot. He placed his hands behind his head. “Now I feel like I’m talking to a psychologist.”

“Tell me about your childhood,” Bracken joked.

“I’ve heard wraiths and zombies in my mind,” Seth said. “But I’ve never mentally talked to a friend. Kendra used to describe what it was like talking to the Fairy Queen.”

“Your sister? She spoke with the Fairy Queen?” He sounded keenly interested.

“Whoops. Maybe I shouldn’t get into that. I guess it’s no big secret anymore. The Sphinx knows that she’s fairykind.”

“You mean fairystruck?”

“No, fairykind. The Sphinx was the first to diagnose her, actually. I probably shouldn’t talk about that stuff. Sounds like Maddox and the others haven’t.”

Bracken reached out a hand and hoisted Seth to his feet. “Whether or not the Sphinx knows about your sister, you’re right that you should keep that kind of information to yourself. As a unicorn, I know the significance of a human becoming fairykind. That status is very rare, and shows a tremendous amount of trust from the Fairy Queen. She has never bestowed trust easily.”

“Do you know her?”

Bracken looked inexplicably uncomfortable. “All unicorns know the Fairy Queen.” After a brief pause, he smiled and clapped Seth on the arm. “Come with me, I want to show you something. I figured you could use some cheering up after your interlude with the Sphinx.”

Seth followed Bracken out into the passage. They travelled the opposite direction from when they had visited Maddox. Bracken guided Seth through a secret door, up a crude stairway, through a crawl space, out a hidden hatchway, and down a cramped hall. Near the end of the hallway Bracken stopped.

“I’m about to show you my favorite place.”

“Okay,” Seth said, suitably curious.

“I mean my favorite place in the dungeon.”

“I get it.”

Bracken simultaneously pressed and turned two stones, and a section of the wall swiveled open, turning on a central pivot. As Bracken led the way through the entrance, he extinguished his stone and felt along the wall. He flipped a switch and overhead lights turned on, along with a few lamps and a pair of ceiling fans.

“No way,” Seth breathed. Five pinball machines lined one wall. Three dartboards hung on another. A pool table helped fill the middle of the room, balls racked and ready. Nearby stood a ping-pong table and a Foosball table. On one side of the room, three leather couches huddled around a flat-screen television. A large weight machine dominated the far corner of the room, flanked by a treadmill and a rack of free weights. A huge jukebox stood to one side of the secret entrance.

Seth wandered over to the Foosball table. Indians versus cowboys.

“Recognize it?” Bracken asked.

“Why?”

“Because you went straight to it, and it just barely showed up.”

Seth nodded. “I think I played Foosball against the Sphinx on this table when I first met him. Or one just like it. Kendra did too.”

“This room is our best evidence that the Sphinx knows we sneak around down here,” Bracken said. “In fact, with what you mentioned about the Foosball table, we can consider it a certainty. He uses this room to incentivize good behavior. If we act up, things disappear. Sometimes the room is left empty. As we behave, items show up. It has never been openly acknowledged that this place exists. Welcome to the dungeon rec center.”

“Does the TV work?”

“Everything works. The TV gets lots of channels.”

“How did he get electricity down here?”

“Wires?”

“Right.” Seth walked over to a pinball machine. He tapped the flipper buttons.

“The yellow button starts the game,” Bracken advised.

“Who has the high score?”

“Me. On all of them.”

Seth turned to face Bracken. “I’m going to take you down.”

“I’d like to see that,” Bracken chuckled. “I have pretty good reflexes, and I’ve been playing them for almost forty years.”

Seth frowned. “I bet you’re pretty good at pool.”

“I’ve had a little practice.”

Seth shrugged. “I can live with getting schooled. It would sure beat sitting on my cot listening to the water drip.”

“Agreed.”

Seth ran a hand along the pool table. “If we start a riot, all of this will go away.”

Bracken crossed to a rack on the wall and selected a cue. “This room will be empty for years. And they’ll do their best to seal up as many passageways as they can find.”

Seth selected a cue for himself. “Do we have a chance of succeeding?”

Bracken chalked the tip of his stick. “Not much. But I’m not willing to let the world end without a fight so I can keep playing ping-pong.”

“Then we should probably enjoy this room while we have it.”

Bracken twirled the cue stick expertly. “My sentiments exactly.” He crouched over the table and sent the cue ball rocketing into the others.



Vanessa's Secret

Kendra swam in a shallow, syrupy lake. The viscous liquid made it a challenge for her to keep her head up, but she didn't want to touch the bottom, either, populated as it was with slimy, squirmy creatures that might bite or sting. The brownish scum on the surface pulled and wrinkled as she carved a slow path through it, arms and legs churning awkwardly. She could not see the shore. Her only landmarks were dead limbs protruding from the mire.

Grandma jostled her shoulder, and Kendra jerked awake, relieved to be free of the uncomfortable dream, but somewhat confused because she saw no evidence of daybreak. A glance at the clock on the nightstand confirmed that it was 3:22 a.m.

"What's going on?" Kendra asked, fear dispelling her drowsiness.

"No great emergency," Grandma soothed. "We're about to learn Vanessa's secret."

Kendra bolted upright. "What is it?"

"Visitors," Grandma said. "Stan, Tanu, and Warren are meeting them at the gate."

“It could be a trick,” Kendra warned. What if they admitted a pair of dragons in human form? Or that wizard Mirav?

“Vanessa whispered the secret to Stan about an hour ago,” Grandma said. “Apparently she has been in communication with somebody important, and that person is coming here tonight. Stan was satisfied with her explanation. He’ll be careful. You should get dressed.”

Kendra slid out of bed and started changing her clothes. “You don’t know the details?”

“Not yet. The plan is to discuss the situation back in time.”

“And I get to come?” Kendra asked hopefully.

“Vanessa suggested that you should be there.”

Kendra felt delighted to be included. Who were these mysterious visitors? Kendra could not formulate a reasonable guess. Dare she hope it might be her parents? Or Seth? Would that need to be a big secret?

Dressed in jeans and a comfortable top, Kendra followed Grandma down to the entry hall. The door opened as they arrived. Grandpa entered, followed by a masked figure of medium height wearing a loose, hooded cloak. The cartoonish rubber mask depicted a scowling man with squinty eyes, fat lips, and fleshy cheeks. A shorter person, perhaps a young child, entered as well, wearing a mask like a grinning dog with the tongue lolling out. Warren and Tanu brought up the rear.

“I’m glad you’re up, Kendra,” Grandpa said. He gestured to the stairs. “This way.”

Kendra and Grandma joined the procession to the secret side of the attic. Kendra still had no guess regarding the identity of the disguised visitors. She hoped Grandpa knew what he was doing, letting these masked strangers into the most secretive room in the house.

When they reached the attic, Coulter awaited them with the Chronometer. “We’re set for a night ten years ago. The attic should be empty.”

“Well done, Coulter,” Grandpa said. “Kendra, Warren, and Ruth will be joining me and our taller visitor. The other visitor will await us here.”

“Won’t be much of a wait for the rest of us,” Tanu said.

“Right,” Grandpa said. “Our conversation will seem like a blink to those who remain behind. The advice from Patton helped Coulter crack the

code for setting the Chronometer. We'll do as many sessions in the past as it takes to bring everyone up to speed."

Kendra felt excited to be part of the first group to learn the secret, although she wasn't overly eager to have the breath knocked out of her again. She, Grandma, Grandpa, Warren, and the mystery guest gathered around the Chronometer.

"For the sake of modesty," Grandma said, "I submit you all keep your eyes shut while I track down some blankets."

"Sounds sensible," Grandpa agreed. "Everybody place a hand on the device."

They complied. He slid a symbol along a groove and flipped the switch.

Kendra braced herself, tightening her abdominals, but it did nothing to thwart the alarming sensation of the breath rushing out of her lungs. Eyes shut, Kendra clutched her midsection, shoulders heaving as she tried to jump-start her breathing. After a weak cough, air began to flow in and out.

She heard Grandma moving around. The stranger would be completely uncovered. Kendra resisted peeking. She would know soon enough.

She heard and sensed a light click on. From behind, Grandma placed a soft comforter over Kendra's shoulders. Kendra wrapped the comforter around herself.

"Okay," Grandma said after a moment. "Open your eyes."

Kendra did, and gazed at the visitor. She felt like the wind had been knocked out of her a second time. The stranger was Grandma Larsen.

"I'm so sorry," Grandma Larsen said gently, eyes on Kendra.

Grandma Larsen was dead! She and Grandpa Larsen had asphyxiated together! Kendra had attended the funeral, had seen her embalmed corpse in her casket!

"How is this possible?" Kendra asked numbly, disbelief impeding her happiness. Could this really be Grandma Larsen, who snuck her candy and took her to the park and made cheese empanadas? The grandmother who had actually been there while she and Seth were growing up?

"You should be able to guess, Kendra," Grandma Larsen said. "Your family buried stingbulbs."

Kendra made a sound, half laugh, half whimper. Tears of relief sprang to her eyes. Her joy was tinged with a sense of betrayal. How could her grandparents put all of them through this? With a stab of guilt, Kendra realized this was a glimpse of how her parents would feel when they learned they had not actually buried their daughter.

“Incredible,” Grandma Sorenson murmured.

“What about Uncle Tuck and Aunt Kim?” Kendra asked.

“Sadly, they really died in that trailer,” Grandma Larsen said. “We used the opportunity of their demise to stage our own deaths alongside them.”

Grandpa pulled his blanket more snugly around himself. “Then what happened?”

“Let me try to summarize,” Grandma Larsen said. “Your grandfather and I have long worked as spies for the Knights of the Dawn. This was while the Sphinx still served as Captain, so masks were worn, and almost nobody knew us. Stan and Ruth were exceptions. As our assignments became more sensitive, Hank and I pretended to retire. The Sphinx knew that we remained active, as did our Lieutenant, but neither had ever met us face-to-face. We communicated with our leaders via coded messages, using false names. Several other spies for the Knights behaved in similar fashion. After all, once your cover is blown, your career as a spy is over. Anonymity is everything. Unlike Stan and Ruth, who were busy as caretakers, Hank and I were able to live dual lives, spending time at home between assignments.”

“You went on vacations pretty often,” Kendra remembered. “They weren’t real?”

“Usually not. In the months leading up to our staged deaths, the Society of the Evening Star became more active than ever. Around this time, your grandfather received the opportunity to become assistant caretaker at Living Mirage.”

“Living Mirage?” Warren asked.

“The fifth secret preserve,” Grandma Larsen said. “The Sphinx is the caretaker.”

“Oh, no,” Grandma Sorenson gasped.

“Accepting the position of assistant caretaker would make Hank the most deeply placed spy in enemy ranks. The catch was that going to Living Mirage meant never leaving. Only an inner circle of five Society members

are allowed to come and go from Living Mirage, which is how the secret has been preserved. Even within the Society, almost nobody knows that Living Mirage exists.”

“So you faked your deaths,” Kendra prompted.

“Part of it was to explain why Hank would disappear, perhaps for the rest of his life. Part of it was to prevent any chance of our enemies tracing us back to our children and grandchildren. The Society does not know Hank and I are married. To them, he is Steve Sinclair and I’m Clara Taylor.”

“When did you last see Hank?” Grandpa asked.

“Three days before he left,” Grandma Larsen said. “Around the time of our mock funeral. I didn’t know where Living Mirage was located, because he didn’t know. I had not heard from him until a few weeks ago.”

“What were you doing all that time?” Kendra asked.

“Establishing deeper trust with the Society elite,” Grandma Larsen said. “I have been out of touch with the Knights for years. The Society sees me as one of their most devoted members. Your grandfather and I decided to insinuate ourselves as deeply into the Society as possible, so we could serve as a last line of defense in a worst-case scenario. Good thing we did, since that worst-case scenario is about to transpire.”

“How long have you known about the Sphinx?” Warren wondered.

“He covers his tracks very well,” Grandma Larsen said. “I didn’t know he was leading the Society until last year. And I didn’t know he was Captain of the Knights until he was revealed through your efforts.”

“How did Vanessa become involved?” Kendra asked.

Grandma Larsen exhaled with exasperation. “Vanessa found me out years ago. She had worked with me once back when she was a false Knight. Even though I had been masked when we met as Knights, and I also typically wear a mask when dealing with members of the Society, she somehow recognized me at a Society event, although she kept the secret to herself at the time. While doing research prior to coming to Fablehaven, she got her hands on a home movie of me and Hank with you and Seth. That was when she connected me to my true identity.”

“That girl does her homework,” Warren said with admiration.

“Vanessa is a very talented operative,” Grandma Larsen said. “In the past, she has caused me more distress than anyone. We should be most

grateful that she has defected to our side. And we should take every precaution to prevent her from betraying us again.”

“You don’t trust her?” Grandpa asked.

“It would be unwise,” Grandma Larsen said. “At least not until this crisis has passed.”

“But didn’t she bring you here?” Kendra asked.

“She has been very helpful,” Grandma Larsen said. “She has been in contact with me from time to time using sleepers she had previously bitten. In fact, it was Vanessa who alerted me that you had been abducted by Torina.”

“Did you help me get free?” Kendra asked.

“I watched you use the Oculus.”

Kendra furrowed her brow. Then she remembered that not long before she had used the Oculus, a masked figure had entered the room with Mr. Lich. The identity of the masked onlooker had never been revealed. “You wore a mask.”

“That’s right. Thankfully, I almost always conceal my face when I work with the Society. I’m sure you would have had a hard time hiding your surprise. There was nothing I could do in the moment except hope you survived the Oculus. Any action I took would have hopelessly compromised both of us. But afterward, I slipped the knapsack and the stingbulb into your room.”

“You gave me the knapsack!” Kendra exclaimed, her mind reeling. “I’ve wondered who helped me.”

“Finesse is everything in my line of work,” Grandma Larsen said. “I wish I could have done more. I did what I felt gave us the best chance for success. I was relieved that you were able to do the rest.”

“That knapsack was my home for a few months,” Warren mentioned.

“Navarog destroyed it and trapped him inside,” Kendra explained. “We used the Translocator to rescue him.”

“Then you must know Bubda,” Grandma Larsen said.

“Both Kendra and I do,” Warren said.

“Is he all right?” Grandma Larsen asked.

“He’s still inside that room,” Warren said. “Stubborn little guy doesn’t want to leave, but eventually he’ll starve unless we extract him.”

“I understand about Bubda not wanting to leave,” Grandma Larsen said with a knowing chuckle. “That was why I left him in there in the first place. He loves his home, and, as hermit trolls go, he is extremely mild and sociable. I saw no real harm in letting him continue to reside there.”

Grandpa coughed softly into his fist. “We’re beginning to stray. How are we on time?”

Grandma Sorenson checked a watch she must have acquired when she had gathered the blankets. “Fifteen more minutes.”

Grandpa rubbed the edge of his blanket between his thumb and forefinger. “I know I can speak for all of us when I say we’re shocked and relieved to find you alive, Gloria. I’m sure you have more to tell us. You mentioned that Hank contacted you recently.”

“Once Hank learned that Scott and Marla were in custody at Living Mirage, he began planning a rescue. When Seth showed up there, Hank hastened his efforts.”

“Seth’s alive?” Kendra exclaimed. “You’re sure?”

“The Sphinx healed him with the Sands of Sanctity,” Grandma Larsen said.

“He and my parents are all at Living Mirage,” Kendra muttered. “Where is it?”

“Eastern Turkey,” Grandma Larsen answered. “We have a way in. The plan is to recover as many artifacts as we can while rescuing our lost family members.”

“Tell us more,” Grandma Sorenson said.

“Hank risked everything to get information out of Living Mirage. The Sphinx’s preserve remains his most closely guarded secret. He derives his immortality from the artifact he discovered there centuries ago. But in recent months, as the Sphinx has grown certain of victory, his caution has finally begun to slacken. Hank runs the logistics of Living Mirage, and he has built up enough trust that when the Sphinx is absent from the preserve, Hank becomes the de facto caretaker.

“In his first communication, which arrived via homing canister, Hank told me that if we acquired the Translocator, he had a way to smuggle us in. The day I learned you had recovered the Translocator, I sent word to Hank, journeyed to a predetermined location in Istanbul, and found a dwarf awaiting me.”

“The dwarf you brought here tonight,” Warren said.

“Correct. His name is Tollin. The dwarf used to work at Living Mirage. Hank smuggled him out. With Tollin and the Translocator, we can penetrate Living Mirage.”

“Who else knows about this?” Grandpa asked.

“Only the dwarf, Hank, and myself,” Grandma Larsen assured him. “Not even Vanessa knows that Hank is at Living Mirage. His communiqués have arrived untampered with, bound by cryptic seals as verification. Hank released the canisters just outside the gates of Living Mirage, and the messages flew directly to me. I have traveled in disguise, employing a brand-new set of masks. Tollin and I have worn masks the entire time since Istanbul. We got back to the United States through illegal, untraceable means. No passports, no credit cards.”

“Our greatest risk is the Oculus,” Grandma Sorenson said.

“Which is why we’ve constantly worn the masks,” Grandma Larsen said. “I destroyed the messages as soon as I received them. All the Oculus could have seen so far, had the Sphinx even known to look in my direction, is masked figures travelling. This is the first time I have discussed our plans aloud.”

“Is Hank confident we can trust the dwarf?” Warren asked.

“As sure as he could be,” Grandma Larsen said. “It’s a small miracle Hank got him out. One man at Living Mirage drives a truck to a local town when supplies are needed. Making supply runs has been that man’s job for hundreds of years. Hank ordered a supply run and, unbeknownst to the driver, smuggled Tollin out in the truck. The dwarf then made his way to Istanbul. Hank has never given the Sphinx any reason to distrust him. Nor have I, until I came to Fablehaven tonight. Hank has worked closely with the dwarf, and he feels confident that Tollin, along with most of his kind, would welcome the arrival of a new caretaker at Living Mirage.”

“We’ll have to act swiftly,” Warren said. “Every moment we spend back in our proper time increases the chance that the Sphinx might catch on. What are the chances the Sphinx will notice Tollin is gone?”

“Hank manages the dwarfs,” Grandma Larsen said. “Living Mirage is an immense preserve. He doesn’t expect anyone to notice Tollin missing for weeks, and can cover if they do. But I agree that we need to move swiftly. The Oculus is powerful, and it is often focused at Fablehaven.”

“What do we know about the layout of Living Mirage?” Grandpa asked.

“Along with several outlying buildings, there are three main ziggurats,” Grandma said. “The Sphinx has his headquarters in the Great Ziggurat, with the dungeon underneath. He stores the artifacts in his office. Hank will secure the artifacts. He sent duplicates of all the relevant keys with the dwarf, along with a map to the Great Ziggurat, including rarely used service tunnels.”

“We might have a chance,” Warren said.

“We really might,” Grandma Larsen agreed. “Secrecy has protected Living Mirage for so long that security inside the compound has grown rather lax. Hank even sent official paperwork for us to retrieve Scott, Marla, and Seth if we want to try to bluff our way into the dungeon. The great advantage with the Translocator is that once we get to the prisoners, we don’t have to figure out an escape. The escape is instantaneous.”

“And we can abort the mission at any point,” Grandma Sorenson said.

“With nothing to stop us from trying again later,” Warren added. “Although we need to get it right the first time in order to take advantage of the element of surprise. How large of a strike force should we gather?”

Grandma Larsen shrugged. “That is open to debate. The Translocator carries only three people at a time. A small team can move in and out more easily, but a larger team could split up and might have a better chance of fighting their way through obstacles.”

“The dwarf will obviously have to bring in the first pair,” Grandpa said. “Then we can shuttle in whoever we want.”

“We mustn’t let the Sphinx get the Translocator,” Kendra reminded them.

“Somebody reliable should have the Translocator at all times,” Warren agreed. “If things go wrong, their top priority must be to teleport away.”

“We don’t necessarily have to leave the Translocator with the strike force,” Grandma Sorenson considered. “Of course, without the Translocator on hand, escape from Living Mirage will be much more complex, even if we coordinate with satellite phones and establish rendezvous points.”

“Whoever goes into the dungeon needs the Translocator,” Grandpa said. “They’ll be lucky to make it to the prisoners, let alone get back out. Warren is right—if all else fails, they can abort and jump away.”

“This is risky,” Grandma Sorenson said.

“Any option we have left is risky,” Grandpa said. “This scenario is much more promising than any option I had hoped to encounter. If it pays off, we could rescue Seth, Marla, and Scott, and retrieve the other artifacts.”

“And if it fails,” Grandma Larsen cautioned, “we could lose the Translocator, and soon thereafter the Chrono-meter.”

Kendra’s insides fluttered nervously. “She’s right. The Sphinx has been to Fablehaven. So has Mr. Lich. If they had the Translocator, they could come straight here, and that would be the end of everything.”

Grandpa pinched his lip absently, eyes far away. “Gloria, you’ve had much more time than us to think this through. What would you recommend?”

“A team of six,” Grandma Larsen said. “Two fighters and I rendezvous with Hank. The dwarf leads two other fighters to the dungeon. The dungeon strike force should keep the Translocator and leap home with the prisoners. Tollin has had some prior access to the vicinity of the dungeon, so those who go there with him will be able to teleport somewhat on the way to their objective. After the captives are secure, a designee will return to a prearranged rendezvous to claim us and the other artifacts.”

“How will Hank know when to move?” Warren asked.

“He’ll check from his window at two in the morning every night until I send him the signal. Which means we’d want to launch the assault around 6:30 p.m. our time to account for the seven-hour time difference.”

“I would propose an extra participant,” Warren said. “The dwarf should drop off an extra man first, a good distance from the others. He can serve as a fail-safe, to clean up the mess if the mission goes awry. A human insurance policy. For now, let’s call him . . . Warren.”

“Are there fairies at Living Mirage?” Kendra asked.

“I’m sure,” Grandma Larsen said. “We can ask Tollin for details.”

“Fairies have to follow my orders,” Kendra explained. “I should come.”

Grandpa reddened. “Absolutely not. The idea is not to jeopardize the entire family.”

“I’ve had a little success in the past,” Kendra reminded him. “The idea is to make this work, right?”

Grandma Sorenson nodded thoughtfully. “Maybe she could enter with us at first, issue commands to some fairies, then leap directly home.”

“Do you have other participants in mind?” Grandma Larsen asked.

Grandpa cleared his throat. “I’d lead the assault force to the dungeon. Trask can accompany me with the dwarf. Elise and Tanu can join you to help Hank.”

“And I sit at home knitting and fretting?” Grandma Sorenson said.

“Why don’t you escort Kendra?” Grandpa proposed. “Help her find some fairies, set some assistance in motion, then teleport back to Fablehaven before I head for the dungeon. We’ll leave Coulter back home as interim caretaker, and let Dale keep running the logistics, but I’d feel much better knowing more than one of us remained at home.”

“That sounds reasonable,” Grandma Sorenson admitted reluctantly.

“Where will the dwarf insert us?” Grandpa asked.

“Near the nest of a roc,” Grandma Larsen said.

“A roc?” Warren exclaimed.

“A rock?” Kendra asked.

“An enormous bird that preys on elephants and aurochs,” Grandma Larsen clarified. “The inhabitants of Living Mirage generally stay away from the nesting area, but the nest lies within fifteen minutes on foot from the Great Ziggurat. During maintenance errands, Tollin has ventured right up to the nest itself. He will teleport us to a sheltered location with enough proximity to the roc to provide us with privacy.”

“Sounds sensible,” Grandpa said. “I expect you want this to happen this evening?”

Grandma Larsen gave a nod. “The quicker we set this in motion, the less chance we have of getting discovered.”

“Should be simple to bring Trask and Elise here with the Translocator,” Warren said.

“We’ll get word to them,” Grandpa said, “but we won’t reveal details or bring them to Fablehaven until the last possible moment. Surprise will be the difference between success and failure.”

“The Sphinx won’t know what hit him,” Grandma Sorenson murmured.

“I suggest you return Vanessa to the Quiet Box until this is over,” Grandma Larsen said. “You should probably place Tollin and me in the dungeon. We’ll keep our masks on. Should the Sphinx glimpse us, we want him confused about our presence here.”

“I believe we have the outline of a plan,” Grandpa said. “We’ll get to work on the particulars. First order of business will be to bring Tanu, Coulter, and Dale in on this to help flesh out details. We’ll hold all meetings back in time. No discussion of this otherwise. Not a word. This has to succeed.”

“We’ll make sure it does,” Grandma Larsen said staunchly.

“How are we on time?” Grandpa asked.

Grandma Sorenson checked the watch. “We should probably get into position.” None of them had moved much since coming back in time.

Kendra studied her Grandma Larsen. It was so wonderful to have her back. At the same time, Kendra felt she hardly knew her. It was hard to reconcile her memories of Grandma Larsen with this no-nonsense spy before her.

Grandma Larsen caught Kendra’s eye. “I’m sure this is a lot for you to digest.”

“Kind of.”

“You and your brother are well-known among the Society. You’ve been in much more danger than I would prefer, but I’ve been so proud of you both.”

The compliment made Kendra feel awkward. “Thanks.”

“I’m sorry Grandpa Larsen and I have missed the last couple of years. I suppose it’s fair that Stan and Ruth got a turn to know you. Hopefully we’ll all have lots of time together in the future.”

“I hope so too,” Kendra said.

Chapter 12



Rescue

The next day, peering out the kitchen window, Kendra spotted Hugo sitting on the lawn, legs straight out, shoulders slumped, big hands folded in his lap. In harmony with the springtime atmosphere at Fablehaven, the golem looked more colorful than usual, with an abundance of wildflowers, blossoming creepers, and tufts of grass sprouting from his earthen body. Dale stood beside Hugo, hands on his hips. Kendra realized she had never seen the golem sitting down before.

Kendra went out the back door and crossed the lawn to Dale. “Something wrong with Hugo?” she asked.

“Hey, Kendra,” Dale said, wiping his damp brow with a handkerchief. “I’ve never seen him like this. The big guy has been sluggish all day. Then I came out of the barn to find him picking grass.”

Kendra noticed the small pits and discarded divots in front of the golem. “You okay, Hugo?”

The big head swiveled toward her, cavernous eyes regarding her solemnly. “Hugo okay,” he said wearily. His gravelly voice was becoming more expressive and intelligible every day.

“Well, get up then,” Dale prodded. “We have chores to do. You’re making everybody nervous.” Dale looked uncomfortable.

Kendra wondered if Dale missed the way Hugo used to be. In the past, Hugo had done nothing but follow orders. But after the fairies had tampered with him, the golem had developed a will of his own. He still almost always followed commands, but on occasion he would deviate or improvise.

With a grunt like rolling boulders, Hugo rose to his feet, mouth bent in a frown. He looked down at Dale.

“That’s the spirit,” Dale said, as if encouraging a child. “Let’s go see to those stables.”

Powerful arms at his sides, Hugo bent at the waist and then toppled forward. His head hit the ground hard, digging a short furrow in the lawn. Propped up by his head and feet, he rigidly held his bowed position, arms at his sides, rear end pointing skyward.

“What’s wrong, Hugo?” Kendra asked. Could the golem be ill? He looked absolutely pathetic.

Heaving with his arms, Hugo rocked back to a sitting position. “Seth gone,” he said, a forlorn rumble.

“You miss Seth?” Kendra said. “He’ll be back.”

Hugo shook his heavy head. “Seth taken.”

“Who told you Seth was taken?” Dale asked.

“Doren.”

Kendra blinked. Suddenly Hugo’s behavior made much more sense. He was concerned about Seth.

“Is that what has you out of sorts?” Dale asked. “You miss your buddy?”

Hugo patted his chest. “Miss buddy.”

“Seth will be all right,” Kendra said encouragingly. “He’s survived tough situations before.” She wished she could fully believe her words.

Hugo regarded her with an unnerving, eyeless gaze. “Hugo want help.”

“Best way you can help is to keep Fablehaven running,” Dale urged. “Otherwise there won’t be a preserve for Seth to come home to.”

Once again, Hugo stood up. He gazed down at Kendra. “You help Seth.”

“We’ll figure out something,” Kendra promised. She couldn’t explain that they already had a rescue planned. They were only allowed to discuss plans in the past. Maybe the golem needed a distraction. “Want to play catch, Hugo? Or hit a baseball? You can throw me in the pool.”

The golem forced a craggy smile. He rubbed his stony chest. “Not feel right. Maybe later. Stables first.”

“I’ve never seen him all emotional like this,” Dale muttered out the side of his mouth.

“It’s sweet,” Kendra said, fighting back tears.

“Come,” Hugo said, picking up Dale and cradling him in one arm. The golem gently patted Kendra on the shoulder, then turned and loped out of the yard.

Kendra was left standing alone. She sat down on the grass, which had been squashed flat by the golem’s rump. The rescue operation would commence within the hour. Trask and Elise had still not arrived. But they were ready. Warren would teleport them to Fablehaven at the last moment.

A quartet of fairies fluttered over and began replacing the grassy divots into the corresponding pits. Kendra focused on the nearest fairy. She had short blonde hair and wore a simple shift the color of sunflower petals. Her translucent butterfly wings ended in fanciful curled points. Kendra marveled at the tiny hands packing the clod of earth back into place. How strange to quietly observe a beautiful woman the size of an insect!

Aware of the attention, the fairy glanced up at Kendra, her expression uncertain as she brushed soil from her dainty palms. The miniature woman checked her radiant slip for stains.

“You look lovely,” Kendra said.

The fairy beamed, twirled, and leaped into the air, flitting off toward the nearest rosebush. The other three fairies smoldered with jealousy.

“You all look fabulous,” Kendra assured them.

The other fairies took flight as well. “And *you* said she was too big and clumsy to recognize style,” one chirped to another.

Kendra smiled. This unlikely, magnificent world of magical creatures was certainly worth protecting. She could understand why her grandparents had devoted their lives to the cause. She just wished the job came with less danger.

Kendra considered how she might use the fairies of Living Mirage to help the assault force. Since the fairies would obey any order she gave in the name of the Fairy Queen, Kendra took the responsibility seriously. Her commands could cause innocent fairies to perish without any choice in the matter.

The fairies of Living Mirage could at least provide assistance as guides and sentries. Since stealth was the key to this mission, that extra guidance might give the strike force the edge they needed. Kendra ran a hand over the grass the fairies had just replaced. The repaired portions blended seamlessly with the rest of the lawn. Fairies possessed strong restorative magic. Kendra wondered if fairy magic could somehow benefit the upcoming mission.

Wearing a dark outfit, Warren came out of the house and vaulted the back porch railing. “Meditating?” he asked.

“Something like that,” Kendra answered, rising.

“I just set up Bubda in a storage room in the dungeon,” Warren said. “I left him with a deck of cards, taught him how to play solitaire. Little guy really resisted leaving the knapsack room. But as soon as he dug into a bag of overripe tomatoes, he was feeling much better.”

“How did Vanessa take her transfer to the Quiet Box?” Kendra asked.

“Like a pro,” Warren said. “She may not love the idea, but she gets it. With a bunch of us heading off to Four Pines, she knows we can’t have her loose.”

They had decided to pretend that several of them would be teleporting to a preserve called Four Pines in Canada. All of their preparations were discussed in this context in order to explain why they were gathering so much gear, and to misdirect the Sphinx’s attention. The idea had come from Coulter.

“It will be interesting to see a new preserve,” Kendra said.

“You’ll like it,” Warren said. “Ruth sent me out to call you for dinner.”

“What is it?”

“Italian,” Warren said. “Pasta, lasagna, pizza, salad—the works. I cheated and used the Translocator to pick it up from my favorite restaurant. You’ll love it.”

Kendra thought about how they had tried to use pancakes to calm her before the visit to Stony Vale. Would pasta be a last meal for any of them? She tried to push away the morbid thought.

She followed Warren into the house, where Coulter and Tanu were removing plastic containers of food from bags. Grandma Larsen would not get to participate in the meal. Kendra had hardly seen Grandma Larsen since their discussion back in time. Her grandmother and the dwarf kept silent while in the present, and were currently residing in a dungeon cell.

Warren was right about the food. The spicy lasagna was so delicious that she actually got distracted from the upcoming mission and ate a hearty portion. She had cannoli for dessert, and they tasted divine as well.

Grandma and Grandpa Sorenson came to the table last. She had on a light gray sweatshirt and jeans. He was clad in black. Kendra supposed that since she and Grandma would be at Living Mirage for only a few minutes, they didn't require much camouflage.

Kendra eyed the clock while her grandparents ate. Minutes ticked by. At 6:20, Tanu went to bring Grandma Larsen and the dwarf up from the dungeon. At 6:25, Warren used the Translocator to retrieve Trask and Elise. He was back within seconds.

Everyone started checking gear and shouldering packs. Tanu examined his potions. Trask fiddled with his weapons. The dwarf gobbled up no fewer than six cannoli, stuffing them under his mask.

"Four Pines should be secure," Trask announced, sliding a dagger back into its sheath, "but we can't be too careful." Warren would only have just whispered to him the actual destination.

Grandpa clapped Coulter on the shoulder. "We'll be back soon."

"I'll be waiting," Coulter said.

"Now?" asked the dwarf.

"Me first," Warren said, holding out the Translocator. "You know the drill."

Tollin twisted the middle portion and they winked out of sight. Kendra knew Warren had conferred with the dwarf to select an alternate location for him to be inserted at Living Mirage, but was not privy to the details. A moment later the masked dwarf returned without Warren.

Trask and Grandma Larsen grabbed opposite ends of the Translocator and vanished with the dwarf. Grandma Larsen reappeared and collected Tanu and Grandpa Sorenson. A moment later, Grandma Larsen was back for Elise and Grandma Sorenson.

“Take care,” Coulter said to Kendra. “See you soon.”

She gave a distracted nod. Her mouth felt dry, her palms damp.

Grandma Larsen returned. “Ready?” she asked, voice muffled by her mask.

Kendra took hold of the Translocator. Grandma Larsen twisted the device, and suddenly she and Kendra stood in a warm, dark grove of olive trees. A bright array of stars glittered in the moonless sky. Grandma Larsen raised a quieting finger to the lips of her mask.

“Trask, Elise, and Tanu will scout the area,” Grandpa whispered. “We have five minutes to locate a fairy or two. At that point, whether or not we’ve found one, Kendra and Ruth will return home and we’ll proceed.”

Tollin had removed his mask. Sweat matted his gray beard. The dwarf tapped his temple and curled a finger at Grandma Larsen, miming for her to crouch. Grandma Larsen removed her mask and bent an ear down to the dwarf. Quick as a mousetrap, he snatched the Translocator from her grasp, twisted the center, and disappeared.

During the stunned pause that followed, Kendra felt her insides sink and shrivel. They were doomed.

“Scatter!” Grandpa cried.

An instant later, weighted nets started falling from the sky.

Kendra heard the twang of bowstrings and the hiss of blowguns. Hoarse shouts echoed from all directions. Somewhere above and behind, the roc shrieked with enough power to rival the roar of any dragon. Amid all the commotion, Kendra recognized the eerie chanting of Mirav the wizard.

The members of the strike force tumbled to the ground as they sought in vain to flee, tangled in nets, drugged by darts, and hampered by spells. Frozen with terror and despair, Kendra watched as the others fell. She glimpsed Trask slashing a net with a short sword. She heard Grandpa growling with effort, dragging himself a short ways along the ground before slumping into unconsciousness.

Dazedly, Kendra realized that she remained unscathed. Perhaps her inaction amid all the commotion had prevented their enemies from targeting her. Perhaps she was perceived as the least threatening member of the party. Perhaps it was dumb luck. She fleetingly wondered if she could be enjoying some form of magical protection. No, they were trespassers here. Their protection had been secrecy, and the dwarf had betrayed them.

Collapsing to the ground, Kendra faked unconsciousness. Maybe if she was sneaky, she could crawl away while the others were being rounded up. Nobody could see better than she could in the dark. If she could slither free, she might be able to find a way to help.

She heard rapid footsteps approaching, voices whispering, bushes rustling. Should she move? Should she wait?

“This one is awake,” said a dry voice above her.

Kendra opened her eyes and found herself staring up at Mirav. Reaching out a long-nailed hand, he sprinkled glittering powder in her face.

Kendra felt an insistent tickle, as if she had to sneeze, but the sneeze refused to come. Instead, the world rocked, then spun, then darkness enfolded her.

* * *

Kendra awoke reclining against a plush, squarish cushion. The Sphinx sat opposite her, cross-legged on a mat. Kendra pushed herself upright. They were on a wide, tiled, torch-lit balcony. A glorious mist of stars sparkled overhead.

“Welcome to Living Mirage,” the Sphinx said pleasantly.

Kendra felt surprisingly alert. No grogginess lingered from her unconsciousness. Here she sat, alone with the man who had sabotaged her life and stolen her family. “Where is everyone?”

“All four of your grandparents are in my custody,” the Sphinx said. “As are your parents, as is your brother, as are many of your friends.”

“Is everyone all right?” Kendra asked.

The Sphinx offered a kind, white smile. “None of them were harmed, and this despite several of them attempting to fight. Only Warren has not yet been captured, but Tollin told us where he left him. We will have him soon.”

She despised his smile. She hated his friendly demeanor. “The dwarf betrayed us.”

“Do not blame the dwarf,” the Sphinx said. “All of this was orchestrated. The dwarf was merely a piece in the puzzle, an anxious servant willing to bring honor and comfort to his people.”

“You saw us with the Oculus?”

“When your grandfather Hank sent his first message to his wife, your cause was ruined. I am very, very slow to trust, Kendra. My assistant caretaker was a competent man, but decades away from earning any real credibility. Steve, as Hank called himself, was constantly monitored. I cannot describe my excitement when I heard he had sent a homing canister. A spy who does not realize his cover has been blown can be a most valuable asset. My elation increased as I dug into his past and discovered he was a desperate spy, eager to rescue his relatives. Using the dwarf to spoil your incursion was simple. Even I was surprised by all we gained. I did not expect you to be joining them. May I offer you refreshments?”

Kendra’s gaze strayed to a nearby low, round table crowded with food and beverages.

“No, thank you.”

“The figs are exceptional.”

“I just had a bunch of Italian food.”

“Water, perhaps? Juice?”

“I’m fine. What are you going to do with us?”

The Sphinx folded his hands in his lap. “Your only task in the near future will be to relax. Your role in the coming events has concluded.”

“You’re really going to open Zzyzx?” Kendra asked.

The Sphinx fingered his grin. “It was inevitable. There is amazing power in single-mindedness.”

“You’re going to destroy the world.”

The grin faltered. “You and your loved ones have fought hard because you believe that is the case. I bear you no malice. In the end, you will be released.”

Kendra looked around the balcony, noticing the potted ferns and inhaling exotic fragrances. “Why have you brought me here?”

“I showed your brother the same courtesy. You children fascinate me. Your potential is extraordinary. Are you sure you will not have some food? The fare in the dungeon is not quite so fine.”

“Is that where you’re keeping us?”

“Consider it a mark of respect. Many of you are dangerous opponents. The stay will be temporary, I assure you. Our plans are nearing fruition.”

Kendra walked over to the table and sat down on a mat. “Maybe I’ll have some water.”

The Sphinx joined her at the table. “Try the pear juice. It is very light.” He removed a chilled carafe from a bucket of ice and poured the clear fluid into a goblet.

Kendra sampled the drink. The Sphinx was right. The cool liquid had a subtle, fresh flavor.

“Have you any questions for me?” the Sphinx asked.

“Not that you would answer,” Kendra huffed.

“Try me. I made a similar offer to your brother. This is finally over. Some details are not yet tied up, but the game is done. I may not be an expressive man, but I am celebrating, Kendra. It relieves me to finally lay down the burden of my secrets.”

“Okay, then tell me your next move,” Kendra said, not expecting an answer.

The Sphinx compressed his lips. “I like to think that once you and your family truly understand me, your hatred will evaporate. My aims are noble, and my means are no more unsavory than necessary. Would you like to know the remaining steps to opening Zzyzx?”

“Sure.”

The Sphinx selected a piece of fruit and took a bite. “I do not foresee how telling you this information can cause me harm. Yet it goes against my instincts to expose my plans.”

“You told me to ask.”

“I’m aware. And in many ways, I cannot wait to part with these secrets. Secrecy has been necessary for so long that the habit resists my tampering. If I reveal this information to you, as a token of goodwill, will you at least promise to consider the possibility that I am truly an ally?”

She wanted to fling the pear juice in his face. But no matter how hopeless their cause might seem, and no matter how confident the Sphinx was of victory, there was always a chance that this information could prove useful. “Sure, I promise.”

The Sphinx studied her for a prolonged moment. “Do you really hate me so much?”

“Put yourself in my position.”

“I understand.” He straightened and grew serious. “Our first task will be to retrieve the Chronometer from Fablehaven. Do not worry, we should be able to accomplish this without harming any of your other friends there. Next I will go back in time with two companions. Only mortals can use the Chronometer.”

“Okay.”

He munched thoughtfully on his fruit. “I’m about to sum up centuries of research. To share secrets men would kill for. Secrets I have killed to protect. So enjoy. Zzyzx lies on Shoreless Isle in the Atlantic. The gateway into Zzyzx lies within a virtually impregnable stone chamber, a hollow hill. The stone of the chamber is enchanted, much like the Dreamstone at Obsidian Waste. In other words, a direct nuclear blast would harm it no more than a breeze, just as a meteor strike would fail to scratch it. There exists but a single weakness. The stone chamber on Shoreless Isle opens for a single day every thousand years.”

“When did it open last?” Kendra asked.

“The late fifteen hundreds. So I can either wait almost six hundred years to open Zzyzx, or I can travel back in time.”

“You’re going to open it in the past?” Kendra exclaimed, horror seeping into her voice.

“That would be convenient,” the Sphinx said. “Unfortunately, the masterminds who engineered Zzyzx did not design it with convenience in mind. Quite the opposite, in fact. The Chronometer will not transport objects into the past, and the other keys are required to open the prison, so opening the gateway in the past is impossible.”

Working at the problem, Kendra scrunched her brow. “So you’ll go back in time to the day the chamber was open, enter it, then return to the present and use the Translocator.”

The Sphinx beamed. "Very good, Kendra. That was quick. Since the Translocator can take me anywhere I have been, it should provide easy access. My expectation is that I will then be able to open the stone chamber from the inside."

"Doesn't sound too hard," Kendra lamented.

"It is only the beginning," the Sphinx said. "A virulent plague resides inside the chamber. After we enter it, we will have to get back to the present quickly to be healed by the Sands of Sanctity. Then, in the present, I will use the Translocator to transport some seeds inside. The plants that sprout will scrub the air and eradicate the plague."

"Wait a minute," Kendra said. "Before any of this, won't you have to get to Shoreless Isle? You'll have to go back in time from there, right?"

The Sphinx grinned. "One of the benefits of a long life. Mr. Lich and I are perhaps the only living men who have visited Shoreless Isle. The Translocator will take me directly there, along with the Chronometer and the Sands of Sanctity."

Kendra sipped some pear juice. "The five artifacts are also actual keys?"

The Sphinx nodded. "They are actual keys to the great door of Zzyzx. But they all serve dual purposes. Access to the great gateway would be impossible without them."

"I get the purpose behind the Chronometer, and the Translocator, and the Sands of Sanctity," Kendra said. "What else does the immortality artifact do?"

The Sphinx held up a finger. "I believe it is an item of practicality. The Font of Immortality enables a mortal to live long enough to solve this gigantic puzzle."

A realization struck Kendra. "And it lets you live long enough to go back in time far enough to get inside the chamber."

"Or to live long enough to wait for it to open again," the Sphinx added. "Kendra, if this were a job interview, I would hire you immediately."

"I'd have to turn you down," Kendra said. "What about the Oculus?"

"In many ways the Oculus is the most important item," the Sphinx said. "It helps locate the other items. And it will help me track down the Eternals."

Kendra had been hoping he might not know about them. She decided to play dumb. “Eternals?”

“Five mortals who must be killed before Zzyzx can be opened,” the Sphinx explained. “I have already found and eliminated two of them.”

“You have!”

“I found one before I had the Oculus. I eliminated another recently. Without the Oculus, finding them all would be nearly impossible.”

“So once the Eternals are dead . . .”

“Once the title *eternal* no longer applies to them, and once I have access to the chamber and have scrubbed the air of disease, I must only wait for the morning after a full moon to insert the keys and set the gateway ajar. Then I will negotiate with Gorgrog the Demon King. If he will not heed my terms, I will not fully open the door. He wants out. He will eventually agree. And a new age will dawn.”

“And the name of that age will be *The End of the World*.”

Smiling sadly, the Sphinx shook his head. “No, but it will be the end of prisons, and the end of inequality.”

“Honestly, I hope you’re right. Because I don’t see how anyone will stop you. I’d take just about anything over the end of everything.”

“Relax, Kendra. I have the minutia figured out. All you need do now is wait. Have you any other questions?”

Kendra plucked a grape and popped it in her mouth. “My brain is fried. I can’t think of anything.”

“Have you eaten your fill?”

“Yeah, I guess.”

“Then the hour has arrived for you to become acquainted with your new accommodations. I will try to put you someplace where you may cross paths with your brother. I’m afraid the comforts are few, but unless I am mistaken, your stay will be brief.” The Sphinx clapped his hands, and four armed guards came out onto the balcony.

“Don’t do this,” Kendra sobbed, surprised at the sudden surge of emotion. “You can still stop all of this. You should be protecting these artifacts, not using them.”

“Be still,” the Sphinx said. “I cannot be swayed. Do not waste your energy. I am fortified by the power of certainty.”

A guard helped Kendra to her feet. “I hope somebody stops you,” she said.

The Sphinx poured himself some pear juice. He took a sip, swallowed, and then spoke gently but firmly. “Hope for something else.”



A Promise Kept

Seth rested on his cot, staring at the web of cracks in the dim ceiling, listening to the constant dripping, wondering about the time. In the dungeon, there was no sunrise, no sunset, no way to keep his internal clock calibrated. Bracken, however, seemed to know innately when it was day or night. Some time ago they had separated to sleep. Seth had slept. Later he had wakened. And he now had no idea if it was time to get up or the middle of the night.

He had not slept well in the dungeon. For days he had dozed in odd stretches, more an irregular series of naps than any normal slumber.

At the moment, if he knew it was morning, he felt awake enough to get up. He could also probably fall back to sleep if he tried. He considered calling Bracken with the coin, but decided he should wait rather than risk rousing the unicorn for a trivial concern.

The door to his cell opened without warning. He heard no footsteps approach, no key rattle in the lock. By the time he sat up, the door had banged shut.

“On your feet,” a harsh voice called through the peephole in a loud whisper. “Have a look.”

Seth jumped out of bed and hurried to the door. He pushed against it but it wouldn't budge. Beside the door sat a canvas sack. Seth pressed his face to the peephole, looking up and down the hall as best he could. Dim and silent, the only movement in the corridor came from shadows jittering in the wavering torchlight.

Returning to his cot, Seth retrieved his coin from under one of the legs. Running a finger clockwise along the edge caused it to start glowing. Coin in hand, Seth returned to the sack. He could hardly believe his eyes when he looked inside and beheld a copper teapot shaped like a cat and a narrow, segmented platinum cylinder set with precious stones. Along with a handwritten note and a cube of walrus butter, the shabby sack contained the Translocator and the Sands of Sanctity!

This had to be a trick. Still, he grabbed the note and started reading hastily.

Take these artifacts and escape from Living Mirage at once. Just twist the center of the Translocator and think of home. An attempt to rescue you has failed, and these were the only artifacts I managed to pilfer. Time is short. Leave immediately. Take nobody. Thanks to your time in the dungeon, you can help lead rescues later. Everything depends on you leaving immediately with these items.

I am the last spy the Knights have within the Society. I will contact you soon. Do not delay.

The note was unsigned.

Why was the Translocator here? Something must have gone terribly wrong. Could this be a trap? What kind of trap would grant him access to anywhere he wanted to go? What kind of trap would give away two of the artifacts essential for the Society to accomplish their objectives?

He popped the walrus butter in his mouth, chewed, and swallowed. Maybe the artifacts were fake. But what would be the point of that? They sure looked authentic.

Rereading, he tried to process the message. There had been a rescue attempt, but it had failed. Who would have participated? Trask? Tanu? Whoever had been captured would need his help. But right now he didn't even know where to start looking.

Should he follow the advice in the note and teleport straight home to Fablehaven? What about his friends? He pressed his thumb against the

griffin on the glowing coin. “Bracken,” he whispered.

What is it, Seth? The answer came swiftly. He doubted Bracken had been asleep.

“I have our ticket out of here. Somebody just slipped me the Translocator.”

Are you serious?

“Where are you?”

In my cell.

Seth had not yet visited his cell. “Have I been near there?”

Not really. They keep me down deep.

“The Translocator came with a note. It said I should escape immediately. How long would it take you to get someplace I’ve been?”

At least ten minutes. That’s too long. Obey the note. I’ve gotten word that there has been some sort of disturbance here tonight. A bunch of people captured. You should get out of here while you can. If you have the Translocator, you can come back for me anytime.

“Be in my cell tomorrow at midnight. I’ll be back, I promise.”

Just take the coin with you. It should work even over great distances. We can devise a plan.

“Gotcha. See you soon.”

Good luck.

Seth heard many heavy footsteps running down the corridor. Had he ever heard guards rushing in the dungeon? Not that he could recall. Heart pounding, Seth slid a finger counterclockwise along the edge of the coin, then slipped it into his pocket. He pocketed the note as well. Tucking the teapot under one arm, he grabbed the Translocator.

If he pictured Fablehaven, and twisted, he would be home. But what about Maddox? He pictured Maddox’s cell and twisted. For an instant, Seth felt like he was folding into himself, shrinking down to a tiny point. Then he was standing in Maddox’s cell. His friend was not there.

“Bad time to go exploring, Maddox,” Seth muttered to the empty cot. He consoled himself that when he made plans with Bracken, he would figure out how to save Maddox and the others as well.

As he prepared to twist the Translocator again and return to Fablehaven, a realization stopped him. He had been to the Sphinx’s office.

He knew right where the Oculus was sitting, knew the location of the secret compartment that held the Font of Immortality. What if he returned to Fablehaven with all of the lost artifacts?

Mind racing, Seth tried to weigh the pros and cons objectively. If he went straight to Fablehaven, they would have three of the five artifacts. But once the Sphinx knew Seth had escaped, he would certainly relocate the artifacts Seth had seen in his office. If Seth went directly to the Sphinx's office, he might win the war with one fell swoop. Without the Oculus, the Sphinx would lose his biggest advantage. And without the Font of Immortality, he would be dead within a week.

Of course, if Seth got caught, all would be lost. But how could he get caught? If somebody was in the office, he would teleport right out.

Seth pictured the office where he had conversed with the Sphinx and twisted the Translocator. To his relief, the office was empty. He quickly observed that the Oculus no longer rested on the handsome desk. Crossing to the desk, he hastily scrabbled through the wooden drawers, but found no multifaceted crystal. Turning, Seth tore aside a tapestry, triggered the catch he had seen the Sphinx use, and tugged open the hidden cupboard in the wall. Empty.

At that moment, the Sphinx stormed into the room. Recognizing Seth, he stopped short in genuine astonishment. With the door at the far end of the office, forty feet, two dozen cushions, and a few gauzy veils separated them. The Sphinx's gaze flicked down to the Translocator. He pointed at Seth, outrage distorting his features. "Put that down," he roared. "Seth, you don't—"

Seth twisted the Translocator, and the Sphinx disappeared. After a momentary folding sensation, Seth stood on the roof of his elementary school. He had climbed up there once on a dare, and afterwards had used it as a place to escape when he wanted to be alone and think. For some reason, it was the first place that had sprung to mind.

It was a calm, cool evening. The sun had recently set, painting the cloudy horizon with warm, vivid colors. Seth sat down, his hands shaking. Nobody could have anticipated that he would receive the Translocator, and even if they did, nobody would guess that he would come here. It was hard to believe, but for the moment, he was actually safe.

Seth had never seen the Sphinx lose his façade of calm control. The Sphinx had entered the room as if aware of an intruder, but seemed shocked when he saw it was Seth. He supposed that made sense. If the Sphinx had just captured the Translocator, he had probably been off celebrating his victory. It must have blown his mind to find Seth in his office with two of the artifacts!

A pebble sat on the roof near his foot. Seth picked it up and tossed it off the edge, hearing it clack as it hit the pavement below. His next step should be to return to Fablehaven. Even if Tanu and some of them had been captured during the failed rescue, surely Grandma and Grandpa were still there, and probably Kendra.

A single concern prevented Seth from teleporting immediately to the house at Fablehaven. Tracing a finger along the copper teapot, Seth considered his commitment to Graulas. He could clearly picture the old demon languishing in agony, hoping for some way to reduce the anguish of his impending death. Seth had never witnessed such extreme suffering. With the Translocator, he could easily pop in and heal the demon before returning the artifacts to the house. As far as Seth knew, Graulas could already be dead, or he could presently be right at the brink of death. If he didn't heal Graulas now, Seth expected Grandpa would forbid him from doing so later.

Seth had promised the demon he would heal him. Graulas had no other hope for aid. He might have lived an evil life, but the demon had helped Seth multiple times.

Seth fingered the Translocator. Could this be a bad move? What if Graulas turned on him? Of course, even in his weakened state, the demon could have killed Seth upon any of his previous visits. If Seth healed him, Graulas would probably be more grateful than ever. Maybe the cunning demon could suggest strategies to stop the Sphinx, or provide insight about Nagi Luna. After a dusting from the Sands of Sanctity, the demon would still be old and dying, but curing the disease would reduce the pain and maybe buy Graulas a little extra time. And Seth would keep the Translocator handy. If all else failed, he could always teleport away.

Seth hesitated. He would prefer to take this action with permission from Grandpa Sorenson, but he felt certain Grandpa would never agree to it. Grandma and Grandpa hated demons. And they would worry too much

about his safety. Seth scratched his arm. As long as he acted before returning home, he would not really be disobeying a direct request. Sometimes it was easier to get forgiveness than permission.

Envisioning the cave where Graulas lived, Seth twisted the Translocator. The stench of putrefying flesh hit him like a physical blow. Gagging, Seth covered his nose with one hand. The demon sprawled on the floor, flies buzzing around his many weeping sores. His wheezy breathing came quick and shallow, like that of a panting dog.

Seth slid the Translocator into his pocket. "Can you hear me, Graulas?"

Grunting, the demon raised his head, festering eyes squinting in not quite the right direction. "Seth?"

"I brought the Sands of Sanctity," Seth announced.

"The pain . . ." Graulas moaned through cracked lips, his voice trailing off.

"Hang on, I'm here to heal you." Striding forward, Seth upended the teapot over the dying demon. Golden sand poured out, snapping and hissing like water on a hot griddle as it contacted the inflamed flesh. Acrid fumes rose from the pathetic, bloated form. Pacing and swinging the teapot, Seth dusted the limitless supply of sand all over the demon until the sizzling smoke subsided.



“Oh-ho,” Graulas said, sitting up, the tone of his voice deeper and richer than Seth had ever heard. In place of infected skin, short gray fur covered his arms. The drooping wattles had vanished from his face, leaving him with the head of a ram to match his curled horns. His misshapen body had become symmetrical, and now appeared muscular rather than lumpy.

He stretched his thick arms forward, examining them. “Oh-ho-ho-ho!” he laughed exultantly.

“Feeling better?” Seth asked.

Graulas pounced at him, seized a shoulder with a hairy hand, and hoisted Seth off the ground effortlessly. Before Seth could react, the demon quickly tore the Translocator from his pocket, then dropped him on a pile of rubble. Landing roughly, Seth lost hold of the teapot, and the demon snatched it up. From his supine position, Seth stared up at the broad, bestial figure towering over him.

“Honestly?” Graulas rumbled. “This is the best I’ve ever felt.” His rejuvenated voice had more growl to it than before.

“What are you doing?” Seth cried. His elbows were bleeding, and his back ached where a wooden knob had jabbed it.

“Many things, now, many things, thanks to you.” The demon flung sand from the teapot over Seth, and his injuries vanished. “After all of these years, against all odds, I am now free! She was right. She may not be utterly sane, but she was right.”

“Who was right?”

“Nagi Luna.”

It took Seth a moment to find words. “You know her?”

“She contacted me using the Oculus,” Graulas said. “She has not yet held it herself, but she can borrow some of its power when her captor uses it. Which is often. She harbored hopes of an opportunity like this for a long while, but only felt certain after she met you.”

“What have I done?” Seth mouthed.

The demon grinned better than any actual ram could. “You still don’t fully understand. Of course you don’t, or this would never have happened. Seth, this disease has plagued me for thousands of years. It is what slowly ruined me. The sickness was my prison much more than this cave. Only the Sands of Sanctity could have healed me. I am old, yes, but now I am far from dying.”

“And you have the Translocator.”

“You begin to see. This area was designed to hold me in my weakened, diseased state. Now that I’m whole, I could probably defeat the barriers that

contain me. But thanks to your thoughtful tribute, that will not be necessary.”

Seth groaned, hiding his face in his hands. “Why am I so stupid?”

“Not the common breed of stupidity,” the demon corrected. “You’re too trusting. Too independent. Too good of a friend, even to one who is by nature your enemy. These attributes were used against you.”

“What happens now?”

“I will acquire the Chronometer and return to Living Mirage. I have been there before, you see, centuries ago. And at the end of his long years of scheming, the Sphinx will lose control of his endeavor. Before long, the demons of Zzyzx will be free according to *my* terms.”

Seth still felt off balance. “Wait—wasn’t the Sphinx behind this trick?”

“Certainly not. Use your intellect. All the Sphinx needed to do was use the Translocator to collect the Chronometer. Why give it to you and risk losing it? Mirav the wizard left the artifacts in your cell, under strict orders from Nagi Luna. She communicates with him through the Oculus as well. Since the gambit paid off, I will go to Living Mirage in my full strength, free Nagi Luna, and take leadership of this endeavor. Tonight you have ushered in an age of demonic rule!”

Seth hugged himself miserably, gripping handfuls of his shirt. He wished he could stop existing. He had ruined everything!

“I will leave you with your life, Seth.”

“Why bother?” Seth moaned.

“Because I sponsored your elevation to shadow charmer, and because you did me a great service. I owe you a debt of gratitude, and for that I will spare you, even though I know you will never serve me.”

“Let’s be honest,” Seth said. “I’ll try to stop you.”

“Let’s be honest,” Graulas countered. “Resourceful as you are, there is nothing you can do about this. Not a thing. You would be wise to put it out of your mind.”

“Please,” Seth said, fighting back tears of desperation. “Please, I healed you. Don’t punish my family for it. Don’t punish Fablehaven. Go free, do whatever, but if my aid meant anything, don’t take the artifacts.”

“My dear boy,” Graulas said. “You do not comprehend the nature of demons. Your grandfather does, and some who work with him. It almost

surprises me that you remain so naive. Did I ever bother to lie about my nature? I do not believe I did. Nagi Luna stretched the truth, perhaps, to make me seem more pitiable, and I acted somewhat more infirm than I felt, but I never misled you on this issue. Let me leave you with a final lesson. I am what you would call evil. Pure, deliberate, evil. I am aggressively self-serving. I take great pleasure in destruction. At times I cause harm to get gain, and at times I cause harm for the sheer enjoyment of breeding mayhem. So, will I take the artifacts? Seth, without a twinge of remorse, I will use them to unlock a season of devastation like the world has never witnessed. And, mark my words, I will revel in it.”

Grinding his teeth, Seth tried to think of something to do. He saw one possible option. “Take me with you.”

“No, no, my boy. Shadow charmer or not, I fully understand that you could never be my servant, except perhaps as part of a clumsy deception. Our destinies are no longer entwined. Should we meet again, it will be as enemies, all past debts settled. You will not be bored without me, Seth. There will be work enough to do here.”

“What do you mean?”

Snarling, Graulas dragged his claws across the earthen roof of the cave, dislodging wormy clods of dirt. “I intend to pay my respects to this despicable zoo by overthrowing the foundational treaty and leaving a suitable amount of havoc behind. Like Bahumat, I never officially consented to my incarceration here. The treaty has no direct claim on me.” Graulas sniffed the air, eyes narrowed to slits. He spoke in a lower tone, as if to himself. “I would free Bahumat, but the fairies buried him deep and sealed him well. There will be time to unleash him later. Kurisock is gone, Olloch more stomach than mind. I will take none of my brothers with me, but like any respectable demon coming out of retirement, I shall leave a great deal of chaos in my wake.”

Graulas held up the Translocator. The device looked tiny in his huge hands.

Crouching, Seth snatched up a stone and flung it at the device. Graulas blocked the rock with his forearm. Baring his fangs and leaning forward, the demon struck Seth with a furious backhand. The blow sent him flying into the cave wall. Bones snapped, and he landed in a heap of agony, dirt and blood in his mouth.

“Do not irritate me,” the demon growled. Chuckling softly, he sprinkled sand from the copper teapot over Seth. “The Sands of Sanctity bring amazing new possibilities to the field of torture. Imagine shattering bones over and over and over. Such alluring options . . .”

Bones mended, cuts closed, and Seth sat up. He glared up at the demon with helpless fury, no words left to say.

“Final piece of advice?” Graulas offered. “Run away, Seth. Forget this backward circus of a preserve and flee to the farthest, most barren portion of the globe. Hide there for the rest of your life. Pray we do not meet again.”

Graulas twisted the Translocator and vanished.

“No!” Seth yelled.

Scrambling to his feet, Seth ran toward the mouth of the cave. He had to warn Grandpa! Graulas had certainly never been inside the main house. The demon had probably never been in the yard, either. He could not teleport directly to the Chronometer. First the demon would have to contend with the magical barriers protecting the yard and house.

Out in front of the cave, sunset was dwindling, the first stars already shining. “Hugo,” Seth shouted, cupping his hands around his mouth. “Anyone! Help! Emergency! Help!”

Nobody answered, but he knew the way to the house from here—he had only to follow the rutted road. Seth took off running. The exertion felt good, kept him busy, provided the illusion that he was accomplishing something. After his gut-wrenching mistake, the last thing he wanted to do was think.

But it was hard to shut down his guilty mind.

Why didn’t he see this coming? Grandpa had consistently warned him to stay away from Graulas! Seth had assumed his grandparents didn’t understand the unique relationship he had with the demon. The dying demon had seemed so weak, and so helpful, that Seth had begun to consider him safe. Now the relationship had culminated in nightmarish betrayal, just as his grandparents had foreseen. If he had gone directly home with the artifacts, his family would be in a solid position in their war against the Sphinx. Now the opposite was true! He had befriended evil, and he had gotten burned.

Seth tried not to imagine all of the effects that would flow from his blunder. He tried not to envision Graulas slaying his family. He resisted visions of demon hordes rampaging across the globe.

Maybe he could stop it. Maybe he could beat Graulas into the house.

His breathing became more ragged, and his heart hammered, but Seth kept his legs churning. How much longer to the house if he kept up this pace? Ten minutes? More?

Something huge came crashing through the bushes off to the side of the road. Seth slowed, confident he recognized what was approaching. A moment later, Hugo loped out from under the trees. "Seth!" the golem bellowed, raising both arms.

"Hugo!" Seth exclaimed.

The golem picked Seth up, tossed him disturbingly high into the air, and caught him gently. "Seth not taken!"

"Whoa!" Seth laughed. "Good to see you, too! Hugo, we have an emergency. Graulas got loose and is headed for the house."

"Graulas?"

"I visited him and he tricked me. We have to hurry!"

The golem cradled Seth in one arm and bounded into the woods, cutting cross-country. Still panting from his run, Seth tried to calm his mind. Getting a lift from Hugo would let him reach the house much faster. But what would he do when he got there? Could Hugo defeat Graulas? Probably not. The demon was bigger and had unknown powers. What if the golem could at least wrestle away the Translocator? It would be worth a try. If that failed, they would have to try to escape somehow with the Chronometer. Where could they go?

From up ahead, Seth heard ferocious roaring. Bursts of light interrupted the deepening twilight.

"See that, Hugo?" Seth asked.

"Demon attack house," Hugo replied, pounding through the forest.

The golem trampled a path through the lush, spring foliage, tearing branches aside and bulldozing through shrubbery. Minutes passed like hours. Flashes of light accompanied feral growls and distant sounds of demolition. Realizing that he was unarmed, Seth wished for his emergency kit.

When the yard came into view, the barn was already ablaze. Devouring flames raged up most of one wall and across much of the roof. Mooing like a foghorn, eyes rolling in terror, the immense form of Viola the cow stamped across the yard, giant hooves leaving deep impressions in the lawn. By the nightmarish light of the burning barn, Seth could see that half the house had collapsed, smashed in as if by some natural disaster. He did not see Graulas, but could hear glass breaking and wood splintering within the house.

“To the house!” Seth shouted.

Hugo took off across the yard with leaping strides. A great crash sounded within the house. The golem vaulted onto what remained of the back porch and entered the ruined house, striding over the remnants of missing walls.

“Coulter,” Hugo said in a concerned rumble. The golem waded through rubble-strewn rooms to the entry hall, where they found Coulter pinned beneath a beam. Dust covered his mostly bare scalp. His little tuft of gray hair was matted with blood. He was mumbling, semiconscious.

“Get the beam off of him!” Seth cried.

The golem gripped the heavy beam, shifting rubble as he raised it. Grabbing Coulter beneath his arms, Seth slid him out from underneath. Coulter jerked his head toward Seth. “Run!” Coulter urged weakly.

“Demon gone,” Hugo said.

Coulter clutched at Seth. “Seth? He got it. Graulas got the Chronometer. He also had the Translocator. He destroyed the foundational treaty. He used a spell to summon the safe that contained it. It hurried to him like a trained dog. He destroyed the documentation and undid the magic. I couldn’t stop him. He smashed through the defenses in no time.”

“It’s my fault,” Seth admitted wretchedly. “I was a prisoner at Living Mirage, and somebody snuck the Translocator and the Sands of Sanctity into my cell. I’d promised Graulas I would heal him if I could, so on my way back here, I stopped by his cave. As soon as I healed him, he stole the artifacts before I could react. He was so quick!”

Coulter closed his eyes, one cheek twitching. “I see.” When he spoke again, he sounded more in control of himself. “Seth, you must listen to me. I don’t have much time.”

“Don’t talk like that,” Seth said.

“Hush,” Coulter insisted. “I’m no tenderfoot. I’ve had plenty of injuries in my time, and I know what this is. Things got crushed, parts deep inside. I have minutes, maybe seconds. Listen. While Graulas attacked the barn, I grabbed the Chronometer. As he tore into the house, I watched from a window, trying to formulate a strategy. After I glimpsed you at the edge of the woods with Hugo, I used the Chronometer.”

“Used it how?” Seth asked.

Coulter coughed wetly. “I visited Patton. Told him the Chronometer was about to be taken. Told him you were around.”

“You should have run!” Seth said.

“I did run. Visiting Patton cost me no time. I didn’t even make it to the front door. There was no escaping what happened. Graulas is too powerful. But listen. Since we knew you were around, Patton promised to leave you some advice. A passageway beneath the old manor leads to a secret grotto. Down in the cellar, beneath the manor, you’ll find a fireplace against one wall. Step inside and say, ‘Everybody loves a show-off.’ That will open the way.”

“Then what?” Seth asked.

Coulter grimaced, his breath hissing through clenched teeth. “We hope Patton has an idea.”

“Where are the others?” Seth asked urgently. “Where is Grandpa?”

Coulter shook his head. “Gone. If they lost the Translocator, they were all captured at Living Mirage earlier tonight.”

“All of them?” Seth asked incredulously.

“Stan, Ruth, Kendra, Tanu, Warren . . . all of them. I was . . . holding down the fort. Vanessa is still here, down in the Quiet Box. Maybe she could help. Use your judgment.” Coulter gasped and coughed. “I’m on my way out,” he grunted. “Do your best.”

Hot tears flowed freely down Seth’s cheeks. “I’m so sorry, Coulter.”

The old relics collector patted his hand. His eyes cleared for a moment and locked with Seth’s. He seemed intent on speaking, but the words resisted. “Not your fault,” he finally sputtered. He gripped Seth’s wrist. “You’re a good boy. They tricked you. You were . . . showing mercy. Maybe we can get them yet.”

“I will. I promise, I will, I really will.”

Coulter laid his head back, closing his eyes. His chest shook as if trying to cough, but only a faint strangling sound came out. His eyelids fluttered. His hands jerked.

Seth looked up at Hugo. "What do we do?"

Coulter exhaled one last time and then went limp and silent. Seth felt for breathing at his mouth and tried to find a pulse in his neck and chest. There were no signs of life. Trying to recall the first-aid basics he knew, Seth started rhythmically compressing Coulter's chest. Then he pinched Coulter's nostrils shut and breathed into his mouth a couple of times. He repeated the compressions and the breathing exercise, but Coulter remained inert.

"Coulter gone," Hugo rumbled heavily.

Seth backed away from the corpse of his friend. Despite the words of comfort from Coulter, he could not avoid the conviction that he had caused this. Sure, the demons had designed and carried out the plot, but Seth had been the idiot they could design it around. Both Graulas and Nagi Luna had known he would do the wrong thing, and he had, and now Coulter was dead, Fablehaven was in ruins, and the artifacts were gone.

The weight of his regret threatened to crush him. Thanks to his lack of judgment, the Society of the Evening Star now had all the keys to the demon prison.



An Unexpected Ally

There seemed to be some confusion regarding where to put Kendra. She spent a lot of time waiting in smoky guard rooms as men and goblins haggled. When her escorts had finally resolved on a cell, just as she was being ushered inside, a stumpy goblin with squinty eyes and a face like a catcher's mitt showed up waving a written order. A tall, armored man and a potbellied goblin with a severe underbite studied the parchment.

"Came straight from the top," the squinty goblin rasped importantly.

"I can see that, pugface," snarled the goblin with the underbite. "Why that cell? We haven't had a chance to properly examine it yet, what with all the commotion."

"You telling me no?" the squinty goblin challenged.

"I'm saying it don't add up," the other goblin groused.

"Not our place to do the math," advised the armored man. "Boss always has his reasons."

"There's some sense," applauded the squinty goblin.

"This way," the armored man said to Kendra.

They escorted her deeper into the bowels of the dungeon, finally opening a thick wooden door. The potbellied goblin motioned for her to

enter.

“You’re sure?” Kendra asked.

“Don’t get smart,” the goblin spat.

The door banged shut behind her and the guards tromped away. When she had first been led away from the Sphinx, her captors had made her take off her shirt of adamant mail. She felt much more vulnerable without it. Feeble torchlight seeped in through a peephole, but Kendra didn’t need it. To her eyes, even the deepest shadows of the room were dim, not dark.

The only furniture in the dank space was a flimsy cot. Water dripped steadily in one corner. A hole in the floor appeared to serve as a latrine. What most caught Kendra’s eye were the messages scratched on the wall. She roamed the cell, reading the crudely inscribed phrases.

Seth rules!

Welcome to Seth’s House.

Seth rocks!

Seth was here. Now it’s your turn.

Seth Sorenson forever.

Enjoy the food!

If you’re reading this, you can read.

All roads lead to Seth.

Is it still dripping?

Seth haunts these halls.

You’re in a Turkish prison!

Seth is the man!

Use the meal mats as toilet paper.

And so forth.

Cold, hopeless, and alone, Kendra found herself giggling at the messages her brother had scrawled. He must have been so bored!

Kendra sat on the cot. Where had her brother gone? One of the guards had mentioned that the cell needed to be inspected. Did that mean Seth had escaped? It fit the discussion she had overheard, but seemed too much to hope. Escaped to where? After all, they were on a hostile preserve in Eastern Turkey.

Should she search for a way out? Could Seth have dug a tunnel? He had been captured less than a week ago. Unlikely or not, it seemed faithless not to look. She probed the walls and floors, tapping, pulling, trying to dig her fingers into cracks. She scooted the cot aside, in case it helped mask some kind of false panel. Her attempt at optimism began to wane. If Seth had excavated an escape tunnel, could he possibly have hidden it so well?

The Sphinx had suggested she might cross paths with her brother. What had he meant? Remembering the bickering guards, she assumed that the Sphinx had taken an active role in selecting her cell. Was the point for her to see the messages on the walls? That was sort of like crossing paths. Would he have deliberately assigned her to a cell with an escape tunnel? Not likely.

She began to really worry about Seth. If he hadn't escaped, what had they done with him? Could the cell be faulty in a dangerous way? Would she cross paths with her brother by dying from the same type of accident? She studied the stone roof, half expecting it to cave in at any moment.

Search as she might, the dismal room offered no clues. She detected no means of escape, and perceived no particular threats. Maybe Seth had had the right idea. Maybe her time would be best spent scratching messages on the walls for the benefit of the next occupant.

From the back of the cell came a deep grating of stone on stone. Kendra watched in startled awe as a portion of the wall slid aside. Had she inadvertently stepped on a hidden trigger?

An unapproachably attractive young man with a white light in his hand ducked through the gap left by the sliding wall. He froze when he saw Kendra, wincing and tilting his head away. He raised a hand to shield his eyes.

"Who are you?" Kendra challenged.

"One of the neighbors," the stranger said. "I thought my sources must be mistaken when I heard they had already filled the vacancy here."

"You know who was here before?"

"I do. Can you turn it down a little?"

"Excuse me?"

"Hit the dimmer or something? You're shining like a lighthouse." Blinking away tears, he made brief eye contact with her.

“Most people can’t see my light,” Kendra said. “Including me.”

“Right, give me a second, my eyes will adjust.” Blinking frequently, he turned his head toward her more and gradually widened his eyes. “Okay, I think I can handle it.” His wincing expression diminished, replaced by something more like wonder. “Wow, you’ll never be dim.”

They stared at each other for a moment. His threadbare clothes hugged an athletic build. He had thick, longish hair; expressive, silver-blue eyes; and flawless skin. His boyishly charming features would look much more at home on a magazine cover than in a prison.

“I’m Bracken,” he said.

“Does the Sphinx send you to all the new girls?” He was way too good-looking to be anything but a spy.

He held up his hands as if to calm her. “You’re wise to be cautious.”

“Believe me, I’ve learned caution. Tell the Sphinx to let me rot in peace.”

“Now, don’t write me off just yet. I’d have the same suspicions about you, but you’re obviously fairykind. Which must mean . . . you’re his sister?”

“Whose sister?”

“Seth’s.”

Kendra resisted getting excited by the mention of her brother. Of course he knew about Seth. He was just trying to push her buttons. “Where is my brother?”

Folding his arms, Bracken regarded her appraisingly. “He never mentioned you were so . . . bright.”

Kendra felt herself blushing. “Answer the question.” Her voice was hard.

Again Bracken raised his palms. “Sorry. I will. He’s gone. I’m not sure where. Probably Fablehaven.”

“What?”

“Somebody brought the Translocator to him and he teleported out of here.”

“How is that possible?”

“Your guess would probably be better than mine. Hopefully he’ll contact me before long.”

Kendra huffed in exasperation. “Are you guys pen pals?”

“I gave him a coin that lets us communicate telepathically. I know he’s far from here, because I can’t hail him. Once he uses the coin to reach out to me, we should be able to speak.”

Kendra frowned. “A magical telepathy coin? Who are you? At least, who are you pretending to be?”

Bracken chuckled and shook his head. “The truth sounds absurd.”

“Try me.”

“You don’t even believe I’m an actual prisoner; you’re not going to believe this.”

“Give it a shot. You might want to stutter—that could help sell it.”

“Stutter?”

“Long story.”

He glanced away. “I’m a unicorn.”

Kendra’s jaw dropped. It took her a moment to recover. “Did you just say a unicorn?”

Eyes hesitant, he shrugged using hands and shoulders. “I warned you.”

Kendra laughed incredulously. “Look. Bracken. You need to go back to spy school. In fact, maybe you should just try a different career path. You obviously weren’t hired for your brains.”

“Maybe you’re right. I would be a suspiciously lousy spy.”

“What, you’re saying I should believe you because you’re incompetent? Or just because your story sounds crazy? I don’t suppose you can prove that you’re actually a horse?”

“I’m stuck in human form. I lost my horn.”

Kendra covered her eyes with one hand. “This is actually worse than feeling lonely.”

“You’re fairykind. Can’t you perceive my aura?”

She looked at him. He was undeniably handsome. That was all. “I’ve never been good at seeing that stuff.”

His eyes lit up with an idea. “I am now speaking the secret fairy language. Can you understand me?”

“Yes.”

“Can you tell I am no longer speaking English?”

Kendra tried to focus. She heard English, but something did feel different. “I interpret intuitively. Keep talking.”

“What should I say? I suppose it doesn’t matter. I’m trapped in a dungeon with a girl who thinks I have lost my mind.”

“I can tell you’re speaking another language,” Kendra said. “But I can’t tell the difference between the various fairy languages.”

“At least it’s a start,” Bracken said. She perceived that he had reverted to English. “I can take you to visit some of your friends. Maddox, for example. Mara.”

“The guards just let you roam free? Don’t they know you’re sneaking around in the walls?”

“Our captors look the other way if we stay unobtrusive. I’ve been here for a very long time. This dungeon is vast and ancient, riddled with forgotten tunnels and unused spaces. The rest we dig—we meaning the prisoners.”

“What about my parents?”

“I know of no accessible route to their cell. I looked into it for Seth.”

“But they’re here?”

“I believe so.”

“I’d love to contact them. They think I’m dead.”

“Wish I could help. Hopefully Seth will show up soon and rescue us. He can vouch for me.”

Kendra considered the statement. “It might take more than Seth’s endorsement.”

“Don’t underestimate your brother. He was careful. He didn’t trust me right away. In fact, maybe he still doesn’t really trust me. I hope he uses the coin.”

“If you gave him a magical toy, he’ll use it.”

Bracken sighed. “I can’t believe you’re fairykind and you can’t recognize a unicorn. You know, the sooner you trust me, the sooner we can play ping-pong.”

“Huh?”

“Nothing. Lousy joke. It’ll make sense later. Unicorns aren’t very social creatures. I’m doing my best.”

“You’re fine.”

“Doesn’t help that you’re so . . . brilliant.”

“Is that sarcasm?”

“I meant brilliant as in shiny. Should I stop talking?”

She was starting to entertain the possibility that Bracken might be legitimate. Wouldn’t the Sphinx’s dungeon be full of good creatures like unicorns? Many of his prisoners should be potential allies. Of course, every time she started trusting a stranger, it seemed like she got burned. Gavin had seemed great before his true nature was revealed. She would be slow to offer any real trust. “You’re saying you could take me to Maddox right now?”

“I’m saying—” he stopped. Suddenly he looked stricken. “I don’t believe it,” he muttered in a completely different tone.

“What?” Kendra asked.

“I have an intruder in my cell.” He sounded astonished.

“How do you know?”

Bracken turned to face the gap in the rear wall. “I created a magical detection system that would signal me if anybody entered while I was away. It has never alerted me before. Nobody ever visits my cell.”

“What does it mean?” Kendra wondered.

“I have no idea. This has been the most eventful night this dungeon has seen in decades. I have to investigate. My cell is some distance away. Care to join me?”

If he was an enemy, she supposed he could harm her as easily here in her cell as out in some secret passageway. “Sure.”

He smiled. “Follow me.” His expression seemed so playful, Kendra found herself wanting to please him.

They slipped through the gap and Bracken closed the sliding wall. Using the light from his stone to guide them, he led Kendra on an elaborate path, through hidden hatchways, down stairwells and ladders, along tight crawl spaces. They headed mostly downward, until at last they reached an area that looked like a natural cave, with no clear path and glistening rock formations that appeared half melted. Soon they sat and scooted down a cramped incline of oily stone. No wonder Bracken’s clothes looked so ragged!

Just before the bottom of the incline, he directed Kendra into a branching passageway. They hurriedly proceeded along a crudely excavated stretch of tunnel and finally reached a dead end. Bracken held a finger to his lips. Leaning his mouth to Kendra's ear, he whispered, "My visitor awaits us inside." He produced a short, sharp knife. "Stand back."

Kendra stepped away. Bracken waved a hand and sang a few unintelligible words, and a portal opened. Glowing stone in one hand, knife in the other, Bracken entered.

"Who are you?" Bracken demanded.

"A friend," came the answer. Kendra knew that voice!

"I hope so," Bracken replied. "You have a much larger knife."

Kendra peered through the opening into Bracken's cell. The spacious room was more cavelike than her cell, but equally bare.

The intruder was Warren, warily clutching the fancy sword he had claimed back at Lost Mesa.

She caught his eye. "Kendra!" he exclaimed.

"You know each other?" Bracken asked.

"This is my friend Warren," Kendra said. "Or I guess he could be a stingbulb."

"How did you get in here?" Bracken challenged.

"I understand you can protect those around you from outside scrutiny," Warren said. "Sort of a psychic shield."

"Yes," Bracken said. "How would you know that?"

"Are you doing it now?"

"I always do it. Nagi Luna is constantly trying to spy. The only scrying tool I can't thwart is the Oculus. I see that you have a charm that protects you from scrutiny."

Warren fingered the feathery, beaded amulet around his neck. "A recent gift. We need to talk."

Putting his knife away, Bracken approached Warren. "First, I need to confirm you are not an imposter."

"How?"

"Remove the amulet, and give me your hands."

Warren glanced at Kendra. "Do you trust this guy?"

She shrugged. "A little, I guess."

"I won't do anything hurtful," Bracken promised.

"He says he's a unicorn," Kendra inserted.

"So I've heard," Warren said. He removed the amulet and took Bracken's hands. They stared at one another.

"Just relax," Bracken said. "Think about what you hope to accomplish by visiting me." Soon he released Warren's hands. "He's not a stingbulb. Nor is he an enemy. Good to meet you. I'm Bracken."

"Warren, how did you get down here?" Kendra asked.

"I wish I could say through my own brilliant innovation," Warren said. "I had help."

"From who?" Bracken wondered.

"The Sphinx."

"What?" Kendra exclaimed.

"I know how it sounds," Warren said. "Hear me out. It will make sense."

"We're listening," Bracken said skeptically.

"Tonight changed everything for the Sphinx," Warren explained. "He has lost control of the Society."

Bracken scowled doubtfully. "How?"

"Graulas is here."

"The demon who helped Seth back at Fablehaven?" Kendra asked. "Isn't he dying?"

"Not anymore," Warren said. "Apparently a demon called Nagi Luna here at Living Mirage had an agent slip Seth the Translocator and the Sands of Sanctity. Seth escaped the dungeon and went to heal Graulas. Once healed, the demon stole the artifacts, acquired the Chronometer, and came here."

"Seth healed Graulas!" Kendra cried.

"He must have thought he was being kind," Warren inferred.

"So now the Society has all five artifacts," Kendra said.

"And something the Sphinx never counted on," Warren said.

"A powerful demon vying for control," Bracken surmised. "The Sphinx always maintained he would open Zzyzx only on his terms."

“But his plans have fallen apart,” Warren said. “Graulas has already won over most of the Society, including Mr. Lich. Many have long felt the Sphinx was too lenient and conservative. If the Sphinx doesn’t play along, he’ll end up a prisoner in his own dungeon. Blixes are mortal beings, and Mr. Lich has been with the Sphinx almost since the beginning, sipping from the same Font of Immortality. With or without the Sphinx, Mr. Lich can use the Translocator and the Chronometer to begin the process of opening Zzyzx.”

“And the demons can finish it,” Kendra said.

Bracken pounded a frustrated fist into his palm. “Deluded as the Sphinx was, we’re all worse off than before.”

“We have one ray of hope,” Warren said. “If he can’t do it on his terms, the Sphinx wants to abort the opening of Zzyzx. He wants to stop Graulas as badly as we do. He can’t let the demons know his intentions. He wants to remain close to the center of things, in the hopes of bringing them down from the inside. But he provided me with some key information.”

“How did you meet up with him?” Bracken inquired.

“Earlier in the night, I was part of a rescue attempt,” Warren said. “Kendra came here as part of the same mission. I was dropped off separately from the rest of the strike force as a fail-safe. I began evasive maneuvers the instant the dwarf left my side, and good thing I did. Minutes later I was the target of a manhunt. Coulter, a friend of ours, had lent me his invisibility glove, which improved my chances. Even so, I barely managed to elude my pursuers.

“Not long after Graulas arrived at Living Mirage, the Sphinx decided to personally lead the hunt for me. Accompanied by a few wraiths under his control, the Sphinx tracked me down. But instead of bringing me in, he told me the situation, gave me some keys, and explained about a secret passage into the depths of his dungeon.”

“You can lead us out of here?” Bracken exclaimed.

“By a pathway known only to the Sphinx,” Warren confirmed.

“Then what?” Kendra said.

“He wants us to protect the Eternals,” Warren said.

Bracken laughed bitterly. “The world is upside down.”

“He said there are three Eternals left. He recently learned the location of one, a man called Roon Osricson, who has long occupied a heavily fortified stronghold in Finland.”

“Okay,” Bracken said uncertainly.

“The Sphinx feels certain Graulas will move against Roon immediately,” Warren said. “The demon is already campaigning for support to remove Nagi Luna from her confinement in the dungeon. The Sphinx believes it will not be long before Nagi Luna holds the Oculus in her hands. Once she does, he believes she will speedily discover the remaining Eternals. Bracken, he wants you to leave one of your psychic communicators in your room. He will retrieve it and feed us information as it becomes available.”

“This is a dangerous game,” Bracken whispered. “You understand, our interests may temporarily align, but the Sphinx does not share our agenda. His end goal is not to stop the opening of Zzyzx, but to regain control of the situation and open it on his terms.”

“I get it,” Warren said. “But keep in mind, if Graulas is here and healthy, what are the odds of the Sphinx regaining control?”

“I see your point,” Bracken said. “Nevertheless, we mustn’t underestimate him. Or place full trust in him.”

“Agreed,” Warren said. “However, for the moment, I think it benefits everyone to use each other.”

“How can we get out of here?” Bracken asked.

“It has to look like we escaped,” Warren said. “The Sphinx said the main gate is heavily guarded. According to him, our best bet is to head to the fairy shrine.”

“The shrine here is sealed,” Bracken said resentfully.

“Right,” Warren said. “By the Sphinx. He gave me the key.”

Bracken cocked his head as if weighing the odds. “So we hope the Fairy Queen can conjure a way out of here.”

“Seems like our best bet,” Warren said.

“What do you mean, the shrine is sealed?” Kendra wondered.

“The Sphinx didn’t want the Fairy Queen to be able to spy on him,” Bracken said. “He lacked the power to destroy her shrine here, so he sealed it off, covering it with an ensorcelled iron dome.”

“The dome has an access port,” Warren said. “And I now have a copy of the key.”

“Getting to the shrine will be no simple affair,” Bracken warned. “This is not a mild preserve.”

“Tell me about it,” Warren said. “When the Sphinx showed up with his wraith squad, he had to rescue me from a manticore.”

“Won’t the wraiths share what is happening with the demons?” Kendra asked.

“The Sphinx is a mighty shadow charmer,” Bracken said. “His wraiths and phantoms communicate only with him. They will not divulge his secrets, and he should be strong enough to shield his mind from Graulas and Nagi Luna.”

“Let’s hope so,” Warren muttered.

“The Sphinx gave you that amulet?” Bracken asked.

“He did. And he promised to help divert the search for me away from the path to the shrine.”

Bracken turned to Kendra. “What do you say? Your brother currently holds the record for quickest escape from the dungeons of the Great Ziggurat. You ready to dethrone him?”

“What about the others?” Kendra asked. “Can’t we take my grandparents?”

Warren winced. “The passage out of the dungeon is down very deep. The Sphinx warned we should keep the escape small. In fact, the only people he specified were you two. He promised to try to aid the others.”

Bracken patted Kendra’s arm consolingly. “If the passage out is down here in the depths, we can’t get to your parents or grandparents without passing numerous checkpoints. We might be able to collect Maddox and Mara. Of course, Mara is still recovering from injuries, Maddox has had trouble moving quickly ever since Rio Branco, and neither of them is nearby.”

“Up to you guys,” Warren said. “Speed will matter. As soon as Nagi Luna gets the Oculus, we won’t be able to shield ourselves from her view.”

“Then we should seize the moment and depart,” Bracken decided. “Kendra?”

“Seems like the only choice.”

“Either of you have a coin?” Bracken asked.

Warren dug in his pockets. “How about a quarter?”

“Perfect. I prefer coins to stones.” Bracken cupped the coin in one hand and covered it with the other. For a moment, his hands shed a pearly radiance. Then he placed the quarter under a rock in a corner of the room.

“Did you just turn that into a communicator?” Warren asked.

“Correct. If the Sphinx wants to feed us intelligence, he now has the means.” Bracken adjusted the position of the stone over the coin. “How did you get into my cell? There are three secret entrances.”

“I came through the front door. The Sphinx gave me a key. The passage out of the ziggurat begins just around the corner.”

Bracken smirked. “Right under my nose all these years. How could I have missed it?”

“It’s perfectly disguised and heavily enchanted,” Warren said. “Only opens for the password, which is in Akkadian. I had to memorize the syllables.”

“I’m usually able to detect such things,” Bracken said. “I suppose it didn’t help that I spend most of my time skulking along forgotten passageways. I’m seldom out in the main corridors.”

“We ready?” Warren asked.

“My possessions are few,” Bracken said. “Lead on.”

Warren opened the cell door. Kendra and Bracken shadowed him into the hallway and tiptoed around the corner.

Bracken nudged Kendra. “Nagi Luna resides around that next corner, at the end of the hall.”

“Tough neighborhood,” Warren whispered. He paused in front of a blank wall.

“Here?” Bracken asked, running a hand along the surface, eyes intent. “I must be losing my touch.”

Warren spoke strange words, and the wall became semitransparent. Warren stepped through it.

Bracken gave a low whistle. “I feel a little better. This was very well concealed, the work of a true master.”

He and Kendra walked through the wall and started up a long stairway.



Message in a Bottle

His promise to Coulter helped pull Seth back from the brink of total emotional collapse. By degrees, he stopped looking inward at his guilt and became aware of the demolished room around him, of the golem waiting patiently at his side. He glanced at the steel safe crumpled in a corner like a crushed soda can. He heard timbers creak and crash as part of the burning barn collapsed outside. Outside. Did the house even have an inside or an outside anymore, now that so much of it had been torn down?

“I really blew it this time,” Seth said to Hugo.

“Bad demon,” the golem said.

“I just didn’t see this coming,” Seth moaned. “How could I be so blind?”

The golem said nothing. A big hand patted Seth on the shoulder consolingly.

Seth wiped his nose. He needed to get busy, to lose himself in a task. “I can’t undo what happened. But I can’t quit, either. Maybe Patton has an idea for a next move. We need to go to the old manor.”

“Danger,” Hugo warned.

“I know it isn’t safe,” Seth agreed. “With the treaty destroyed, we could run into bloodthirsty monsters anywhere. But that also means it isn’t any safer here. Not anymore.”

“Hugo keep safe,” the golem rumbled.

“I believe it,” Seth said.

“Hello?” called a timid voice. Seth whirled. It sounded like Kendra.

“Kendra?” he answered, confused.

“Sort of,” came the reply. After a moment, his sister limped into the room, favoring her right leg.

“You’re the stingbulb,” Seth said. They had placed an injured duplicate of Kendra in the Quiet Box after Tanu had done all he could to heal her.

“How did you get out of the Quiet Box?”

“They put Vanessa inside when they left on their mission, which meant I had to come out. My time is running short. I won’t survive much beyond daybreak.”

“Do you know what happened here?” Seth asked.

“Not really. Nobody brought me up to speed. I’m still hurt, so I can’t help much. Being in the Quiet Box froze my healing. I’ll expire before I become whole again. I wanted to listen to music, so they placed me in Vanessa’s former cell. She has a terrific sound system.”

“Would you be willing to go back into the Quiet Box?”

“Sure, if you want,” she said. “It prolongs my existence. It isn’t much different from back when I was just a fruit. Minus the connection to the tree, of course.”

It was strange to be talking with his sister, knowing it was not his sister. “We got attacked by a demon.”

“Sounded bad,” the stingbulb said. “I was hesitant to come up, but curiosity got the better of me. You were captured, weren’t you? They were talking about it after they got me out.”

“They came to rescue me, and all of them got caught, but I got away. It’s a long story.”

She nodded, then glanced at the corpse on the floor. “The demon got Coulter?”

“Yeah,” Seth said, voice getting husky. Her expression didn’t change. “Does it make you sad?”

“Not in the same way it would make Kendra sad,” the stingbulb said frankly. “I have memories of her feelings for him. But I’m aware they aren’t my memories. Kendra gave me general instructions to help you guys, so I’m regretful that I couldn’t prevent the mishap.”

“Would you take orders from me?” Seth asked.

“Sure. The last standing orders I got from Kendra before entering the Quiet Box were to always help your family and never betray you. I could interpret that to mean I should follow your commands.”

He wondered how he might make use of the stingbulb. Nothing immediately came to mind. Her injured leg would limit his options. He could store her in the Quiet Box until a need arose, but that would mean freeing Vanessa. Did he want the narcoblix’s help or not? Hard to say. He should probably visit Patton first.

“Is the dungeon in good shape?” Seth asked.

“The ceiling collapsed in part of the stairway up to the house,” she replied. “A section of the ceiling in the first hall fell in as well. The main door in the hall was knocked askew, which let me get up here. The rest of the dungeon seems to be intact.”

That was a relief. The last thing he needed was all those dangerous prisoners going free. He wondered how much the destruction of the treaty would weaken the dungeon.

“I think we’ll leave Vanessa in the Quiet Box for now,” Seth decided. “I might want her help later. Can we keep Coulter in Vanessa’s cell with you?”

“Sure, I’ll watch over his body.”

“Hugo, would you mind?”

“Not mind,” Hugo said, picking up Coulter.

“I’ll wait here,” Seth said. “Hugo, you might want to carry the stingbulb back down, too. Her leg is hurt.”

Hugo picked up the stingbulb in his other hand and lumbered out of the room, rubble crunching underfoot. Seth plopped down on the remnants of a couch. Graulas must have used more than his physical strength to damage the house. He had destroyed too much too quickly. Magic must have been involved.

Seth considered his assets. The loyal golem topped the list. He also had an expiring stingbulb, a semi-trustworthy narcoblix, and hopefully a message from Patton. And what about his emergency kit? Might Kendra have replaced it in his room? Knowing her, it would be in its place under his bed. Unless she had taken it to Living Mirage in order to return it to him.

He took the coin from his pocket. He could communicate with Bracken. The thought of talking to the unicorn made him shiver. How could he tell him that he had already lost the Translocator? No, he would reach out to Bracken later.

What about Dale? Might he have joined the rescue mission? Coulter hadn't specified. Seth had never known Dale to go abroad on a mission. He was probably around here someplace. If so, with the treaty undone, he might be in trouble. Seth would ask Hugo.

Before long, heralded by heavy footfalls, the golem returned. Seth rose from the damaged couch.

"Do you know where Dale is?" Seth asked.

The golem tilted his head back. Was he looking at the broken ceiling? Was he listening? Seth wasn't sure how the golem saw and heard, or if his senses worked some other way. "Stables," the golem said. "Safe room."

"Does the safe room still work?"

"Yes."

Seth regarded the golem. How could he know Dale was at the stables? "Do you see him, Hugo?"

The golem placed fingers into the empty hollows of his eyes. "Not here." Then Hugo tapped his temple. "See here."

"With your mind?"

"Yes."

"So Dale is safe for now?"

"Yes."

"Can you see Grandpa?"

Hugo raised his head searchingly, leaning first one way, then another. "Too far."

Seth hadn't expected it to work, but it had been worth a try. "I need to look for my emergency kit before we go." The staircase from the entry hall

had collapsed, but the hall at the top partly remained. “Can you get me up to that hall?”

Hugo picked up Seth, walked over to where the stairs had once stood, and lightly tossed him up to the hallway. With Hugo’s height and reach, the golem did not have to throw him far. In one direction, the hallway ended along with the rest of the house, leaving an open view of treetops and stars. The attic stairs were the other way.

Passing gaps in the walls, Seth hustled to the attic stairs, which he found mostly intact, although deep cracks ran through the stairwell. The playroom at the top was missing most of one wall, part of another, and a good portion of the ceiling. There were some holes in the floor. But the beds were in place. Peeking under his bed, Seth instantly spotted his emergency kit. He checked inside and found the contents in place, including the figurines of the leviathan and the tower he had brought from Wyrmoost.

Returning as he had come, Seth dropped into Hugo’s reaching grasp. “I got it. Now we can head for the manor.”

The golem exited the crumbling house through the back. Glaring firelight brightened the night, the entirety of the barn now blazing. Another portion of the structure collapsed, sending a whirlwind of sparks above the towering flames. Even from a distance, Seth could feel the heat of the inferno.

As the golem started across the yard, a pair of figures emerged from the woods.

“Seth?” cried Doren.

“Seth!” shouted Newel.

The satyrs gamboled toward them across the lawn. Hugo slowed.

“You’re all right!” Doren yelled. “I knew it!”

“What’s happening?” Newel exclaimed.

“Put me down, Hugo,” Seth said. The golem complied. “I escaped from the Society and healed Graulas.”

“You healed Graulas?” Newel yelled. “Did the Society amputate your brain?”

“I thought it would ease his suffering as he died,” Seth said. “Instead he stole the artifacts I had and went on a rampage. Coulter is dead. Graulas

left not long ago. The Society now has all the artifacts to open Zzyzx.”

“And the treaty is down,” Doren added. “We felt the boundaries fall.”

“Right,” Seth confirmed.

“We came this way after we saw Viola crashing through the woods,” Newel said. “This is going to be pandemonium. Where’s Stan?”

“There’s nobody around.” Seth explained how the others had been captured when trying to rescue him.

“Quite a pickle,” Newel lamented, hands on his woolly hips.

“What happens now?” Seth asked. “Will the creatures leave Fablehaven?”

Newel and Doren exchanged a glance. “Many of the satyrs are fleeing toward Grunhold,” Doren said. “The domain of the centaurs will stand even with the treaty down. Of course, the centaurs will now be completely free to rove. Some creatures might depart. But most have their homes here now. It will be some time before many stray beyond the outer fence.”

“Without a caretaker to calm things, the centaurs will probably try to take charge,” Newel guessed. “They’ll offer safe harbor to other creatures in exchange for land. They’ve always been sore they weren’t running the place.”

“What about the dark creatures?” Seth asked.

“Hard to say,” Doren said. “The demons of Fablehaven are bound or gone. The swamp hag gets older and battier every day. The dark creatures will lack leadership. The minotaurs could cause trouble if they decide to leave their territory, but I doubt the centaurs would allow it. Without a leader, the goblins, hobgoblins, and imps will probably lie low. The fog giants love their swamp. The few trolls will skulk and look for advantages in the upheaval. Many of the darkest creatures hibernate except for on festival nights. You’ll know better than anyone if the undead are on the move.”

“I don’t sense anything,” Seth said.

“That’s a relief,” Doren said.

“What about you guys?” Seth asked.

“We wanted to get a grasp of the situation,” Newel said.

“And now that you know . . . ?”

“It would be fun to catch a movie,” Newel mused. “Do you know any theaters that allow goats inside?”

“No theaters will let goats in,” Seth affirmed.

Newel frowned. “Maybe we could slip the ticket guy some of Viola’s milk.” He glanced at Doren. “We could wear boots and baggy pants.”

“Or you could help me try to save the world,” Seth said.

“You have a plan?” Doren asked.

“Best not to meddle in human affairs,” Newel interrupted, grabbing Doren by the elbow. “I just remembered, we have some women and children to evacuate.”

“The end of the world would mean an end to television,” Seth reminded them.

Newel froze. It took him a few seconds to recover. “We’d have reruns.”

“Not if people stopped running the TV stations,” Seth said solemnly. “Your portable TV would be useless, even with the digital converter. On the other hand, if you helped me, there would be nothing to stop me from getting you guys a gas generator.”

“A generator?” Newel said. “I’m listening.”

“You’d need a reliable, long-lasting power source for your new flat-screen television and DVD player.”

Newel licked his lips apprehensively. “What’s the plan?”

“It’s a work in progress,” Seth explained. “First I need to get to the old manor. Patton left a message for me there.”

Newel brightened. “So we get you to the manor, and you provide the gadgets?”

“I would need you guys to help me until this crisis is over,” Seth said. “I’m not going to lie. It will be really dangerous.”

“We can handle danger,” Doren said stalwartly.

“Not so fast,” Newel blurted. “We reserve the right to abandon you to your fate at any moment.”

“In which case the deal would be off,” Seth clarified.

The last major portion of the barn collapsed, a fiery wave breaking on a blazing shore. Newel folded his arms. “A gas generator needs a supply of gasoline.”

“Two hundred gallons,” Seth promised.

Newel was unreadable. His eyes shifted to Doren, who nodded. Newel sniffed. He swallowed. Then he spat in his palm and extended a hand. Seth shook it. Newel grinned. "You just acquired a crack commando backup unit."

"Who might abandon me at any time," Seth said, wiping his palm on his pants.

"In which case you won't have to spend your life savings on entertainment equipment," Doren added.

Newel rubbed his hands together. "I'm glad we've reached an accord. You know, it might be refreshing to embark on an actual adventure again."

"Adventures tend to be uncomfortable and deadly," Doren reminded his friend.

"Don't get me wrong," Newel said. "I've developed a keen preference for vicarious thrills. But nothing ventured, nothing gained."

Doren punched Seth playfully on the arm. "It saddened us to think we might have lost you. It will be good to help a friend."

"And to help yourselves," Seth stressed. "The end of the world sort of affects everybody."

"Hoping that these types of crises will somehow sort themselves out has served us well in the past," Newel muttered.

"Valid point," Doren seconded. He stared at Seth. "Are you sure you wouldn't rather find a place to hide and just see what happens?"

"I have to fix this," Seth said. "It's me or nobody. Sometimes I don't get you guys. You talk as if you don't have little adventures all the time!"

"*Little* is the operative word," Newel said. "Nipsie-sized. It's one thing to swipe a meal or filch some gold. That's just sport. It's easy to keep well within your limits. It's quite another decision to get involved in an actual cause. Causes have a way of tainting your reason until a person takes much bigger risks than sanity would otherwise allow."

"Which is why you reserved the right to bail," Seth said.

"Exactly," Newel said.

"Seth did save you from the influence of Ephira and Kurisock," Doren reminded him.

"I know," Newel snapped. "No need to dredge up the past. If I didn't like the boy, I wouldn't agree to this."

“Sounds like you’re already investing in the cause,” Doren teased.

“Enough chitchat,” Newel spat, shaking a fist at Doren. He turned to Seth. “I assume the dirtman can get you to the manor without our help. If this fiasco could snowball into a real quest, we should collect some gear.”

“Not a bad idea,” Seth agreed.

“We’ll meet you at the manor,” Doren said, turning away.

“Don’t take it personally if we never show,” Newel called over his shoulder.

“Let’s go, Hugo,” Seth said.

The golem lifted Seth and charged into the woods in a different direction from the satyrs. Seth wondered if Newel and Doren would return. If they showed up, should he really let them join him? He would love the company and the help, but hadn’t he gotten enough people killed?

In the darkness beneath the trees, there was little to see. Seth could hear Hugo crashing through the undergrowth, snapping limbs and flattening shrubs. Occasionally Hugo vaulted an obstacle or climbed a steep slope. At times his route veered around unseen obstructions. Although vegetation congested the way, the golem did an expert job of shielding Seth as they plunged through dense foliage.

At one point, Hugo paused and crouched. Perhaps a minute later, Seth heard hoofed creatures galloping through the undergrowth, crossing their path ahead of them.

“Probably best to avoid being seen,” Seth whispered after the sounds had faded.

“Yes,” Hugo replied, as softly as he could manage, before resuming his loping gait through the trees.

At length they reached the edge of the yard that surrounded the pillared manor. The stately building looked dark beneath the stars.

“Let’s get this over with,” Seth whispered, rummaging in his emergency kit for a flashlight.

“Wait,” Hugo cautioned. “Troll inside. Looting. Two goblin guards.”

“Can you take out the goblins?”

Hugo shook and let out an irregular exhalation. Seth realized he was laughing.

Seth patted Hugo’s stony shoulder. “Let’s get them.”

With Seth cradled in one arm, the golem charged out into the yard. As they drew near to the manor's porch, one of the goblins called out, "Who goes there?"

Hugo didn't slow. He set Seth down before the porch steps and cleared them with a single leap. Seth glimpsed one goblin lunging with a spear. Hugo batted the weapon aside, seized the goblin by the ankles, and used him to swat the other guard. Armor clanged as they connected, and the second goblin went tumbling loudly along the porch. Still clutching the first goblin by the ankles, Hugo hurled him sidearm across the yard. The creature skimmed the grass for an incredible distance before skipping and rolling to a stop. Both goblins stumbled away at full speed, leaving their dropped weapons behind.

"Good job, Hugo," Seth said, coming up the steps.

With that same irregular exhalation, Hugo pantomimed how the goblin had bounced and spun across the yard. Seth found himself laughing as well.

"What's going on?" hissed a voice from inside the manor.

"Intruder!" Seth called in a commanding voice. "Cease your activities and come out this instant!"

A moment later, Nero appeared in the doorway, glaring until he saw Hugo. His eyes then fell on Seth. "Good evening to you," the troll said in his deep, silky voice.

Seth switched on his flashlight. The troll had a reptilian look about him, his glossy black scales highlighted by yellow markings. The nostrils of his snout flared, and his cunning eyes narrowed. His formidable muscles bunched as he coiled into a tense crouch.

"Why are you looting the manor?" Seth asked.

"Go ask your mentor," the troll replied, his tone reasonable despite his edgy posture. "Graulas ended the treaty. You can't blame an old trader for seizing an obvious opportunity."

"Graulas left me in charge," Seth said, inventing as he went. "He had to undo the treaty in order to leave Fablehaven. But he'll be back. And he wants the manor as his residence."

Baring rows of needle teeth, Nero glared at Seth suspiciously. "You openly serve him?"

Seth displayed no uncertainty. “My family abandoned Fablehaven. I stayed behind. I have much to learn. Graulas sent me to make sure his future home remained secure.”

Nero became fidgety. “I had no way of knowing . . .”

“I don’t blame you,” Seth said. “You’ve helped me in the past. Help both of us tonight. Spread the word that nothing in or around the manor is to be touched. Same with the main house at Fablehaven, especially the dungeon. Graulas knows every item in both houses, and he will show no mercy to any who claim his prizes.”

“Knew it was too good to be true,” Nero mumbled.

“Excuse me?” Seth asked, a hint of warning in his voice.

“It will be as you say, young master Sorenson,” the troll answered obsequiously, inclining his head. “Naturally, for your sake, these words had best be proven faithful when Graulas returns.”

“Was that a threat?” Seth bristled. If he was going to bluff like this, he needed to play the role convincingly. “Maybe a conversation with a shade would relieve your doubts.”

Raising his webbed hands, the cliff troll finally looked truly intimidated. “No need for unpleasantness.”

“You’re the one causing unpleasantness,” Seth snapped. “I was going easy on you. I guess you vermin only speak one language. Hugo, let’s see if trolls can fly as far as goblins.”

The golem grasped Nero by his torso, turned, and flung him out into the yard like a football. Seth used the flashlight to follow the trajectory of the troll as he soared in a long arc. The cliff troll righted himself in the air, spreading his arms and legs like a flying squirrel. Extendable fins fanned out to help him glide. When he landed over fifty yards away, Nero rolled adroitly and ended up on his feet.

“Don’t let me see you again,” Seth barked, turning his back on the troll and entering the house. Not far from the door lay a bulging sack crammed with candlesticks, silverware, and other household treasures. Behind Seth, Hugo squeezed through the doorway.

“Is he leaving?” Seth whispered after a moment.

“Yes,” Hugo confirmed quietly.

Seth sagged. “Good. I’m glad he landed all right. I didn’t want to be mean. I wanted to protect our property and keep dark creatures away from us. Thanks for backing me up.”

“Hugo help.”

“You sure did.” Seth shouldered the heavy sack and lugged it to the pantry, where it would be slightly more hidden. Regardless of the message he had shared with Nero, there would probably be more looters. No need to make their job easier. “Let’s find the stairs to the cellar.”

Hugo leaned his head back searchingly. “Come.”

Flashlight brightening the way, Seth followed Hugo to a locked door. A nudge from Hugo broke it open, and they descended the stairway beyond. Barrels, crates, and boxes cluttered the webby basement. The flashlight beam revealed an iron door on a nearby wall. Seth wondered if it led to a dungeon.

They located the fireplace without much effort. Hugo swiftly brushed some large barrels aside to clear a path for Seth, stirring up dust and making sheets of cobweb flap and tear. Seth ducked into the fireplace and recited, “Everybody loves a show-off.”

Immediately the back of the fireplace turned to dust. Seth walked through the insubstantial barrier, particles swirling in his wake, and passed into a tunnel with rock walls braced by wooden beams. The air in the man-made tunnel was noticeably cooler. Hugo followed on hands and knees.

They proceeded along the passage, the ground sloping constantly downward. After some distance, the tunnel widened into a spacious natural cavern. A gentle stream trickled across the lowest part of the room, appearing from under one wall and vanishing beneath another. The flashlight illuminated several chests, a bed, a desk, a safe, camping gear, stacked crates, a few barrels, and a large table covered with maps.

A green, corked bottle on the table caught Seth’s eye due to the large white label on it with *SETH* written in bold letters. He crossed to the table and picked up the bottle, then unfolded the note he found underneath, scanning the succinct message.

The contents of this bottle are meant only for Seth Sorenson.

Seth worked at the cork with his thumbs but could not get it to budge. Digging into his emergency kit, he got out his pocketknife, selected the corkscrew attachment, and twisted it into the cork. After a good tug, the

cork came unplugged with a hollow pop, and colored gas started gushing out of the bottle.

Seth set the bottle on the table and backed away, briefly concerned that a saboteur had turned the message from Patton into a poisonous trap. But a moment later, as the gas finished flowing from the mouth of the bottle, it gathered into the form of Patton—old, wrinkled, and semitransparent.

“Patton,” Hugo rumbled.

“If this is Seth,” the Patton cloud said, “try to touch me.”

Seth strode forward and passed a hand through the gaseous figure, creating a temporary disturbance in his midsection.

“Very good,” Patton said. “I’m glad we managed to connect. Our friend Coulter delivered a most disturbing message earlier tonight. Based on the scant available evidence, we managed to deduce what had transpired. We assume the group sent to rescue you failed, losing the Translocator, which was then somehow entrusted to you along with the Sands of Sanctity. Meaning well, you went and healed Graulas, who stole your artifacts and then went on to steal the Chronometer. Forgive me if our deductions were incorrect, but it was the only way we could reconcile the sudden wellness and freedom of Graulas with your unexpected presence at the edge of the yard.”

“Can you hear me?” Seth asked hopefully.

The gaseous Patton continued speaking as if no question had been asked. “Coulter expected to lose his life upon his return to your time. He took it like a man. I expect if you’re listening to this message, you’re dealing with his recent demise. You’re feeling alone and desperate, and you could use some advice. I’m sorry there can’t be any actual communication between us. I’m not much more than a talking letter. I could have simply written this message, but I figured you could use the company, even if it was just an illusion. In addition, candidly, I have too much time on my hands these days. Creating this gaseous monologue was an engaging proposition.

“Seth, against all odds, I’ve lived a longer life than most men. And like any thinking man, I’ve tried to figure out the meaning of my existence. Closest I’ve ever come is deciding that the purpose of life must be to learn to make wise choices. I believe that, and try to live by it.

“In my opinion, good choices are not always safe choices. Many worthy choices involve risk. Some require courage. You elected to heal Graulas. Seth, I believe that had I been in your shoes, with your knowledge, I would have done the same thing. I imagine you thought you were easing the departure of Graulas from this world. The demon had aided you in the past, and you were granting him what seemed a small favor. Had you known enough to anticipate what might happen, it would have been a poor choice indeed. But I’ve mulled it over, and I understand your decision. So did Coulter.

“Making mistakes is part of learning to choose well. No way around it. Choices are thrust upon us, and we don’t always get things right. Even postponing or avoiding a decision can become a choice that carries heavy consequences. Mistakes can be painful—sometimes they cause irrevocable harm—but welcome to Earth. Poor choices are part of growing up, and part of life. You will make bad choices, and you will be affected by the poor choices of others. We must rise above such things.

“Although cataclysmic at a glance, your choice might have some benefits. Getting Graulas involved shuffles the deck for the Sphinx. Clever as he is, he would not have seen this coming. The Sphinx certainly was not the one who loaned you the artifacts. If he had the Translocator, all he had to do was bring a force to Fablehaven, recover the Chronometer, and proceed with his plans to open Zzyzx. I expect your decision has disrupted his calculations. If that is the case, it could create opportunities.

“I knew you for only a short while, Seth, but I was impressed. You are my kind of person. When guys like us make mistakes, we clean up the mess. It will not be easy, it may not even be possible, but I’m going to make some drastic suggestions based on things I might attempt in your situation. Do with my ideas what you will.”

The gaseous Patton gave a little smile. “Your family is trapped. Your enemies are on the move. The world is on the brink of destruction. I suggest that you save it.”

A tingling thrill went through Seth. He liked where this was headed.

“If I were you, I would consider the artifacts gone and work under the assumption that my enemy will succeed in opening Zzyzx. When that prison opens, I would want to be on hand to oppose the demon horde.”

Goose pimples rose on Seth's arms. Could he do something so bold? Wouldn't the demons trample him?

"You will need a weapon. In this case, I would think big. I would try to find Vasilis, the Sword of Light and Darkness, the most fabled blade of which I am aware. Remember the name: Vasilis. Say it to yourself." Seth whispered the word. "This storied blade reflects the heart of the wielder. In the hands of a virtuous shadow charmer, I expect it would be quite powerful.

"I once sought Vasilis, but since I had no pressing need for the weapon, I abandoned the quest. I do not know where Vasilis lies, but I believe it is hidden in our region of the world. I imagine the Singing Sisters could send you in the right direction. Your grandparents would have my head for suggesting that, but you need a weapon of this magnitude, and you have no time to find it without assistance. The Sisters only help others for a price, and it is always steep, but I have visited their lair thrice, and here I stand.

"There is no way to prepare for a meeting with them. They will bargain with you. If you fail to reach an agreement, they will take your life, so be very careful. In an envelope in my desk drawer, you will find the latitude and longitude of their residence. The Singing Sisters dwell on an island in the Mississippi River, protected by a gentle distracter spell. They have resided there for a long time.

"You will also require passage to Shoreless Isle, where Zzyzx lies. Again, the latitude and longitude are included in the envelope, but they will do you little good. No ordinary ship can sail there. I have been to Zzyzx, aboard a ship I would rather forget. I required the help of a necromancer. You will not, if your mind is firm. The ship you must seek is crewed by the undead, and such will hearken to your instructions. To summon the *Lady Luck*, you must journey to Hatteras Island off the coast of North Carolina and follow the guidelines in the envelope. Before you can carry out those instructions, you will need to collect a bell, a whistle, and a music box from a certain leprechaun at Fablehaven. You'll find more details in the envelope.

"You may want companions on your adventure. Hugo should be able to leave Fablehaven. After he was granted a will by the fairies, he never covenanted to remain. Of course, Graulas may have overturned the treaty, in which case any of the creatures could come and go as they please. Choose your companions carefully. Based on my recent conversations with your

grandparents, I believe Vanessa may be an asset worth using, but I will leave the ultimate decision in your hands.

“I also recommend you practice soliciting help from the undead. In the same drawer as the envelope, I left copies of keys to the Fablehaven dungeon and the Hall of Dread. If the treaty is broken, recruit a wraith to stand guard over the dungeon. Although help from phantoms is generally undesirable, in your case, it would be wise. You need the practice, and your cause is sufficiently desperate. There are certain entities in the dungeon that you do not want released. When dealing with the undead, make sure they vow loyal service, and make sure all of the particulars are settled. Appoint limits, establish rewards. They thirst for the living, so an obvious reward for standing guard is the right to claim any victims who come along. That sort of thing. If the dungeon is inaccessible, you could also conscript liches from the Grim Marsh. Hugo knows the way. Should you travel there, be sure to stay on the wooden walkway. Hopefully it has been kept in good repair.

“Should you require further aid, as I suspect you might, consider finding Agad, the wizard in charge of Wyrmoost. Unbeknownst to most, he is one of the five wizards who founded Zzyzx. He may be able to provide wisdom in dealing with this threat. None wish to see those demons remain in confinement more than he.

“You now have all the ideas I have managed to compile. Use whatever makes sense. No doubt you will devise other strategies on your own as the situation evolves. Ephira should effectively safeguard my communications to you until less than a year before your hour of need arises. I trust you will find my messages undisturbed.

“I wish I could do more for you. Please do not obsess over choices you cannot change. Mistakes happen. Learn from the past, but concentrate on the present and the future. Difficulties like I have never faced await you. I don’t want to guide you toward harm, but when the world is about to end, the only real option is to save it. With a threat like the opening of Zzyzx impending, no safe choices remain. This message will repeat if you uncork the bottle again. It will play only for you. Good luck.”

The gaseous form of Patton returned to the bottle in a rush. Once the gas was inside, Seth pressed the cork into the mouth.

So much to digest! Too much! Seth squeezed his head. For some reason, it was one thing to tell himself he was going to try to save the

world, and quite another to receive that assignment from Patton, as if everything really did depend on him. Too much was at stake!

But Patton was right. All safe choices were gone. And trying to hide from the responsibility would be a choice as well. A bad one. At least Patton had shown him a path to follow. He would do his best, one step at a time.

Crossing to the desk, Seth found an envelope with his name on it in the second drawer he checked. Beside it he discovered the dungeon keys. Opening the envelope, Seth scanned the pages inside. He saw the promised latitudes and longitudes, along with accompanying explanations and descriptions. At the end he read about the Eternals and the final steps required to open Zzyzx.

Satisfied that he had everything Patton had promised, he folded the papers back into the envelope and tucked it in his pocket. "Come on, Hugo," Seth said. "Let's go see if those satyrs have shown up."

As the golem followed him out of the grotto, Seth reconsidered using the coin to contact Bracken. It would be painful and embarrassing to explain how he had lost the Translocator, but Bracken could possibly find ways to help. After all, he was at Living Mirage, and he seemed like a resourceful guy. Who knew when a well-timed prison revolt at the Sphinx's headquarters might provide an important diversion? At this stage, Seth could not afford to ignore any possible assets.



The Sealed Shrine

Near the top of the stairway, Bracken grabbed Kendra by her upper arm. “Your brother is contacting me,” he whispered.

“Is he all right?” she asked.

Bracken paused, listening inwardly. “He’s unharmed. He’s devastated by how Nagi Luna used him to free Graulas. The sentiment comes through in more than his words. Your friend Coulter has perished.”

“No,” Warren said, reflexively rejecting the news.

“My condolences, but Seth seems certain,” Bracken said. “He feels tremendous guilt, potentially enough to break him. I am telling him he was used, tricked, and that there is nothing to be done about it now.”

Kendra tried to choke back her tears. How could Coulter be gone? He was supposed to be safe back at Fablehaven! Warren watched Bracken expectantly.

“Seth says Graulas destroyed the foundational treaty of Fablehaven.”

“He needs to get out of there,” Warren said.

Bracken nodded, holding up a finger. “Seth says he will depart soon. Apparently he has received advice from an ancestor of yours, Patton Burgess, and Seth is now preparing to embark on a quest.”

“Patton would have provided sound guidance,” Warren said.

“I’m telling Seth that you two are with me. He’s thrilled to hear it. I’m telling him we’re in the middle of an emergency of our own, and am advising him to contact me again soon. I’m advising him not to fret about losing the Translocator. I can tell he appreciates the support, but he is still wrestling to come to terms with the crisis resulting from that loss. He longs for a way to make restitution. He has put away the coin.”

“Will he be all right?” Kendra asked anxiously.

“I think so,” Bracken said. “Evidently your ancestor gave him an ambitious assignment. We didn’t go into specifics, but if Seth can channel his energy into an active endeavor, it should help him cope. He will hail us again soon. We must press on.”

They continued upward. The stairway had been tunneled through smooth, dark stone. Warren ran a hand along the wall. “No digging into this stairway,” he said.

“These walls are harder than steel,” Bracken agreed.

The stairway ended at a blank wall. Warren recited an unintelligible phrase, and the wall faded, almost vanishing.

“Should I extinguish my light?” Bracken asked.

“Keep it shining,” Warren said.

They passed through the ghostly wall into a cave composed of sharp, angular rocks. Bracken’s light glared off the glossy black stone. Glancing back, Kendra noted that the wall appeared solid again.

Farther along the cave, a creature stood at the edge of the light. It had the body of a large bull and the head of a bearded man wearing a bronze crown. The creature spoke in a garbled language.

Bracken answered with equally strange speech.

“Don’t worry,” Warren whispered to Kendra.

The creature spoke again.

“What is it?” Kendra asked in hushed tones. “What is it saying?”

Bracken took her hand, and the garbled words became instantly untangled. The creature was still speaking.

“ . . . many years it is a relief to have a shred of hope.”

“We will do our best,” Bracken promised. “You have met Warren. This is Kendra.”

The creature bowed his head politely. "Greetings."

"Kendra, this is Halad," Bracken continued, "one of the proud lammasu enslaved by the Sphinx."

"He is no sphinx," Halad stated in his strong, calm voice. "Call him the Ethiopian."

"Halad stands guard over this secret entrance to the dungeons," Bracken explained. "He is not an evil being, but he would be bound by covenant to slay us if we trespassed here without permission from the Ethiopian."

"I take no pleasure in my assignment," Halad said stoically. "Nevertheless, a sworn sentinel must perform his duty."

"Any sense of what lies beyond the cave?" Bracken asked.

"My vision is restricted to my domain," Halad answered. "As you shall observe, my domain here is insulting. I am a prisoner guarding a prison."

"We thank you for safe passage through your domain," Bracken said.

"I lament the loss of your horns," Halad replied. "Go in peace."

Bracken released Kendra's hand. "Off we go."

"No trouble?" Warren asked.

"Just exchanging pleasantries," Bracken explained.

They advanced quickly. The lammasu stepped aside to let them pass. Halad was so large that Kendra doubted she could reach the bottom of his beard even if she jumped. Once beyond the lammasu, Bracken put his glowing stone away. Warren led the way out of the cave into the predawn light. They crouched behind some jagged boulders to survey the vicinity.

"Living Mirage contains a lot of land," Bracken whispered to Kendra. "In fact, the careful observer will find more land inside the surrounding fence than there should be."

"Several of the preserves are like that," Warren added. "Kind of like the knapsack but on a larger scale."

Bracken nodded. "A long, fertile valley runs north to south through Living Mirage. We're just barely in the northern half of that valley. The sealed shrine lies farther north where the valley narrows."

"The Sphinx suggested a course that should get us past most patrols and around the most dangerous areas," Warren said. "He has wraiths herding the undead away from our route."

“How do you know so much about Living Mirage?” Kendra asked Bracken.

“I first came here to investigate why the shrine had been sealed. I had some time to explore the area before I was captured. ”

“What kind of dangerous creatures are here?” Kendra asked.

Bracken shrugged. “Beyond the ordinary I know of jinn, various demons, manticores, a chimera, steppe giants, sphinxes, river trolls, sirrushes, and of course the simurgh.”

“He means the roc,” Warren clarified. “Which is hunting a lot lately to feed three enormous hatchlings.” He drew his sword. “The Sphinx warned that an actual sphinx guards the sealed shrine. It will pose riddles to us.”

“Let me handle the riddles,” Bracken said.

“The Sphinx seemed to think you’d have that covered.”

“I’ve been around a long time,” Bracken said. “I would almost prefer if the puzzles surprised me. I suppose we’ll skirt the river, try to get cover from the trees.”

“That was the route he described,” Warren confirmed.

“We should walk, not run,” Bracken said. “Haste draws attention.”

“I’m with you,” Warren agreed. He handed Kendra a glove. “That belonged to Coulter. It will make you invisible when you hold still.”

“I remember it,” Kendra said.

“Take the key as well,” Warren said, handing her a short rod with a complicated shape at the end. “If the need arises, I’ll draw off attention so you two can reach the shrine.”

“We’ll all escape together,” Kendra insisted.

“Right,” Warren said, trying to be patient. “We’ll all try to make it. But if we have to choose, let’s get the people to the shrine who can actually communicate with the Fairy Queen. Some of us would get blasted into sawdust if we dared to tread upon her sacred ground.”

“We should move,” Bracken said. “You lead, Warren.”

For the first five minutes, Kendra expected enemies to descend on them with every step. As they proceeded without incident, and as the cover offered by the trees became better instead of worse, she started to unwind. She began to wonder how the Fairy Queen could help them escape. Could she admit them to her realm? Kendra was pretty sure that was forbidden

under any circumstances. The realm where she ruled had to remain unspoiled or it could mean the end of all fairydom.

Kendra kept an eye out for fairies. If she could recruit a few of them to act as scouts, it would improve their chances.

At one point, where the trees became sparse, the roc soared across the sky, outstretched wings temporarily blocking out the rising sun. A huge beast thrashed in its claws.

“Does it have a rhinoceros?” Kendra asked, shielding her eyes as the sun reappeared behind the gigantic bird.

“A karkadann,” Bracken corrected. “Bigger than a rhino, with a sentient horn. Pray we don’t cross paths with a karkadann out here unprotected.”

“I have my sword,” Warren objected.

“And I have my little knife,” Bracken said. “Neither would avail us if a karkadann charged. What I need are my horns.”

“How did you lose them?” Kendra asked.

Bracken hesitated, as if uncertain whether to respond. He broke his silence after a small shrug. “The Font of Immortality is fashioned from my third horn.”

“One of the five artifacts?” Warren exclaimed.

“How old are you?” Kendra asked.

“From your point of view, ancient,” Bracken said. “Among unicorns, I’m still considered young. I have walked many roads, and I have seen much, but I still feel young. Like fairies, unicorns are youthful beings.”

“You surrendered your horn?” Warren asked.

“I was willing to do anything to help lock those demons away,” Bracken asserted. “I gave my first horn as a gift years ago. Many of my kind do not retain their first horns once the third has grown. My second horn was taken when the Sphinx captured me. I have no idea what he did with it.”

“He should return it to us,” Kendra said.

“It would help,” Bracken said. “I can feel my horns out there. None have been destroyed. Without them I feel like a shadow of myself. They house much of my power.”

“Your third horn is irretrievable?” Warren wondered.

“If the Font of Immortality is ever broken, it will disappear and re-form elsewhere, taking the horn with it. That horn would be retrievable only should Zzyzx open. Without my third horn I’m trapped in human form, but I would much rather live this way than see Zzyzx breached.”

They continued in silence. Several times they crouched or fell flat or hid behind tree trunks as Bracken sensed creatures in the area. Kendra glimpsed lions with the heads of men and scorpion tails. She caught sight of vicious packs of scaly flying dogs. She observed burly, armored nomads half the height of the surrounding trees, laughing loudly and brawling without provocation. But all of these potential threats were viewed from a distance. Many of the hazards Bracken detected were never perceived by Warren or Kendra. Their little group would simply hide in silence until Bracken suggested they proceed.

After hours of fitful progress, Warren squatted behind a fallen log to confer with them. With the sun now high, the day was growing uncomfortably warm. Ahead, at the far side of a clearing, Kendra observed trees with foliage of remarkable colors. “The Beckoning Grove lies ahead,” Warren said. “The Sphinx gave specific warnings about this stretch of our route. To go around to the left would take us along the riverbank through a community of river trolls.”

“They would consider us extraordinary delicacies,” Bracken said. “We would be devoured with much ceremony.”

“To loop around to the right would take us into the domain of the chimera,” Warren said.

“Which would also mean certain death,” Bracken said.

“And if we go through the grove?” Kendra asked.

“The fruit smells are unbearably tempting,” Warren said. “All have harmful effects. Most are lethal. The Sphinx said one might liquefy your bones, another might make you a lycanthrope, a third might cause you to burst into flames.”

“I’ll take fruit over trolls or a chimera,” Bracken voted.

“We mustn’t succumb,” Warren warned.

“We’ll help each other,” Bracken said. “Make up your minds now. No matter what happens while we are under those trees, no matter what cravings strike us, no matter what desperate urges arise, no matter what argument we make with ourselves, we will sample no fruit.”

“What if the fruit overpowers our common sense?” Kendra asked.
“What if we can’t resist?”

“I might prefer the type of threat I can stab,” Warren muttered. “In the grove our enemies will be ourselves.”

Kneeling, Bracken scraped together dirt. Spitting into his palm, he mashed the dirt and worked it into pellets, then slipped two into his nostrils. He held out his hand. Kendra hesitantly took a pair of dirt balls and pressed them into place. Warren did likewise.

“I have to believe our wills are stronger than the allure of some fruit,” Bracken said. “To be slain by a troll or a chimera would be sad. But to destroy ourselves to scratch an itch would be so pathetic I refuse to accept the possibility. The dirt will help you, and so will I.”

“Good enough for me,” Warren said, his voice a little different with his nose plugged. “Kendra?”

“Let’s try the grove.” She spoke like she had a cold.

“Promise me that you will not sample the fruit,” Bracken said. His voice sounded no different with the dirt up his nose. “Promise me and promise yourself. Say the words.”

“I promise,” Kendra said.

“I swear,” Warren offered.

“Link arms,” Bracken instructed, rising. “Breathe through your mouths and ignore your senses. I suggest we jog.”

Elbows linked, the three of them broke into a trot, breathing only through their mouths. Kendra wondered if her fairykind status would offer extra protection from the enchantment. After all, she was immune to most magical forms of mind control. But experience had shown that although her mind was protected, her emotions were vulnerable to manipulation, like from Tanu’s potions or magical fear. She worried that the attraction of the fruit might attack emotion more than intellect.

Ahead of them, the trees looked like what autumn aspires to be but never quite attains. Kendra marveled at the variety and vibrancy of the leaf colors: fiery reds and oranges, deep blues and purples, electric yellows and greens. She also saw leaves of more peculiar shades, including bright pink, shiny turquoise, metallic silver, and radiant white. Some leaves featured stripes or other patterns. Even the trunks of the trees displayed unusual colors, ranging from lava red to sparkling gold to midnight black.

As they passed beneath the trees, the plump fruit came into view. Different from the leaves, the fruit tended to exhibit opalescent blends of color, smooth skin shimmering like mother-of-pearl. Other fruit possessed the rich shades of fine jewels: sapphire blues, emerald greens, and ruby reds. Kendra found herself fascinated, unable to help speculating what such beautiful fruit might taste like.

But it was not until the scents of the Beckoning Grove began to trickle past her clogged nostrils that Kendra felt a dangerous pull from the fruit. The fragrance awakened hunger like she had never known, a desperate starvation that she instinctively knew could be quickly cured by the fat fruit dangling within reach. With the hunger came a profound thirst, along with a certainty that the juices inside the fruit would satisfy the need as no thirst had been quenched before.

Kendra knew she could not be experiencing the full smell of the place. A carnal impulse screamed for her to tear the dirt balls from her nostrils so she could luxuriate in the undiluted aroma of the orchard. Her reason tried to support the urge, telling her that smelling was not eating. Why should she needlessly forgo the most stimulating smell of her life? The aroma alone would cause no harm!

Bracken released Kendra, swatting at Warren's hands as he reached to unplug his nostrils. If she exhaled sharply, Kendra felt certain she could blow out the dirt pellets. Why not? She was salivating almost painfully. The full scent of the grove might actually provide enough limited satisfaction to help distract her from the raging hunger.

"Remember!" Bracken shouted. "This orchard is a death trap! The pleasures it promises are garish wrappings over deadly gifts. Remember that we chose not to partake. Force your mind to control your base urges."

Kendra resisted.

Warren slapped himself and then bit down on his thumb.

Bracken linked arms with them again. "Take a deep breath, hold it, close your eyes, and let me lead you."

Kendra obeyed. With her breath held, the call of the fruit became less immediate. She tried to see the situation logically. What would those sumptuous fragrances do to her without the pellets in her nose? She had imagined the grove would smell good, but had ignored the desperation that

smell might awaken in her appetite. If she removed the pellets, the smell would probably overwhelm her reason.

It was difficult to run while holding her breath. After a time she simply had to breathe, so she began gulping down air, trying to compensate for lost oxygen. With those deep breaths, the scents of the grove assaulted her as never before. The overpowering aroma promised more than a way to sate her appetite and slake her thirst. The smells promised ecstasy. They promised rest. They promised peace.

She kept her eyes squeezed shut and resisted. The smells were lies. False promises. Her instincts rejected the mental assertions. How could something so sublime be hazardous? But Kendra kept her mind in control. As her breathing began to stabilize, she held her breath again. The lack of air quickly made her feel light-headed, so she promptly returned to inhaling.

She could hear Warren gasping greedily on the other side of Bracken. Their progress slowed. Then Bracken released Kendra. She opened her eyes. Bracken and Warren were on the ground wrestling.

“Go,” Bracken demanded. “You’re almost there. Leave the grove!”

Looking ahead, Kendra could see where the exotic orchard ended. Focusing on the clearing beyond the final trees, she started running. She was acutely aware that Bracken was no longer there to help her. Her solitude increased the weight of the temptation. She tried to envision a bite of fruit blasting her to pieces, but her body would not believe the image. Maybe Warren had misunderstood the Sphinx. Maybe the grove would provide all the joy its aroma promised! Bracken and Warren might already have given up. They might be behind her right now, delicious juice dribbling down their chins, laughing at her for fleeing.

Kendra glanced back. Bracken was dragging a thrashing Warren by his feet.

Turning forward, Kendra saw that she was almost out of the grove. What if she removed the dirt pellets just for the last few steps? She wanted at least one unobstructed whiff of the grove before she exited.

No. She had promised herself, and her friends, that she would pass through the grove without trying the fruit. Even with the best intentions, to smell the fruit might lead to tasting the fruit. Lowering her head, she charged out of the orchard, raced across the clearing beyond, and took cover behind a bush.

Looking back, she saw Bracken staggering forward with Warren draped over his shoulder. They were not yet out from under the shadows of the dazzling trees. Should she return to help? Kendra wasn't sure she could trust herself.

With labored strides, Bracken carried Warren out of the grove. As Bracken crossed the clearing, Warren struggled less. Silver liquid flowed freely from one of Bracken's nostrils. Perspiration gleamed on his face. He dumped Warren on the ground beside Kendra.

"I'm so sorry," Warren panted. "I'm so sorry." He snorted out a dirt ball. Kendra cleared hers out as well.

Bracken produced a frayed handkerchief and held it to his nose. A wet silver stain spread across the threadbare material. "Don't mention it."

"Silver blood?" Kendra asked.

"I'm not quite human," Bracken said.

"If your nose is bleeding, did the dirt come out?" Warren asked.

"Of one nostril, yes," Bracken said.

"How did you resist?" Warren asked in genuine amazement.

"It wasn't easy," Bracken said. "I'm sure it helped that I have lived a long time. And it helped that this is not my true form."

"It helped that you rule," Warren said. "You have an iron will. I owe you my life. Please forgive me. One of my nostrils came unplugged as we were running. After that, my rational side went on vacation."

"Nothing to forgive," Bracken said. "I felt the draw of the fruit. It was almost too much. Had I been alone, without responsibility, I might have failed the test."

"Both of you really smelled it?" Kendra asked, a little jealous.

"My nostril cleared when Warren punched me," Bracken said. "The scent was intoxicating. It may have been fortunate that blood replaced the dirt."

"I'm so sorry," Warren said. "I was out of control. All I knew was that I needed that fruit at all cost!"

"You don't feel that way now?" Kendra asked.

"The memory is appealing," Warren said. "But the irresistible urge is gone."

"We should move on," Bracken said.

“I dropped my sword,” Warren said.

“That was way back there,” Bracken said. “The first time you started to stray.”

“I really wanted to clear my nose and fully smell the grove,” Kendra confessed.

“Me too,” Warren said. “Be glad you didn’t. The full smell was a hundred times more compelling. I take it we leave the sword?”

“I don’t want to risk the grove again,” Bracken said. “The sword provided more the illusion of security than any actual protection. Stealth is our real weapon today.”

“A fairy,” Kendra said, pointing.

The fairy glided toward them, gauzy wings flowing more than flapping, as if she were underwater. She had dark skin and long dark hair, and wore lavender wrappings that matched her wings. Tiny golden trinkets adorned her arms and ankles.

The fairy alighted on Bracken’s shoulder, and he moved the handkerchief away from his face. She caressed his cheek. From the look on her face to the expressive language of her movements, Kendra had never seen a fairy express such tender concern. The fairy placed her brown hand on the side of his nose. There was a brief glow, and then she used a diaphanous strip of material to clean the flecks of blood from the rim of his nostril.

“Can you guide us to the sealed shrine?” Bracken asked gently.

The fairy nodded eagerly. Kendra felt certain the fairy was in love. Apparently the persuasive influence of her fairykind status would not be needed today.

“Could you gather a few of your sisters to help us avoid trouble?” Bracken asked.

The fairy looked suspicious, as if the mention of other fairies had suddenly spoiled much of the fun.

“I would consider it a tremendous favor,” Bracken said earnestly. Color rising in her cheeks, the fairy glided away.

“You have a way with fairies,” Warren said.

“I may lack my horn,” Bracken said, “but I’m still a unicorn. We’re sort of the rock stars of the fairy world.”

Sure enough, a few minutes later, the first fairy returned with several others. Most had dark skin and elaborate wings. Bracken was the obvious center of attention. The majority of the fairies whispered and tittered from afar. A couple of the boldest drifted close to gaze at him dreamily. One started mending a tear in his shirt.

Bracken laughed. "Do not concern yourselves with my attire. I need scouts. Who will keep us safe from harm?"

"I will," chirped a chorus of tiny voices. Miniature hands waved as fairies vied for selection.

"I would be forever grateful for help from all of you," Bracken said warmly. He made assignments regarding which fairies would rove far, which would stay close, and which direction they would cover. When the fairy who had first found them received the honor of serving as Bracken's personal escort, she beamed with pride.

With their fairy entourage scouting ahead, they made faster progress than before, advancing without hesitation. Occasionally warnings would be passed back to them by their escorts, and they would pause or alter their course accordingly. More fairies joined the group, bringing Bracken nuts and berries and sips of water or honey cupped in fragrant leaves. Bracken shared these offerings with his companions. Eventually the steady parade of minute portions filled them and he had to ask for no further food to be brought.

At length, with the sun past midday, fairies returned reporting a sphinx up ahead guarding the sealed shrine. Bracken assured the fairies that a confrontation with the sphinx was necessary and asked them to hang back. Part of Kendra hoped that he would invite her to hang back as well, but Bracken made no such offer.

The iron dome came into view through the trees. The size surprised her. It was several stories tall, and looked big enough for a circus to perform inside. Devoid of any signs of corrosion, the dull, black iron absorbed the afternoon sunlight, reflecting nothing.

As they drew nearer, Kendra spotted the sphinx lounging in front of the dome, tail swishing back and forth. The sphinx had the body of a golden lion, with feathery wings tucked at the sides, and the head of a woman. She had large, almond-shaped eyes the color of jade, and wore a self-satisfied expression.

Bracken approached her, flanked by Warren and Kendra. The sphinx made no movement aside from her languidly waving tail.

“We want access to the dome,” Bracken said.

“Consider two sisters,” the sphinx intoned in a sultry voice. Audible to the ears, the words also penetrated directly to the mind. Though she spoke in a subdued manner, each word somehow arrived with the force of a shout. “The first is born of the second, whereupon the second is born of the first.”

Bracken glanced at Kendra and Warren. Kendra had no idea.

“The sisters born of each other are day and night,” Bracken replied.

The sphinx gave a sage nod. “I surround the world, yet I dwell within a thimble. I am outside of—”

“You are space,” Bracken interrupted.

The sphinx compressed her lips and gave him a hard stare. She spoke again. “In the morning I walk on four—”

“Stages of a man’s life,” Kendra blurted. All eyes turned to her. “It’s a famous one,” she apologized. “In the morning I walk on four legs, in the afternoon on two, in the evening on three—the more legs I have, the weaker I am. Something like that.”

The sphinx was fuming.

“Knock, knock,” Warren said. The sphinx glared at him.

“Don’t take offense,” Bracken placated, stepping in front of Warren diplomatically. “We have had a taxing day. There are three of us, we answered three riddles. May we pass?” He bowed politely.

“You may pass,” the sphinx allowed, serenity returning.

“Say no more,” Bracken whispered to Warren.

Warren struggled against a grin.

Kendra felt like the eyes of the sphinx were boring into her back as they passed her and walked to the dome. Bracken led them to a hatch in the side that had a large keyhole. As Kendra studied the hatch, she recalled that the Fairy Queen had recently destroyed three of her shrines. What if this was one of the shrines she had eliminated? It seemed a likely candidate since it was sealed.

Deciding she would have an answer to her concern soon enough, Kendra inserted her rod, jiggled it until it caught, and then twisted. The lock clicked, and Warren pulled the hatch open.

Fairies crowded toward the open portal from all directions. Bracken stepped through first, followed by Kendra, who felt fairies brushing past her as she entered. The dome cut out all daylight except what filtered in through the hatchway, but the inside of the dome was also lit by scores of glowing fairies and the steady radiance of a luminescent pond. Kendra gazed at the vibrant variety of fairies, wondering how many years they had been trapped in here. As Warren came through the hatchway, more fairies poured in, twittering at long-lost friends.

The oblong pond took up nearly a quarter of the room. Water trickled down from the top of a conical island in the center of the pond. Five terraced mounds surrounded the glassy water, blooming with exotic flowers despite the lack of sunlight. From one side of the pond, white stepping-stones created a somewhat precarious walkway from the shore to the island.

“This is where I sit on the sidelines,” Warren said. “I’ll stay back and guard the hatch.”

“Fair enough,” Bracken said. He led Kendra over to the stepping-stones, lightly leaping to the first, which Kendra thought had been placed a little too far from the shore. He stepped to the next stone and waited for Kendra. Not wanting to look scared, and trying not to think about what guardians might lurk beneath the surface of the glowing water, Kendra sprang to the first stone. It was slick, but she landed well. Bracken reached back to steady her. They proceeded along the rest of the stones without difficulty and reached the steep, grassy shore of the island.

Bracken led the way around to the back of the island. As they went, Kendra saw that water actually trickled down from the top of the island along three different routes. The drizzling flow of water on the far side of the island collected in a pool halfway up the back slope. Beside the pool stood a tiny figurine of a fairy beside a bronze bowl engraved with delicate patterns.

Kendra started toward the pool, then paused to look back at Bracken, who had halted farther down the slope. He met her eyes. “It has been a long time since I last spoke with the Fairy Queen.” He clenched his jaw, fingers fidgeting, eyes shining. Was he nervous?

“I’m sure she’ll be happy to see us,” Kendra encouraged. “I feel really good about this.”

“Of course,” he said, striding forward, head erect.

They knelt together in front of the fairy figurine. The water in the pool next to the figurine did not glow, although it struck Kendra as abnormally reflective. A breeze stirred the still air, and Kendra smelled citrus fruit, sand, sap, jasmine, and honeysuckle.

Bracken spoke first, aloud, but seemingly also with his mind. “Greetings, your majesty. It is I, Bracken the hornless unicorn, also known by other titles. I am accompanied by Kendra Sorenson.”

A feeling of pure joy flooded over Kendra, clearly emanating from the Fairy Queen. *How did you reach this shrine?* Kendra had never before sensed surprise from the Fairy Queen.

“We had aid from the Sphinx,” Bracken replied. “The demon Graulas brought him the remaining artifacts, and is in the process of usurping his authority. First things first. Could you please vouch for my trustworthiness to Kendra?”

A potent emotion of heartbreaking love washed over Kendra. *Bracken is among the most trusted of all my servants. I have deeply missed his presence.* The feeling of love abruptly hardened into chastisement. Her next words were directed to Bracken. *I warned you not to travel to this preserve.*

“And I spent long years in a dungeon as payment for my disobedience,” Bracken replied. “Forgive me, your majesty, I took the risk in your service.”

You should come home, the Fairy Queen pressed. A powerful feeling of longing accompanied the statement. Suddenly Kendra felt like she was eavesdropping on something intensely private. Bracken shot her a glance, as if guessing her feelings.

“Necessity dictates otherwise,” Bracken said. “I still have much work to do, your majesty. Nearly in a position to open Zzyzx, the Society is now run directly by demons. I must oppose them while there remains any chance to thwart their designs. Perhaps we can converse privately in a moment. First, Kendra has a favor to ask.”

“Me?” Kendra exclaimed, glancing at Bracken uncomfortably. “Seems like you have this handled.”

“Go ahead,” he urged.

Kendra cleared her throat, feeling self-conscious. Her conversations with the Fairy Queen had always been unobserved. To make matters worse, it was clear that Bracken had a long, close relationship with her. Shouldn’t

he be the one making requests? “We are desperate for a way out of Living Mirage. Warren is with us too.”

You have not transformed any of my astrids yet. I have tried to send them in your direction. I lost track of you when you came to this accursed preserve. No astrids are currently near. Yet even without my warriors, I believe I have a solution to your dilemma. It will require a little time.

“Thank you, your majesty,” Kendra said.

Bracken winked at her. “Could you give me a few minutes alone with her? There are a few unicorn-type matters I would like to discuss.”

“Sure,” Kendra said, standing, the dismissal making her even more uncomfortable.

“I’m glad you were here for this much,” Bracken assured her. “Hopefully you now have good reason to trust me. Stay here on the island. We’ll walk back together.”

Feeling a little better, Kendra strolled down the slope to the edge of the radiant water. She could not help wondering what Bracken and the Fairy Queen were discussing. Was she angry at him for getting captured? Did they simply need to catch up? What was their relationship? Did the Fairy Queen have as big a crush on him as the other fairies seemed to? Would the Fairy Queen put more pressure on him to come to her realm? Kendra figured if any creature belonged in an unspoiled realm of purity, it would be a unicorn.

But it was hard to think of Bracken as a unicorn. He seemed way too human. He just felt like a really cool friend. Kendra looked up the slope, watching him as he knelt beside the little pool, his back to her. What a relief to know she could trust him! He was right that an endorsement from the Fairy Queen allowed Kendra to lay aside her concerns about his legitimacy. After so many betrayals, it felt heavenly to know there was somebody she could truly count on.

After some time, Bracken came down the slope. He looked rejuvenated.

“You’re all smiles,” Kendra said.

“I missed that complete form of communication the Fairy Queen can provide,” Bracken said. “Mind to mind, heart to heart. And I missed her. She is very important to me. Since her consort fell, she has borne a very heavy burden alone.”

“What kind of help do you think she’ll send?” Kendra asked.

“I’ll be curious to see,” he responded vaguely. “Let’s go tell Warren help is on the way.”



Preparations

Newel and Doren arrived at the manor just as Seth was deciding they wouldn't show. Seth had waited on the porch for nearly an hour after contacting Bracken, his confidence steadily waning. He was on the verge of asking Hugo to take him back to the main house when the satyrs came scampering across the unkempt lawn. Each had a pack over his shoulder. Newel wore a dented helm. Doren had a bow.

"The word is abroad that Graulas has claimed this house," Newel said by way of greeting.

"We were hoping it was a hoax," Doren added.

"No trick," Seth said loudly. "I was asked to claim it on his behalf." He lowered his voice. "Please don't yell about my hoaxes where any imp can hear."

"Right," Newel said with a knowing wink. He cupped a hand beside his mouth. "We had better clear out of here before the dark master of this haunted abode returns!"

"You don't have to oversell it, either," Seth whispered.

"We brought you some gear," Doren said, unshouldering his pack and rummaging through the contents. He pulled out an oval shield about a yard

tall. “Heroes need proper equipment.”

“Thanks,” Seth said.

“Adamant,” Doren said proudly, handing over the shield. “We fished it out of the same tar pit where we found the shirt of mail.”

“Probably all belonged to the same careless adventurer,” Newel speculated. “Too much money, not enough talent.”

Seth hefted the shield. It felt light, almost like a toy or a prop, but he knew that if it was made of adamant, it was stronger than steel and absolutely priceless. “What a great gift.”

“We were reserving it to trade for batteries,” Newel explained. “But in light of our new arrangement—well, investors need to protect their interests.”

“It would be a shame if I died before you got your generator,” Seth said.

Doren nudged Newel. “The shield isn’t all.”

From his pack, Newel removed a sword in a battered leather scabbard. Jewels adorned the golden hilt. Newel presented it to Seth, who drew the sword. It felt too light. “This isn’t adamant too?” Seth asked.

“Tempered adamant,” Doren gushed. “We found just the naked blade. The edge is keen. The nipsies crafted the hilt, and we salvaged the scabbard from an old scrap heap.”

“The nipsies couldn’t have made it just now?” Seth asked.

“No,” Newel chuckled. “It took them six weeks. We were simply preparing another item for barter.”

Seth belted on the scabbard and sheathed the sword. “Why don’t you guys have armor?”

Newel snorted derisively. “Slows us down. We prefer to avoid injuries by not getting hit.”

“What about the helmet?” Seth asked.

Newel rapped the helm with his knuckles. “This old thing? It’s my good-luck charm.”

“Tell him the story,” Doren urged.

“Satyrs never wear armor, including helmets,” Newel began, using his hands expressively. “But years ago I was in a play, and the helm was part of my costume. During the big battle scene, a few of us were assailing a castle.

We had quite a set. The main tower must have been fifteen feet tall, fashioned from real stone. Anyhow, as we actors were laying siege, a big chunk of the battlement dislodged from atop the tower.”

“Shoddy workmanship,” Doren inserted.

“Definitely not part of the rehearsed scene,” Newel emphasized.

“Newel was delivering a line,” Doren laughed.

“*Behold, the enemy falters!*” Newel quoted in a bold voice, raising a finger skyward for dramatic effect. “I was facing the audience and focused on my diction, so the falling stonework blindsided me.”

“Biggest laugh of the night,” Doren chuckled.

“Those might have been my last words if not for this helmet,” Newel said. “Cumbersome or not, any object that lucky deserves to be worn in battle.”

“Is that how the helmet got dented?” Seth asked.

“Exactly,” Newel confirmed.

“Newel wouldn’t let anyone repair it,” Doren said.

“I’m surprised you weren’t injured,” Seth said.

“I was unconscious for almost two days,” Newel clarified.

“His understudy was elated,” Doren said.

Newel smirked. “The botched scene was such a success, I had to give up the theater. All everybody wanted from me thereafter was slapstick. And trust me, with satyrs involved, slapstick hurts a lot.”

“He came home from rehearsals mottled with bruises,” Doren remembered.

“I see Doren brought a bow,” Seth pointed out.

“He’s a handy archer,” Newel said. “I prefer a sling.”

Seth motioned for them to lean close and lowered his voice to a faint whisper. “I got our assignment from Patton. It will take us on quite a journey. I think we should probably get Vanessa out of the Quiet Box to help us. What do you guys say?”

“Absolutely,” Newel affirmed. “Best idea I’ve heard all day.”

“I’ll second that,” Doren said gladly.

Seth gave the satyrs a doubtful scowl. “Wait a minute. You guys just think she’s pretty.”

"I've been around a long time," Newel said. "Vanessa Santoro is not just pretty."

"He's right," Doren agreed. "She's walking dynamite. My pulse is rising just talking about her."

"She also might be a traitor," Seth stressed.

"The lethal temptress," Newel said with relish. "Even better."

"It will definitely spice up the adventure," Doren encouraged.

"I'm obviously talking to the wrong guys," Seth sighed.

"Believe me," Newel said cockily, "you're talking to the right guys. We've been chasing babes since the world was flat."

Seth rolled his eyes.

"The boy needs objectivity," Doren scolded. "He's leading this expedition. He needs valid opinions. Seth, considering all sides of this, I am deeply convinced that the right move to make would be to bring Vanessa. And any outfits she may require. And makeup. And perfume. And hair products. Whatever she needs."

Closing his eyes, Seth rubbed his face. Did the fate of the world really rest on these clowns? Should he even be involving them? At least he had Hugo.

Newel slugged him on the arm. "Seth? Lighten up! We're just kidding around. Keeping up morale!"

"We know you'll do the right thing," Doren said.

Seth opened his eyes. "I actually think Vanessa might be on our side. Plus, we may need her help to get where we need to go."

"If you bring her, we'll watch your back," Newel promised.

"A man would be a fool to trust a woman that gorgeous," Doren murmured shrewdly.

"That's a little more helpful," Seth said. "We have a lot to do. We should get back to the main house."

"Lead on," Newel said.

"Have either of you caught a leprechaun before?" Seth asked as Hugo lifted him.

Both satyrs perked up.

"We haven't," Newel said.

“We’ve tried,” Doren added. “Did Patton have some advice on the subject?”

“He did,” Seth said as they started across the yard. “It’s part of our mission.”

Newel rubbed his hands together. “This adventure keeps sounding better and better.”

“You just have to get into the right spirit,” Doren laughed.

Seth smiled weakly, quietly wondering if the satyrs would remain as eager once the undertaking stopped seeming fun. “Do you guys want Hugo to carry you?”

“How slow do you think we are?” Newel complained. “Go on, we’ll keep up.”

Hugo loped out of the yard. Seth thought the golem was going a little slower than he had before the satyrs had joined them, but they still made fast progress through the woods, and, true to their word, Newel and Doren kept pace, dashing along behind.

They had been charging through the dark forest for some time when Hugo stopped. Overhead, all but a few stars were blocked by the canopy of leaves.

Seth heard and saw nothing.

“Centaur?” Doren asked.

“Behind us,” Newel agreed. “Coming this way. Right this way. Sounds like they’re tracking us.”

“Can we outrun them?” Seth asked.

Newel chuckled. “I’m not sure anything at Fablehaven can outrun a centaur.”

Hugo set Seth down and stood in front of him. A few seconds later, Seth could hear the approaching hoofbeats. As the drumming hooves got louder, he also heard leaves rustling and the occasional branch snapping. The satyrs were right. The centaurs were coming straight at them.

Seth shone his flashlight as the centaurs cantered into view. They quickly came to a halt. Cloudwing led the group of four, an arrow set to the string of his enormous bow. The flashlight beam rose from his silver fur to his extravagantly muscled human torso, then swept across the other centaurs.

“Greetings, Seth Sorenson,” Cloudwing boomed. “I need to have words with you.”

“In the middle of the woods?” Seth asked from behind Hugo. “In the middle of the night?” He was not anxious to converse with centaurs. He felt certain they still suspected him of stealing their unicorn horn, and even though it had been returned, he knew centaurs were the type to hold serious grudges.

“The treaty has fallen,” Cloudwing replied, his voice clear and strong. “The preserve is in disarray. We need to know what you humans propose to do.”

“We’re working on it,” Seth assured him.

“We have had tidings that you claimed the manor house on behalf of the demon Graulas,” Cloudwing accused sternly.

“Word spreads like wildfire around here,” Newel said to Doren.

“Even the cavalry knows,” Doren replied.

“I’m doing what I can to keep dark forces away from the houses while the defenses are down,” Seth admitted. “Maybe you guys could help the rumor spread.”

“So the tale is false?” Cloudwing pressed.

“Yes,” Seth said. “But don’t go telling everybody.”

“A false rumor will not dissuade wrongdoers for long,” Cloudwing said. “I understand your grandparents have abandoned the preserve.”

“Not on purpose,” Seth said. “But yes, they’re gone right now.”

“Let me suggest you place the houses under centaur protection,” Cloudwing advised. “It appears to be our fate to rise up and serve as the true guardians of Fablehaven.”

“That might not be a bad idea,” Seth said. “Can you spare a few guards until my grandparents get back?”

Cloudwing shook his head. “You misunderstand. We only protect our own property.”

“You want the houses!” Seth cried. “What would centaurs do with human houses?”

“We could find uses for them,” Cloudwing said. “For instance, we would keep them free of humans.”

The other centaurs chuckled.

“Then no, we don’t want your protection,” Seth said.

“Choose your words carefully,” Cloudwing advised. “If you deny our protection, you may face our aggression.”

“Now you’re threatening me?” Seth asked.

“The artificial order of Fablehaven has been overturned,” Cloudwing declared. “It is the natural order for the strongest to take what they want. Be grateful that we extend the hand of mercy by offering our protection.”

“Be grateful they let you grant your permission in order to firm up their claim,” Newel muttered.

“This is none of your concern, goatman,” Cloudwing warned.

Newel reddened, fists clenched, but held his tongue.

“You will have to claim the houses yourself,” Seth said. “I surrender nothing. My grandparents will be back, and Fablehaven will be repaired.”

Cloudwing exchanged amused glances with his fellow centaurs. “You believe the treaty will be reconstituted?”

“Probably,” Seth said, hoping he correctly understood the meaning of *reconstituted*.

“Fablehaven as you knew it is finished,” Cloudwing asserted boldly. “Be glad the centaurs are here to keep the sanctuary from degenerating into gated chaos.”

“Don’t you mean be glad the centaurs are here to bully and enslave the weaker creatures?” Doren asked.

Cloudwing drew his arrow to his cheek and aimed it at Doren. Hugo stepped between them. Cloudwing relaxed. “Another word from either goatman and we duel,” Cloudwing vowed. “Did you wastrels not hear that your people have already signed over their lands to us?”

Newel raised his hand like a student and pointed at his lips.

“You may speak,” Cloudwing said.

“We weren’t part of that arrangement,” Newel said.

“Then I suggest you clear out,” Cloudwing said. “Vacate the premises. We have already claimed the great cow Viola after finding her roaming the woods unattended. By sunrise, most of the former Fablehaven preserve will be part of Grunhold.”

“We plan to clear out,” Seth said. “There is a battle being fought elsewhere that we must join.”

The centaurs laughed. "If the battle is important," Cloudwing said, "I hope you do not represent the reinforcements."

"You should wish us success," Seth said darkly. "We're trying to stop the opening of Zzyzx. I may not have really been claiming property for Graulas, but trust me, if the prison opens, he will be back to make claims for himself, and he will not come alone."

The centaurs no longer appeared quite as jovial. "Is this where Stan went?" Cloudwing asked.

"It is where everyone of any value is going," Seth said.

Cloudwing bristled. "Fortunately for you, I have little interest in the naive opinions of humans. Even so, I am surprised that previous lessons have not taught you to restrain your tongue."

"Previous lessons?" Seth asked. "Like when Patton beat up Broadhoof?" Newel and Doren whipped around. Their stares warned Seth to cut it out. He understood their concern, but he couldn't help himself.

Cloudwing stared grimly down at Seth, who made sure the flashlight beam was focused right in the centaur's eyes. "I do recall an occasion when an outsider intervened in a dispute any real man would have handled himself." His tone warned that Seth was treading on thin ice.

Seth wanted to brag about stealing the horn. He yearned to remind them about Broadhoof begging for mercy from a human. He knew those words would sting. But he had a mission to perform, and friends to protect. He could not risk enraging the centaurs to action.

"You're right," Seth said. "I provoked the fight, I should have handled it myself."

The faintest hint of a smile appeared on Cloudwing's lips. "You say you are preparing to abandon this preserve as well?"

"Not in those words," Seth said. "We are leaving to try to save Fablehaven and the world from certain destruction. You would be welcome to help us."

Cloudwing smirked. "We will not meddle in the petty affairs of lesser races. But we will grant you until sunrise to be gone."

"We have to gather some gear," Seth said. "How about you give us a free pass until next sundown?"

“Very well,” Cloudwing allowed. “Let it be known that after the coming sundown, any of you found upon the property formerly known as Fablehaven will be trespassing on centaur holdings and will be dealt with accordingly.”

“Just so we’re clear,” Seth said, “I don’t recognize your claim, and I will be back.”

“At your peril,” Cloudwing said. He turned to the other centaurs. “We have squandered enough time here. Onward!”

The four centaurs pounded away into the woods. As the hoofbeats faded, Newel glanced back at Seth. “Are you starting to grasp why satyrs hate centaurs so much?”

“I kind of am,” Seth replied. “At the same time, considering how messed up everything has become, it might be good to have them protecting Fablehaven.”

“If you say so,” Doren mumbled. “After that exchange, I would have joined your quest without a reward. This used to be a fun place. I suspect it will soon be unrecognizable.”

“Things are tough all around,” Seth said heavily. “Thanks for the support.”

“We still want the generator,” Newel hastened to add.

“I get it,” Seth assured them. “We should hurry to the house.”

* * *

Seth found the stingbulb version of Kendra in Vanessa’s cell listening to a love song. He tried to ignore the dead body under a blanket in the corner. Newel and Doren murmured to each other about how authentic the false Kendra looked. Hugo was standing guard up by the back porch.

“Have you been all right?” Seth asked.

“It’s been quiet,” Kendra confirmed. “Are you ready for me?”

“I think we’ll need Vanessa’s help,” Seth said.

The stingbulb switched off the sound system and followed Seth out into the hallway. After the accommodations at Living Mirage, the Fablehaven dungeon seemed simple and cozy. Seth hurried to the tall cabinet that contained Vanessa. He opened the door, and the stingbulb

stepped inside. He closed the door, the cabinet turned, and when the door reopened, Kendra was gone, replaced by Vanessa.

Vanessa exited the cabinet, regarding Seth and the satyrs curiously. “Why do I get the feeling that something has gone terribly wrong?”

“Because it has,” Seth answered frankly.

“I know the others intended to rescue you,” she said. “Start there.”

Seth recapped all that had happened, openly taking his share of the blame. Vanessa listened quietly, asking a few clarifying questions. By the time he had sketched out the basics of what Patton had advised him to do, she began to look very tired.

“Why didn’t you give *us* the full rundown?” Newel asked when Seth had finished.

“I figured I’d wait until we were all together,” Seth said tactfully.

“So we need to set up some wraith guards, catch a leprechaun, and get off the preserve before sundown,” Vanessa summarized.

“Those would be the first steps,” Seth agreed.

“Have you any idea how perilous it will be to visit the Singing Sisters?” Vanessa said.

“Not entirely,” Seth replied. “Do you have a better plan?”

She stared at him silently. “I wish I did. We’re so close to utter defeat that the reckless schemes Patton proposed probably do represent our best hope for success. But that only holds true because we basically have no chance for victory. We are talking about pulling off multiple miracles before we earn even a small chance of slightly harassing these demons.”

“You don’t have to help,” Seth said, a little crestfallen.

“I’ll help,” Vanessa said. “It would be criminal to let you attempt this alone. Any chance of saving the world is worth pursuing. I don’t want to crush your faith in the plan. It does offer a glimmer of hope, which we would otherwise lack. Who knows? With luck, Kendra, Warren, and your hornless unicorn friend may find unforeseeable ways to be useful at Living Mirage. And if the new dynamics of the situation are forcing the Sphinx to work against the Society, we may have acquired a very powerful ally. That said, I want to make sure we’re all clear that we’re probably marching to our deaths.”

Newel raised a finger. "Doren and I actually have an escape clause. We're free to withdraw our support and flee at any time."

Vanessa gave him an incredulous glance. "Keep in mind that by the time you know you should flee, it will probably be too late."

"Noted," Newel said.

"Seth will be doing the most dangerous work," Vanessa went on. "If he falls, we'll all cut and run."

"No more cheerful thoughts," Seth said. "All this optimism is giving me a headache. Now, I want to know if a wraith can beat up a bunch of centaurs."

"A wraith in the sunlight would fall to centaurs," Vanessa said. "But in the dark, or underground, or in a building, a hundred centaurs would retreat from a wraith."

"Then I need to go to the Hall of Dread," Seth said. "Can you help me figure out which ones are wraiths?"

"I can."

Seth led the way to the bloodred door. Although they had to walk some hallways and round a couple of corners, the Hall of Dread seemed much nearer to the Quiet Box than it had before his time at Living Mirage. The instructions from Patton explained that he had to say some words before turning the key to open the door to the Hall of Dread. Seth opened the letter and found the words. They were not in English.

"Can you read these?" he asked Vanessa.

She peered at the letter. "Yes. Give me the key." She inserted the key into the keyhole, placed a palm against the door, muttered a few incomprehensible words, turned the key, and pushed the door open. She handed Seth the key and the letter.

The air in the hall felt chilly.

"We'll stand guard out here," Newel said stoutly.

Vanessa gave him a knowing look. "Probably for the best." Newel avoided eye contact. Seth and Vanessa entered the hall. "I feel strong presences here," Vanessa said.

"How can you tell the difference between the dark creatures?" Seth inquired. He could hear them whispering about hunger and thirst, pain and loneliness.

“Experience, mostly,” she said. “There are two basic types of restless beings: corporeal and ethereal. The corporeal entities have a physical form, like wights and liches and zombies. The ethereal beings are more ghostly, like specters or phantoms or shades.”

“I can hear them gibbering,” Seth said. “I’ve spoken to one of these prisoners before. It offered to serve me.”

“Might be a good place to start,” Vanessa said.

Seth hurried down the hall, passing many doors on either side. Forlorn voices babbled in the darkness. He paused at the last door on the left. Ahead was the blank wall where a secret passage could take them farther.

“I’ve returned,” Seth said, facing the door.

The other voices went silent.

“I have been waiting, Great One,” came the attentive response. “How may I serve you?”

Seth turned to Vanessa. “Can you hear him?”

She shook her head. She looked pale.

“Can you tell me what he is?”

She edged stiffly forward and peeked through the peephole. Seth assumed she was feeling the effects of the magical fear to which he was immune. She backed away. “Jackpot,” she said. “It’s a wraith. A strong one. Be sure it is bound by oath to serve you or we will all perish together.”

“I will be your greatest servant, Strong One,” the wraith promised.

“I could use your help,” Seth said. “I need a, um, servant to stand guard over this dungeon. Any who draw too near would be yours to claim.”

“Let me perform this duty,” the wraith asked fervently.

“You would have to leave those who belong to this house unharmed, like my grandparents or my sister.”

“I sense your intent. I understand.”

“You would have to return to this cell upon my command.”

“Yes, yes, anything you ask. Release me and I am yours.”

“Swear to do these tasks and to follow my orders in all things,” Seth said.

“By solemn covenant, I swear fealty to you, Wise One. I vow to obey word and spirit of all your commands.”

Seth glanced at Vanessa. "I think he swore. He seems really eager."

Her brow twitched. "Make sure he's alone in there."

"Are you alone in that cell?" Seth asked.

There came a pause. "I am not alone. Two of my lesser brethren accompany me in my confinement."

Chills tingled down Seth's back. It had been a trap! One wraith swearing loyalty while two others waited in ambush. In the end, with the "master" killed by the unsworn wraiths, they would all have gone free!

Seth had to seem in control. "Would the other wraiths care to serve me?"

"They would serve you," came the reply. The eagerness was gone.

"I would send one of them to protect the old manor. The other to protect the stables and the livestock. They would be under the same terms and conditions as the first."

"I pledge fealty, and to perform your commands," affirmed a new voice.

"I pledge fealty, and to embody your commands," promised another new voice.

"Swear to me that no ambush or deception will come from you or others of your kind," Seth said. "Promise to protect me and my friends and my cause from harm."

"We swear it," answered three voices in unison.

"This woman, Vanessa, and the satyrs, Newel and Doren, are with me, and under my protection. If centaurs should come anywhere near these properties, they are yours to claim."

"We understand," answered three voices. "Release us, Mighty One."

"You understand the places I want protected?"

"We can see them in your mind."

Seth turned to Vanessa. "I think we're ready."

"Is there a key?" she asked.

Seth fished out a separate key and the letter from Patton. "There are new words also."

Vanessa took the letter and approached the cell door. She inserted the key, placed her palm against the door, and mumbled unsteadily. Turning the key sharply, she backed away.

The cell door swung open. A wave of cold spilled out as if the room were an industrial freezer. Three dark forms emerged, upright, gliding forward with shadowy grace. One stood a little taller than Seth, the two others almost a head shorter. It was hard to discern details. The flashlight did not illuminate them. Their whole beings seemed to swallow light, making them indistinct.

Seth glanced at Vanessa. She crouched, head down, utterly immobilized. "You three wait here for now," Seth said. "Let me clear out my friends before you take your positions."

"As you say," the tall wraith pronounced in a low voice as hard and cold as ice.

Seth took Vanessa by the hand, her fingers coming back to life at his touch. Straightening her posture, she stared at Seth in astonishment. He led her down the hall and out the door to where the satyrs awaited them.

"Something feels unnatural," Doren said.

"Whatever you released are no common wraiths," Newel agreed. "Took all we had to stand our ground."

"You three should go," Seth said. "Wait for me with Hugo."

Both satyrs offered Vanessa their arms. Back in full possession of herself, she shunned them both, striding briskly down the hall. The satyrs scampered to keep up.

Seth waited until they were out of sight. Then he counted to a hundred, forcing himself to keep it slow. "Okay!" Seth called. "You can come out now!"

The three wraiths glided to the doorway, arriving more quickly than Seth had expected. "Just a second," Seth said.

The tallest wraith drew close to him. "Do you feel nothing in my presence?" the wraith asked.

"A little cold," Seth said. "But the others have a hard time around you guys."

"Truly you are powerful," the wraith said, exuding almost worshipful esteem.

"I'm a social person," Seth replied, feeling awkward. "I don't discriminate. You seem pretty powerful yourself. What would your chances be against the Demon King?"

“None,” the wraith answered, the harsh word cutting like frozen steel.

“Gotcha,” Seth said. He closed the door to the Hall of Dread. “When you take your positions, try to avoid my friends.”

“As you command,” all three replied.

Silently as shadows, the wraiths started forward, simultaneously walking and sliding. Seth could not keep pace with their odd, gliding gait, and they soon drifted out of view. When Seth finally reached the stairs to exit the dungeon, he noticed the tall wraith standing guard. No words were exchanged.

Seth found Vanessa and the satyrs on the back porch near Hugo. “We felt the wraiths go by,” Vanessa said.

“Did they seem to be going in the right direction?” Seth asked.

“Looked that way,” Newel replied.

Seth stared out into the yard. A few glimmering fairies bobbed in the darkness. He had a feeling the night was nearly spent. “What if I assembled a huge army of wraiths and creepy things to fight the demons?” Seth mused.

“It would be like trying to fight sharks with seawater,” Vanessa said. “Our best hope lies in walking the path Patton outlined.”

Seth unfolded his letter from Patton and used the flashlight to read about the leprechaun. “The letter says the best time to catch the leprechaun is in the afternoon.”

“You should get some sleep,” Vanessa suggested. “You’ll need your strength. Hugo and I can keep watch.”

Seth did feel weary. “All right.”

The satyrs started improvising beds out of ripped couch cushions. Using the flashlight, Seth went to the garage and retrieved a couple of sleeping bags.

“May I borrow your light?” Vanessa asked when he returned. “While you sleep, I want to forage.”

Seth handed over the flashlight.

“Get some sleep,” she said gently.

Hugo cleared a spot in the rubble. Seth unrolled the sleeping bag, unzipped it part of the way, and burrowed inside. He wished somehow sleep could make all of this go away.

Newel and Doren began to snore magnificently. At first Seth thought they were teasing him, but eventually he realized it was no joke. He tried to tune out the droning duet. For some time he lay there struggling to get comfortable, shifting and turning, striving not to obsess about the future, wondering if sleep would ever come. Eventually his exhaustion overpowered all other variables and he sank into a troubled slumber.

Chapter 18



Flight

Warren, Kendra, and Bracken sat with their backs against the iron wall of the dome, legs stretched out in front of them, feasting on pomegranates. Kendra plucked red arils until she had a small handful, then slapped them into her mouth, chewing lazily. The cool juice inside had a faintly sour aftertaste.

The fairies had once again provided them with an abundance of nuts and fruit. One industrious group of fairies had even gone back and retrieved Warren's sword from the Beckoning Grove. Bracken had heaped praise on them for their efforts, making the fatigued fairies blush with pleasure. After the display, a second team of fairies brought them a rust-cankered dagger, and a third fetched a moldy gauntlet. Bracken toned down his enthusiasm, but accepted the offerings graciously.

When the luminous pond began to churn and bubble, Bracken scrambled to his feet for a better view. Warren and Kendra did likewise.

"Will our help come out of the pond?" Warren asked.

They had expected the promised assistance to enter through the hatch. With the implication that help might arrive through the pond, Kendra had a sudden suspicion who the Fairy Queen might be sending. She had only heard of one being who could travel between fairy shrines.

A sleek, winged form burst out of the water surrounded by luminous spray. The undersized dragon wheeled through the air and landed in front of Bracken, silver-white scales reflecting a faint rainbow sheen.

“Raxtus!” Kendra exclaimed.

The dragon shook his head briskly, expelling water from his burnished snout. “Hello, Kendra,” the dragon replied, panting. “Greetings, Bracken. You look well. And, wait a minute, small world! You’re Warren, the guy who had the punctured lung.” The dragon gave a nervous chuckle. “Glad you found a competent healer. And a barber. Sorry about the whiskers.”

“This is our reinforcements?” Warren asked in concern.

“Think of me as your transportation,” Raxtus said. “You’ll feel less disappointed.”

“We’re very happy to see you,” Bracken said.

The dragon dipped his head respectfully. “It’s been too long. I’m glad you’re out of confinement.”

“You know Kendra and Warren?” Bracken asked.

“We met at Wyrmoost.” Raxtus looked around. “I’ve been here before. The sealed shrine. Is that little door the only way out?”

“I’m afraid so,” Bracken said.

Warren considered the door, then glanced back at Raxtus. “You’re small for a dragon, but not that small.” Kendra tacitly agreed. Raxtus had a body the size of a large horse. Even with his wings fully tucked, it didn’t look like his midsection could fit through the hatchway.

Raxtus sighed. “I’ll figure it out. Once you get really acquainted with humiliation, the dread starts to fade.”

“What humiliation?” Bracken inquired.

“Take your pick,” Raxtus grumbled. “I was referring to my avatar.”

“Your avatar is a unique wonder!” Bracken cried.

“My avatar is a wimpy little fairy boy,” Raxtus corrected.

Kendra stifled a giggle.

“I didn’t have time to learn your whole situation,” Raxtus said. He seemed intent on changing the subject. “The Fairy Queen stressed that haste was paramount. What’s the plan?”

“Our most urgent objective is to flee Living Mirage,” Bracken said. “Then we need to make our way to Finland.”

“Why Finland?” Raxtus asked.

Warren related what they knew concerning the Eternals, including the whereabouts of Roon Osricson.

“Finland is a big place,” Raxtus pointed out.

“I have instructions,” Warren said. “Have you ever heard of Shipbreaker Fjord?”

The dragon stamped his forelegs and flexed his wings. “I adore Shipbreaker Fjord! It’s one of the most scenic waterways on the planet. Towering cliffs, raging tides, deep blue water. The area is magically concealed.”

“I know the place too,” Warren said. “The Sphinx said if we fly northeast from Shipbreaker Fjord, we can’t miss Roon’s hideout. A distracter spell shields his stronghold, but the camouflage should be no match for Kendra.”

“Sounds easy enough,” Raxtus said, swiveling his head to study the hatchway. “What awaits us outside?”

“Evidently our escape remains undetected,” Bracken said. “None of us can say how long that will hold true. We should expect pursuit.”

“Can you carry three of us?” Kendra asked.

Raxtus reared up and unfurled his wings. The dragon seemed much larger with his wings spread wide and his neck craned high. He fanned the area with a few trial flaps. After a moment, he folded his wings and dropped down on all fours. “I might be a runt, but I can carry three people.”

“Are you sure?” Warren challenged. “A lot depends on this. I could stay behind.”

“I can carry you three,” Raxtus pledged. “Maybe not around the world, but I can get you away from this preserve.”

“We’re surrounded by desert,” Warren reminded him. “Together the three of us must weigh around five hundred pounds. Have you carried three people before?”

“I’ve carried an elk,” Raxtus replied. “It had to weigh more than five hundred pounds. Wasn’t easy. Imagine running uphill wearing a backpack crammed with bricks. Not ideal, but doable. With you three as passengers, I’ll lose much of my maneuverability. But I can conceal myself. Unless we get unlucky, this should work.”

“Luck has a way of evaporating when you lean on it,” Warren muttered. “Maybe you should go on without me, lighten the load.”

“You’re determined to be a martyr,” Bracken laughed.

“This needs to succeed,” Warren maintained.

“We’ll escape together,” Kendra said adamantly. “We need each other for what lies ahead.”

“I can do it,” Raxtus asserted. “If dragons depended on pure physics to fly, none of us would do more than hop around. Magic is involved. I’ll find a way. I have my weaknesses, but flying is my forte.”

Warren folded his arms. “If things go bad, promise to drop me.”

“Enough with the negativity!” Raxtus said. “You’re freaking me out!”

“Show a little confidence,” Kendra urged. “This is the dragon who destroyed Navarog!”

Raxtus swiveled his head left and right. “Not too loudly,” the dragon murmured. “He might have a relative.”

“Well done, by the way,” Bracken said in a low voice.

Raxtus swung his head away shyly. “She makes it sound impressive. I snuck up behind him while he was in human form. I’m not a fighter. But I’ll do my best. The Fairy Queen made it clear that the fate of the world depends on our mission. I want to do my part. After all, your current needs don’t require a fighter. What you most need right now is to run away. I know a thing or two about that.”

Bracken patted Raxtus affectionately on the neck. “You’re too humble. I can’t claim to like many dragons, but you’re the cream of the crop.”

“Of course the unicorn likes the fairy dragon,” Raxtus grumbled. “If you want to boost my self-esteem, act scared of me.”

“You could bite our heads off,” Warren remarked. “That’s scary.”

“I couldn’t,” Raxtus sighed.

“You could!” Kendra insisted. “I saw you gobble up Gavin.”

Raxtus showed his impressive teeth. “Physically, yes, I could eat you. Emotionally, no way. Maybe while under hypnosis. How can you consume somebody you just spoke with? I mean, once I’ve had a conversation with someone, that person is no longer food. Some dragons get a big thrill out of talking with their meals, playing cat and mouse. I don’t get the allure. Knowing a creature can converse takes it off my menu.”

“Unless it’s evil and threatens your dad,” Kendra amended.

“Touché,” Raxtus replied.

“We should probably depart,” Bracken said. “We don’t want to lose the initiative.”

“Translation?” Raxtus said glumly. “Time for me to become fairy boy.”

“Wait,” Warren said, fingering the hilt of his sword. “Can’t you take us out the way you came in?”

“I can leap from shrine to shrine by cutting through the Fairy Queen’s realm,” Raxtus explained. “Although her realm connects to all of her shrines, the distance between shrines is much shorter where she resides. It’s a great way to travel. Here’s the problem: When she opens a portal to let anyone into or out of her realm, it leaves her kingdom vulnerable for a time. For some reason, I can slip through without opening a portal. But I can’t carry passengers that way.”

“Do you go to her realm a lot?” Kendra asked, intrigued.

“I never stay there,” Raxtus said. “It would be . . . unhealthy. Emotionally. Psychologically. Look, I’m already not very dragonly. If I lived there, I’d lose all sense of what I am. I’d end up like a child who refused to leave the nest, never amounting to anything. But I love to visit her kingdom. As wonderful and diverse as Earth can be, no beauty quite compares.”

Bracken cleared his throat uncomfortably. “I believe we were getting ready to depart.”

“Right,” Raxtus said. “Do you mind closing your eyes?”

“Not at all,” Bracken said.

Kendra covered her eyes. Even with her hands in the way, she sensed the bright flash.

Several of the fairies in the area tittered. It was hard for Kendra to decide whether they were mocking or flirting. Perhaps a little of both.

“No peeking,” Raxtus said, his voice pitched higher.

The comment tempted her. She slid her fingers apart just enough to see the back of a rather scrawny fairy with shaggy silver hair and an elaborate set of metallic wings fluttering toward the hatchway. The fairy was the largest Kendra had seen, about a foot tall. His head turned as if to glance back, and Kendra closed her fingers before he completed the motion.

“Okay, you can look,” Raxtus called a moment later.

Kendra dropped her hands and opened her eyes. The spindly male fairy stood at the hatchway. His face was impishly handsome, with a sparkle of mischief in his bright eyes.

“Is that you?” Warren asked.

“I could tell Kendra wanted a look,” Raxtus said. “I can’t blame her.” He spread his arms wide and turned around. “What do you think?”

“You’re . . .” Kendra stopped herself.

“Spit it out,” Raxtus said. “I can take it.”

“Adorable,” Kendra finished weakly, hoping he wasn’t too insulted.

“Too big to be a fairy,” Raxtus said. “Too small and much too winged to be a human. And the exact opposite of how any dragon would aspire to be seen.”

“You’re a marvel, Raxtus,” Bracken said kindly. “Truly splendid.”

“The sideshow’s over,” Raxtus said. “Let’s get under way.” He flitted out the hatch and out of sight.

Bracken turned to address the fairies. “I am going to close the hatch to help cover our tracks. If I left it open, others would come and close it shortly. If you would prefer the open air at the price of staying away from the shrine, come out with us.”

Several groups of fairies darted out of the hatchway, followed by a few stragglers. Kendra was surprised to see more fairies opting to remain within the dome than had been trapped inside when they had first arrived.

“So many are staying?” Kendra asked.

“They love their queen,” Bracken said simply. He led the way out of the enclosure. When Kendra and Warren had exited, Bracken gave the door a shove, and it clanged shut.

The sphinx remained sprawled on the ground, tail swishing. She did not condescend to look back at them. The day had grown quite hot. Raxtus had returned to dragon form. Beneath the bright sun, his scales really gleamed.

“Time to fly,” Bracken said.

Raxtus sprang into the air and glided toward them like the world’s most dazzling kite. The dragon snatched Kendra with one claw, Warren with another, and Bracken with a third. Jerking Kendra off the ground, Raxtus

gripped her torso from behind, causing her to tilt forward once airborne. The ground became a blur beneath her dangling feet. Wings beating with the sound of heavy tarps in a windstorm, Raxtus gradually climbed, barely clearing the nearest treetops. The dragon went invisible, creating the illusion that Kendra was soaring through the air on her own.

“You all right?” Warren called.

Raxtus veered left and right, wings flapping furiously. “You’re heavy,” the dragon grunted, “but I’ll make it.” They continued to laboriously gain altitude.

Up ahead, the steep wall of the valley approached, a wide precipice of rock and dirt. Down below, the trees shrank, growing ever more distant. In a clearing, Kendra saw a pair of thickset giants hammering at each other with clubs.

As Raxtus reached the wall of the valley, he began to bank and circle, sometimes flapping his wings, sometimes gliding. They started to rise more swiftly. The air grew a little cooler, and the ground became shockingly distant. Soon Kendra had a view of the entire long valley, including the river, the woodlands, numerous cultivated fields, and the stepped pyramids with their garden terraces. Beyond the tops of the valley walls, Kendra beheld the tawny expanse of the surrounding desert.

A shrieking cry of tremendous volume shattered the sense of airborne solitude. Kendra twisted toward the source of the sound and saw the roc rising toward them, at least the size of an airliner.

“The roc spotted us,” Warren warned.

“They have amazing eyesight,” Raxtus said, wings working to lift them higher. They curved toward the roc, giving everyone a better view of the gargantuan wingspan.

“Isn’t it time to run?” Kendra cried nervously.

“We need altitude,” Raxtus said. “With all of this weight, my best maneuvers will involve diving.”

The roc wheeled away from them, rising to a higher elevation with alarming ease. When the great raptor turned back toward them, it approached from above, gaining terrific speed.

Raxtus slipped into a straight, level glide, moving perpendicular to the path of the oncoming predator. As the roc closed, talons large enough to crush a school bus opened wide.

At the last possible moment, Raxtus turned toward the roc, tucked his wings, and dove. The rush of wind brought tears to Kendra's eyes. She could feel the enormous roc swoop past above them, outstretched talons grasping at empty air. The great bird let out an earsplitting shriek.

Raxtus pulled out of his dive, using the momentum to regain some altitude. Above, the roc circled around for another attack.

"Make yourself visible!" Bracken yelled. "Simurghs prefer light to darkness. As she approaches, roll so she can see me."

Raxtus became visible, scales resplendent in the sunlight. "Touch me, Kendra," Raxtus said. "I could use the extra energy."

Kendra laid a hand against the claw around her torso, and Raxtus began to shine with his own light. They seemed to gain altitude faster.

The roc closed again, wings shortened for greater speed. As the vast bird drew near, Raxtus banked, tilting his underside up to better display his passengers.

"Mighty simurgh," Bracken called in a magically magnified shout. "Like you, I am numbered among the Children of the Dawn. Lend us your skies, windkeeper, for our need is dire."

The roc swerved away, apparently giving up the pursuit. Raxtus righted himself and resumed climbing. The roc let out a screech that seemed less of a challenge than the previous cries.

"Good thing," Raxtus gasped. "I didn't want to frighten anyone, but that would have been only a matter of time."

"The simurgh here is well fed," Bracken said. "So are her young. She would willfully devour a unicorn only in a time of famine."

"Don't celebrate yet," Warren warned, pointing toward the largest ziggurat. "We have company."

"I see them," Raxtus said. "Just clearing the trees."

"Three harpies," Bracken reported. "The roc drew the attention of our enemies. How far to the edge of the preserve?"

"Too far," Raxtus puffed. "We need more altitude. They'll catch up and I'll have to evade."

At first, Kendra didn't see what the others meant. Then she spotted the three winged specks rising toward them. "How big are harpies?"

“Not huge,” Warren said. “Our size. Horribly fierce, though. Picture winged hags.”

“Can’t you take them, Raxtus?” Kendra asked.

The dragon spoke in panting bursts. “Unburdened? Fresh? In an emergency? Yeah, I could probably handle them. Right now? I’ll do my best.”

As Raxtus circled higher, the harpies closed, becoming more distinct. The wiry women had wings instead of arms, and talons instead of legs. Their long hair fluttered wildly in the wind.

“Here we go,” Raxtus said, veering away from the fertile valley toward the arid monotony of the desert. Though his wings flapped vigorously, they no longer rose as rapidly. “I hate to leave that updraft. If we’d had another couple of minutes to focus on climbing, I could have outrun them.”

“Should all else fail,” Bracken said, “swoop low and set us down.”

“Or drop me now,” Warren said.

Kendra looked down. They were thousands of feet above the desert. “Are you crazy?”

“If it means the rest of you make it out, it would be worth it.”

“I won’t drop anyone,” Raxtus said.

“These harpies are only engaged in reconnaissance,” Bracken said. “I see no other pursuers. If our enemies knew who we were, they would be throwing everything they have at us. It could be much worse.”

“Can the harpies leave the preserve?” Kendra asked.

“Not over the wall,” Bracken said.

“Unless,” Raxtus gasped, “they don’t belong . . . to Living Mirage.”

“They belong here,” Bracken assured them. “The Sphinx keeps Living Mirage locked down tightly. He wouldn’t want any creatures coming and going.”

“Won’t the wall stop Raxtus from leaving?” Kendra asked.

“Nothing can enter over the wall,” Raxtus wheezed. “But most of the defenses . . . are focused outward. I don’t belong here. Finding a way in . . . is the trick. After that, I’m free to leave. Same with you three.”

“They’re gaining,” Warren said.

Kendra was facing forward, so she really had to contort herself to look back at their pursuers. Two of the harpies had climbed higher than them.

One was flying lower. Their gaunt, greenish faces glared with determination.

“Don’t let them scratch you,” Warren cautioned. “I’d rather get bitten by plague rats.”

Kendra held her palm against Raxtus, hoping her energy would give him a boost. He had not reverted to his invisible state.

“The one below is trying to cut off a dive,” Bracken warned.

“I see her,” Raxtus said, sounding flustered. The two above them were quickly gaining. One bared her pointy teeth.

Warren spoke up. “If you drop me from here, could you catch me?”

“Probably,” Raxtus said.

“Good enough,” Warren said. “Wait for it. Wait for it.”

“I’m not going to—”

“Don’t argue!” Warren snapped. “Now!”

Raxtus let go of him, then curved into a steep dive. Kendra craned her neck to watch Warren. The harpy below was on a course to intercept him. Plummeting through the air, Warren drew his sword. The harpy tried to swerve away, but with a brutal downward stroke, Warren hacked off a wing as he plunged past her. The momentum from the blow made him spin awkwardly as he fell. The caterwauling harpy went into a spiraling plunge of her own. Shedding feathers, the severed wing descended more slowly.

The desert rushed up toward Kendra with alarming haste. Fully committed to a whistling dive, Raxtus neared Warren, who had righted himself and was now falling spread-eagle like a skydiver. The dragon grabbed Warren and then tried to pull out of the hurtling dive. G-forces tugged dizzily as Raxtus wrenched them back toward level flight. Blackness encroached around the edges of Kendra’s vision, and then they were skimming along the ground with her feet inches above parched dirt.

Raxtus slowed, dropping them gently. Beating his wings, the dragon gained altitude and veered off to one side, becoming invisible.

“I take it all back,” Bracken said. “I’m glad you have the sword.”

“Are you all right?” Kendra asked.

Warren grinned. “I’m surprised to be alive. That would have been a very big belly flop into a very dry pool. Here they come!”

The two remaining harpies were soaring toward them. One was looking over her shoulder, an extended finger tracing the flight path Raxtus had taken. Either she could see him or else she was estimating. The other harpy increased her speed, coming right at them.

“Care to lend me your sword?” Bracken asked.

“I’ve got her,” Warren said, holding the weapon ready. “Watch Kendra.”

Bracken took her hand and pulled Kendra back. The harpy who had been tracking Raxtus swerved to one side, wings flailing, talons raised, and was suddenly jostled roughly from the sky. Raxtus flickered into view after the impact. The headless harpy flopped to the arid ground.

The final harpy swooped at Warren, shrieking with rage. He sidestepped and slashed viciously, chopping off a claw, but the other claw raked him, and he spun to the dirt.

Howling furiously, the maimed harpy hopped twice on her remaining leg, then leapt back into the air, flapping her wings and coming toward Bracken and Kendra. Bracken tossed a rock at her, which exploded with a blinding flash. The harpy closed her eyes but kept coming, her remaining claw outstretched. Bracken drew his little knife.

Just before the harpy reached them, she dropped hard to the dirt, as if an unseen piano had landed on her. Raxtus became visible again, standing on top of her, stamping and raking with razor claws. Feathers fluffed into the air. Kendra averted her eyes.

Warren staggered over to them, hand clutching his shoulder, a sheen of sweat glistening on his haggard face. “Rather . . . be mauled . . . by a pack of rabid dogs.”

Raxtus stopped shredding his prey and flew off to inspect the one-winged harpy.

“Let me see,” Bracken said.

Warren removed his hand. Ugly stripes had been slashed into his shoulder, the edges yellow, the blood almost black. Warren bit his lower lip. “I can feel the poison spreading.”

Bracken placed his palm on the wounds. Flinching slightly, Warren gasped in pain. Bracken bowed his head and closed his eyes. His nose and lips twitched. His hand gave off a pearly glow. When he removed his hand,

the edges of the wounds were no longer yellow, and the blood looked less dark.

“Wow, that felt hot,” Warren growled through clenched teeth.

“I burnt away most of the poison,” Bracken said, swaying. He shook his head as if to clear it. “Once upon a time that would have been simple.”

Raxtus came gliding back to them. “No more harpies,” the dragon announced proudly, landing nearby.

“Good work,” Warren said. “How do they taste?”

“Terrible!” Raxtus exclaimed, baring his teeth in disgust. “I bit the head off one of them. I couldn’t spit it out fast enough!”

“Warren got hurt,” Kendra said.

“I tried to hurry,” Raxtus apologized. “They were so intent on you three, it made them easy prey.”

“You did great,” Warren said. “Those harpies barely knew what hit them. I’m impressed.”

“Want to try to heal him?” Kendra asked the dragon.

Raxtus chuckled nervously. “Bracken might be more the expert.”

“I’ve done what I can,” Bracken said. “With my horns gone, I’m a ghost of my former self. Trace amounts of toxin remain. I can’t close the wounds any more than I have.”

“I can try,” Raxtus said uncertainly. “Kendra, it might help if you keep a hand on me.”

The dragon brought his chrome-bright head close to Warren, and Kendra rested her hand against the gleaming neck. Raxtus glowed brighter. Lowering his nostrils to the wound, the dragon exhaled a glittering, multihued spray. The wounds closed, leaving three angry welts.

“Well done,” Bracken said.

“It helped to have Kendra steadying me,” Raxtus replied.

Warren rubbed his shoulder. “Much better.”

Bracken stepped forward and felt his forehead. “You still have trace amounts of harpy venom in your system. We need to get you to a healer.”

“How long do I have?” Warren asked solemnly.

Bracken frowned. “Maybe twelve hours. Maybe fourteen.”

“What?” Kendra cried.

“He would have been dead within minutes without our intervention,” Bracken said. “If I had a horn, curing him would be simple. But any decent healer should have the required antivenin.”

Warren rubbed Kendra’s shoulder affectionately. “I told you, it’s better to get chewed up by plague rats. Harpies are foul.”

“Try biting off one of their heads!” Raxtus griped, shuddering. “Sorry, I know, at least I didn’t get poisoned.”

“Do you know any healers in the area?” Bracken asked.

“The closest I know of would be in Istanbul,” Warren apologized.

“Think you can carry us to Istanbul?” Bracken asked.

“I can make it,” Raxtus said stoutly. “Might help if the attacks would slow down.”

“Let’s get back in the sky,” Bracken urged.

Raxtus backed up, sprang into the air, snatched Kendra, Warren, and Bracken, and started climbing. Several minutes later, still gaining altitude, they passed over the border of Living Mirage with no signs of pursuit.

Chapter 19



Cormac

The sky had threatened rain all morning, but not a drop had fallen yet. Slow, gray clouds currently obscured the sun. Seth checked his watch. Almost 1:30. He hoped the leprechaun would make an appearance soon. Once the sun went down, the centaurs would certainly be after them.

Seth knelt behind a bush between Newel and Doren, watching a sack that hung from a limb over a sandy patch beside a stream. Not far upstream, the water tumbled over a series of ledges, sending up a fine mist around the rocky base of the final drop. According to Patton, the banks near the base of the waterfall were frequented by a leprechaun named Cormac.

“Do you really think this will work?” Doren asked.

Seth flicked the letter in his hand. “Patton seems convinced.”

“Patton doesn’t have a hefty sum of gold coins at risk,” Newel grumbled. “I wish this design had been tested.”

“No you don’t,” Seth said. “Patton made it clear in his letter that the same trap never works twice on the same leprechaun. He has caught Cormac five times with five different traps, and he feels like this new trap will do it again.”

“If you keep talking, the leprechaun will never come,” Vanessa hissed, making Seth jump. Since hazardous creatures were now free to wander Fablehaven, she and Hugo had been scouting the area. Seth still didn’t see her, but apparently her prowling had brought her within earshot.

“Good point,” Seth whispered back.

He surveyed the trap in silence. An irregular trail of gold coins led from the stream to a wide patch of sand ringed by rocks. Along the trail, a few of the coins were half-buried, a couple completely buried. In select places they had scattered multiple coins within a small area. Patton had explained that leprechauns couldn’t resist unattended gold. Finding lost and hidden treasure was how the little men built their wealth.

In theory, the trail of gold would lead Cormac to a point where he would notice the hanging sack, which contained seventy gold coins. A small flask of whiskey, provided by the satyrs, awaited atop the coins inside the sack.

Minutes trickled by. Without the stimulation of conversation, Seth began to nod drowsily. He had not slept soundly the night before, and had awakened early. He was slipping into a colorful dream involving pie and llamas and waterslides when Doren elbowed him in the ribs.

Seth jerked his head up. A little man in a red frock coat was pulling a half-buried coin out of the sand. He stood not much taller than Seth’s knees, wore an outdated hat, and had a bristly auburn beard. The leprechaun wiped the coin on his coat, sniffed it, and tucked it away into a pocket.

Cocking his head back, the little man studied the sack above him. “Foolish place to hide a treasure,” he said in an Irish brogue. He spoke loudly, as if to a slightly deaf companion, although he appeared to be alone. “Might be the poor sap hoped to keep it out of the reach of animals. Might be he had no time to stash his savings properly. The fellow might be so rich he can afford to be careless. Might simply be an idiot—the world boasts an endless supply. Then again, might be a trap.”

Glancing left and right, the leprechaun rubbed his knobby nose. Fortunately, Seth and the satyrs had chosen a thick bush a good distance from the bag.

Creeping forward, the leprechaun recovered another coin from under the sand. The little man flicked the coin, held it to his ear, then addressed it

fondly. “Tell me about your brothers. Do you hail from a large family?” He squinted up at the sack. “I expect you do.”

The coin disappeared into a pocket. The leprechaun stood with his hands on his hips, considering the bulging sack and the tree from which it hung. In his letter, Patton had explained that leprechauns tended to be clever, but that gold and whiskey had been known to cloud their judgment. Seth watched intently.

“Might be a trap,” the little man repeated, peering furtively over his shoulder. “If so, what if old Cormac swipes the bait and leaves the rest? I see no evidence of sophistication. History has shown that few have the wits to get the better of me. That blighter Patton Burgess has been dead and buried for years. And what if it isn’t a trap? I would be the prince of fools to leave a rich haul like this to another.” He rubbed his hands together. “Very well, no use debating once my mind is made up.”

The leprechaun scampered to the base of the tree and scaled the trunk. Newel and Doren crouched lower, and Seth mimicked them. The little man walked out along the limb to the spot where the bag was tied. There he paused, surveying the vicinity one last time. Satisfied, he shinnied down the cord to the mouth of the sack, loosened it, and squirmed inside.

The instant the leprechaun disappeared from view, Newel and Doren were up and running. Despite their haste, Seth didn’t hear a single leaf rustle. He did hear the leprechaun talking to himself inside the sack. “Well, well, fancy meeting you here. Don’t mind if I do.”

Seth found it hard to hold still, but the satyrs had warned that the leprechaun would hear him if he tried to stay with them. He watched as Newel and Doren stepped softly onto the sandy patch beneath the sack. Newel used a knife lashed to a pole to reach up and sever the cord. Doren caught the sack and held the mouth closed.

Now that they had the leprechaun, silence no longer mattered. Heedless of the leaves he rustled or the twigs he snapped, Seth dashed to join the satyrs. Now all they had to do was prevent the leprechaun from outsmarting them. Once he was caught, as long as they kept hold of him, Cormac’s magic was useless. Patton had provided an extensive list of warnings and advice.

Doren opened the mouth of the sack just enough for Seth to reach in. Seizing the little man by his feet, Seth pulled him out. The leprechaun clung

to the flask of whiskey.

“Unhand me!” the leprechaun demanded, upside down, squirming doggedly.

“Hi, Cormac,” Seth said. “Patton sends his regards.” The letter had promised this would quickly get the leprechaun’s attention.

The little man stopped struggling. He looked stricken. “Patton, you say? He gave you my name? Who are you? What is this?”

Seth set the leprechaun on the sand, but kept hold of one arm. The little man used his free arm to hug the whiskey flask.

“The bag’s empty!” Doren said, feeling inside.

Cormac scowled up at him. “Of course it’s empty. It was empty when I found it.”

“It was full of gold coins,” Newel corrected.

The little man glowered. “I may be a clumsy dullard for getting caught, but I’m not so slow that I would miss the chance to pocket a coin or two.”

“Or seventy!” Doren said. “And thirty along the bank of the stream. How many pockets do you have?”

The leprechaun permitted himself a cunning smile. “More than a trio of gangly criminals might expect.”

“Criminals?” Seth challenged. “We weren’t the ones stealing.”

“Who was stealing?” Cormac protested in a hurt tone. “I find a coin in the woods, I pick it up. Any honest chap would do the same. There were no potential owners in sight. I was salvaging.”

“This could have been our camp,” Newel argued. “We could have been off hunting.”

“Aye, but you weren’t off hunting,” the leprechaun corrected with a wink. “You were skulking in the bushes, professional villains hoping to entrap an honest citizen of Fablehaven and extort his wealth. You’re con men. You’re extortionists. I demand to be released at once.”

“Sorry, Cormac,” Seth said. “We need you to take us to your lair and give us some items Patton left with you.”

The leprechaun huffed and shook his head. “I’m not in the habit of storing items for friends, let alone archenemies. Do I look like a warehouse foreman to you? Do I look like a cargo handler? It’s like I said, you’re extortionists, and I won’t stand for it.”

“Call us whatever names you like,” Seth said. “We caught you, and you’re going to do what we want.”

“You can start by returning our coins,” Newel pressed.

Cormac gave him a blank stare. “Coins, you say? My memory is faulty of late. I’m sorry, lads. I’m afraid you apprehended the wrong fellow. I am custodian of no items, I’ve seen no gold, and I have no lair. I’m a humble cobbler by trade. I could repair a shoe or two, I suppose, if you require recompense to spare my life.”

“We don’t have a lot of time,” Seth said. “Maybe we should just take your coat and call it even.”

Cormac glared, lips pressed shut, cheeks reddening. Seth could feel him trembling. “Very well,” he said cordially. “I can see you’re no novices. What would you have me fetch for you?”

“You won’t fetch anything,” Seth said. “You’ll take us to your lair, give us what we want, then escort us back out. I’m not taking my hands off of you until all of that happens.”

Cormac tugged at his beard with his free hand. “Patton Burgess,” he spat like profanity. “Will the scoundrel ever quit haunting me? Even from beyond the grave he reaches out to take what’s mine.”

“No,” Seth said. “We just want the items Patton left with you.”

“And our gold back,” Newel reminded everyone.

The leprechaun hung his head, his body limp. Then he jerked hard against Seth, who maintained a firm hold of his arm. Cormac bit Seth’s hand, but Seth held tight and flicked the leprechaun sharply on his ear. The little man howled as if he had lost a limb.

“Enough,” Seth said angrily, shifting his grip to hold the leprechaun’s legs. “Take his coat off.”

“With pleasure,” Newel said, going to work on the tiny gold buttons.

Doren snatched away the whiskey flask.

“No!” Cormac bellowed. “Please! I submit! You’ll have the bell, the call, and the music box.”

Newel kept working at the buttons, nimble fingers moving swiftly.

“And I’ll return your gold!” the leprechaun promised glumly. “No more trouble.”

“That’s enough, Newel,” Seth said. The satyr stopped unbuttoning the coat. Seth held up Cormac so they could stare eye to eye. “Any other trick, any other attempt to escape, the coat comes off, no questions asked. Then we’ll shave your whiskers. And then I might go ahead and use you as a fishing lure. Don’t test me. I’ve had a really bad week.”

For the first time, the leprechaun seemed to stop acting. “You’ll have no more trouble out of me, lad. You can’t blame an old shyster for working a few angles? Tell me your name.”

“Seth Sorenson.”

“Well, Seth, for the first time since Patton Burgess, I seem to have met my match. I have not formally introduced myself. The name is Cormac.”

“We’re not doing this for fun,” Seth said. “We really need those items. We don’t mean to harass you.”

“Which way to your lair?” Doren asked.

“Behind the waterfall,” Cormac said.

“That one?” Newel asked, pointing upstream. “We’ve checked that waterfall for caves!”

The leprechaun gave him an exhausted stare.

“Right,” Newel backpedaled. “Magic.”

Seth carried the leprechaun upstream to where a curtain of water spilled over a twelve-foot ledge. Cormac tugged Seth’s sleeve. “This is the tricky part, youngster. I need my magic to open the way, but your keeping hold of me inhibits my powers. Would you consent to let me go momentarily? I’ll give you my word as a leprechaun not to slip away.”

“Patton warned me that your promises mean nothing,” Seth said. “And I warned you not to try any more tricks. I’ll hold you by your beard. Patton said that will free you to open your lair without enabling you to use magic against me.” Seth set the little man down on a rock, pinching his chin whiskers between thumb and forefinger.

The leprechaun snapped his fingers and the waterfall stopped flowing. A tunnel, square with rounded corners, appeared in the rock face behind.

Seth picked up the leprechaun and pulled out a flashlight. Treading carefully over loose rocks, he ducked into the tunnel. The low ceiling forced him to walk in a crouch. Newel and Doren followed.

The earthy corridor reeked of pipe smoke. Large, uncut emeralds lay scattered on the floor and embedded in the walls.

“Look at those stones,” Newel said. “I know a jeweler who could make them sparkle.”

“Who, Benley?” Doren asked.

“No, Sarrok, the troll. No one at Fablehaven has a keener eye or a steadier hand.” Newel crouched to study a dull emerald the size of a new bar of soap.

“The instructions warned us to touch nothing in here,” Seth reminded them. “We must only take what Cormac gives us.”

“Waste of resources,” Newel grumbled.

The tunnel broadened into a rounded room with several wooden doors. Casks and barrels were stacked against one wall. A low table sat beside a still pool of water in the center of the room.

“The items,” Seth prompted.

“Are you sure you wouldn’t rather have a crock of gold?” Cormac asked. “Much more traditional.”

“We want the items Patton left with you,” Seth said. “The whistle, the bell, and the music box. And Newel and Doren want their gold back.”

Cormac brushed a finger along the side of his nose and gave the satyrs a wily glance. “Fauns have no business consorting with human youths,” the leprechaun scolded. “Tell you what—free me from the boy, and I have a crock of gold for each of you!”

“Take off the coat,” Seth ordered.

Newel hesitated. After Doren nudged him, he started unbuttoning the frock coat.

Cormac twisted and hollered. “Side with the humans, will you? This won’t be forgotten! Mercy! Leave me my coat!”

“No,” Seth said. “You had fair warning.”

Newel tugged off the coat. The leprechaun was left pouting in a dark yellow shirt with a patterned vest.

“You’ll get it back if you cooperate,” Seth said. “Next step is we shave your beard.”

“You’ve bedeviled me enough!” Cormac spluttered. “Set me down by that door.” He pointed at the one he meant.

Keeping hold of his beard, Seth placed the leprechaun beside the door. Cormac knocked three times and snapped.

“Is that all?” Seth asked.

“Open it,” the leprechaun said.

Seth picked up Cormac and opened the door, revealing a closet cluttered mostly with empty bottles.

“Close it,” Cormac instructed. “Then open it again.”

Seth complied. When he reopened the door, the closet was gone. Instead he found himself looking down a long tunnel.

“One more time,” Cormac sighed.

Seth closed the door again, then opened it to reveal a large room full of shelves, crates, and chests. Sundry treasures crowded the shelves, including fine porcelain figures, strands of pearls, enameled urns, ivory carvings, jeweled goblets, and an extensive collection of snuffboxes. Old paintings hung on the walls in gilded frames. Three heavily ornamented suits of plate mail stood together in a corner beside a rack of halberds.

“Where are Patton’s items?” Seth asked.

“The case on the bottom shelf,” Cormac said with a gesture. “Help yourself.”

Keeping a hand on Cormac, Seth crouched and pulled the wooden case from the shelf. Unfastening the catches, he opened the case to reveal a handbell, a music box, and a slender whistle, each housed in a velvet-lined compartment contoured to match its respective shape. Satisfied, he closed the case and exited the room.

“Success?” Doren asked.

“Looks like it,” Seth replied. He gave Cormac a squeeze. “If you cheated us, we’ll be back.”

“I never lie when I deliver on a captor’s request,” Cormac said. “That’s what keeps my kind alive. Those are the items Patton left with me.”

Seth pointed at the satyrs. “Return their gold and we’ll leave you alone.”

“I brought the sack,” Doren said, shaking it open.

“I’ll need my coat back,” Cormac said. “The coins are inside.”

“I couldn’t find any,” Newel said, handing the dapper coat back to the leprechaun.

Raising his eyebrows, Cormac slipped his arms into the sleeves. “Hold me by my feet and shake me over the sack.”

Seth turned the leprechaun upside down and began bobbing him up and down above the open mouth of the bag. Cormac’s deft little hands reached into the coat, and a cascade of gold coins began to pour into the sack with a musical shimmer of clinking. The cascade eventually slowed, a few final stragglers plunking onto the rest.

“Feels about right,” Doren verified, hefting the sack.

“Tell you what,” Newel said, extending the flask to the leprechaun. “Keep the whiskey.”

Cormac brightened. “That is right neighborly of you.” He accepted the flask. “I’m sure you three can find your way out.”

“You need to escort us out,” Seth said. “Patton warned us. Then we’ll quit bothering you.”

“Fine, let’s get on with it,” the leprechaun grouched.

Seth went down the corridor toward the waterfall. At the end they reached a blank wall. Seth held Cormac’s beard, the leprechaun snapped his fingers, and the wall folded open to reveal a light rainfall.

Seth stepped out and hurried to the side of the streambed. Newel and Doren paused at the mouth of the tunnel.

“What’s the holdup?” Seth asked.

Newel eyed the sky. “This rain is going to mess up my hair.”

“Your hair?” Seth cried incredulously.

“He wants to look good for Vanessa,” Doren explained.

“So do you!” Newel shot back.

“I could provide a proven love tonic for a hundred gold coins,” Cormac offered.

“You guys are starting to act like Verl,” Seth said.

Newel and Doren shared a disgusted glance, then hurried out into the rain. Newel raked his fingers through his hair, messing it up. Doren rubbed some mud onto his arms.

“Are we finished?” Cormac asked, exasperated.

“Yes,” Seth said, setting him down.

The leprechaun sprang like a toad to the mouth of the tunnel and snapped his fingers. The waterfall began to spill over the ledge again,

masking the disappearance of the tunnel.

A sudden flurry of hoofbeats made Seth whirl. Six centaurs cantered toward them, led by Cloudwing and Stormbrow. Cloudwing held an arrow nocked to his bowstring. Stormbrow clutched a huge mace. The other centaurs carried weapons as well.

The centaurs had evidently been waiting for them. Where were Vanessa and Hugo? Seth had a sword at his waist and a shield over his shoulder, but he did not want to test them against centaurs. Cloudwing had given them until nightfall. Hopefully he could talk his way out of this.

“You lied to us,” Cloudwing accused without introduction. “You are in league with darkness.”

“Did you have trouble trying to claim our property?” Seth asked innocently.

“You have unleashed unnatural fiends on centaur lands,” Cloudwing said. “Surrender as our prisoner or die. Same goes for your mangy entourage.” His tone called for immediate compliance.

“You gave us until sundown,” Seth protested. “Are centaurs liars?”

“We gave you until sundown to depart,” Cloudwing said sternly, “not to make preparations for war against us. Your aggression nullifies our concession.”

“My aggression?” Seth blurted, getting mad. “Did I send wraiths against you? Or did you run into wraiths when you tried to steal our property?”

“The locations in question were abandoned,” Cloudwing said. “You loosed evil on territory under our protection. We will not risk the possibility of more mischief.”

“But you are risking the possibility of more mischief,” Seth said, unsure what to do besides bluff. “Do you really want to deal with an undead army?”

“We do not,” Cloudwing said. “Which explains our presence. As our prisoner, you will order the wraiths to depart. At the first sign of undead aggression, you will die.”

“Enough empty words,” Stormbrow snarled. “Fleetfoot, Edgerunner, seize them.”

Two of the centaurs began to trot forward. Cloudwing slapped his neck as if bitten by an insect. He swayed unsteadily, dropped his bow, and flopped to the ground.

“Hold,” Stormbrow ordered, raising a fist, eyes scanning the surrounding trees. A centaur with bluish fur stooped to examine Cloudwing, while the other three turned defensively to survey the area. The light rain pattered down, making leaves wag. Stormbrow flinched and cursed. Inspecting his meaty shoulder, he plucked out a small, feathered dart. He held out his mace in the direction the dart had come from. All eyes raised to Vanessa, well concealed high in a tree, reloading her blowgun.

“Ambush!” Stormbrow roared, forelegs buckling. Mud splattered as he slapped the ground.

Hugo came charging out from among the trees. Three of the centaurs wheeled to face him, brandishing their weapons. The bluish centaur threw a javelin at Vanessa, who dropped gracefully to a lower branch to evade the projectile. Producing his sling, Newel crouched, grabbed a smooth stone, and sent it hissing into the back of a blond centaur’s skull, making him stagger.

Two of the centaurs galloped to meet Hugo’s charge, one holding a spear as if jousting, the other brandishing a longsword. Hugo batted the spearhead aside and then lunged forward, his extended arms brutally clotheslining the oncoming centaurs. The longsword ended up buried in the top of the golem’s shoulder. Hugo pulled the weapon free and tossed it aside.

While the bluish centaur prepared to hurl a second javelin, a blowdart lodged in his chest, dropping him within seconds. The centaur Newel had tagged with the stone fixed his eyes on Seth and charged, holding aloft a double-bitted battle-ax. Doren launched an arrow, but, turning his ax like a shield, the centaur deflected the shot.

Dropping the case with Patton’s items, Seth drew his sword and held up his shield. Hugo was coming his way, but was not close enough to stop the centaur. Vanessa was reloading. Newel grasped for another rock. Doren reached for a second arrow.

There was no time. Seth would face this charge alone.

Bending his knees, Seth angled his shield and held his sword high, hoping the centaur would believe he meant to meet the charge head-on. As

the furious centaur bore down on him, Seth dove and rolled. The ax swished through the air above him.

The centaur turned to come at him again, but was suddenly moving sluggishly. Seth saw the small, feathered dart protruding from his cheek. A moment later, the golden-haired centaur collapsed.

Vanessa used another pair of darts to silence the centaurs Hugo had injured. Descending from the tree, she ordered the golem to keep watch. Then she approached Seth. "Are you all right?"

"Better now," Seth replied. "Those darts really knocked them out."

"You know how I love putting people to sleep," Vanessa said. "While foraging last night, I came across a sleeping toxin Tanu derived from Glommus, the dragon I killed at Wyrmoost. It's the most potent I've ever encountered."

"You slew a dragon?" Newel said in awe.

"What a woman," Doren mouthed.

"You got Patton's items?" Vanessa asked.

"Yes," Seth said, picking up the case and brushing it off.

"Excellent," Vanessa said. "We need to get away from Fablehaven. We bested those centaurs thanks to surprise. Sorry to use you as bait, by the way. Once they had tracked you to the leprechaun's cave, it seemed the most prudent strategy."

"It worked," Seth approved. "How long will these jerks sleep?"

Vanessa walked over to Cloudwing and prodded him with her toe. "It was a small dose, and they are powerful creatures. Still, they should be out at least a day. The substance Tanu derived is truly amazing. Our problem is that other centaurs undoubtedly knew of this mission and will come snooping. Next time the centaurs will attack us in much greater numbers."

"But we'll be gone," Doren said.

"That's the hope." Vanessa knelt beside Cloudwing, opened her mouth, and latched on to his neck. After holding the pose for a few seconds, she pulled back, wiping her lips.

"Are you going to control him?" Seth asked.

"In a minute." One by one, she bit the other centaurs. "The penalty for claiming six will be the same as claiming one. You never know when a muscle-bound brute might come in handy."

Vanessa stretched out on the rain-dampened ground and closed her eyes. Cloudwing stirred and then rose to his feet. Newel and Doren scampered away several paces.

“Wow,” Cloudwing said, flexing his arms, biceps clenching into swollen mounds. “I’ve never inhabited a centaur before.” Cloudwing reared, lashing the air with his front hooves. “I could get used to this.”

“Don’t we need to hurry?” Seth reminded her.

“Right,” Vanessa said through Cloudwing. “Drape my body over the back of the centaur. I’ll need someone to ride with me and steady me.”

Newel and Doren immediately raised their hands.

“I’ll keep you steady,” Doren assured her.

“I could lash you in place,” Newel said, taking a length of rope from his pack.

Stooping, Cloudwing retrieved his bow. “Newel, I like the idea of using rope.” Cloudwing raised his voice. “Hugo! Come! We must depart.”

Hugo placed Vanessa’s unconscious body on the centaur, and Newel bound her to the back of the human torso as well as to the horse. “I’ll ride with you to be certain,” the satyr added, attempting a casual air.

Hugo picked up Seth and Doren. Seth looked down at the five sleeping centaurs. “I wish we had saddles,” he said. “I’d love for them to wake up wearing saddles.”

Newel and Doren cackled.

“We should give them embarrassing tattoos!” Doren cried. “Maybe kittens. Or mustaches!”

“Cut off their tails,” Newel suggested.

“Trust me, guys,” Cloudwing said, not even cracking a smile, “they’ll be mad enough.”

“I think Vanessa is becoming a centaur,” Doren laughed.

“Their sense of humor is rubbing off on her,” Newel teased.

“I’m simply aware that by biting them, I’ve made myself their mortal enemy. In the eyes of all centaurs, I signed my death warrant.”

“Way to bring a joke to a screeching halt,” Newel said.

“We don’t have time for merriment,” Cloudwing said. “I’ll run ahead. Hugo, keep up as best you can. We’ll meet at the garage.” Cloudwing broke into a furious gallop. Hugo followed with his long, loping gait.



Roona

Kendra stared down at the mouth of Shipbreaker Fjord, shivering despite the heavy coat she had picked up before leaving Istanbul. Turbulent water gushed into the fjord through a foamy stretch of tidal rapids, complete with a number of violent whirlpools. Beyond the rapids, snow-clad cliffs bordered the pristine inlet.

“Didn’t I tell you it was amazing?” Raxtus commented.

“It’s beautiful,” Kendra agreed, teeth chattering.

“She’s cold,” Bracken said. “We should have foraged for better winter gear.”

“You did great,” Kendra insisted. “I’m all bundled. We already wasted enough time trying to keep me warm.”

“I’ll find a ledge where we can land,” Raxtus said.

The sun was high and bright, the temperature above freezing, but the wind of their flight had gradually siphoned away Kendra’s warmth no matter how she positioned her stocking cap or scarf. “I don’t want to hold us up,” Kendra said.

“We could all use a quick break,” Bracken insisted.

Raxtus soared into the gorge and alighted on a broad ledge halfway up a cliff. Large enough to support several trees, the ledge also currently benefitted from direct sunlight. Icy patches of snow survived only in the shade of the trees.

Taking off her gloves, Kendra stamped around, rubbing her hands together vigorously. The smell of the sea wafted up to her, cool and fresh with a salty tang. She enjoyed the stunning vista of deep blue water overshadowed by towering escarpments, although she stayed a couple of paces back from the edge.

“Shall I build a fire?” Bracken asked.

“No, I’m warming up,” Kendra replied.

Bracken wore Warren’s sword over his shoulder. By the time they had found the healer in Istanbul, Warren had been feverish. Warren had insisted they leave him behind rather than await his recovery. Given their urgent need to warn Roon Osricson, they had reluctantly accepted his demand. Bracken had left Warren with a communicator. Word had come while they were resting on a hilltop in Latvia that Warren was making a steady recovery.

Bracken had offered to spare Kendra from danger by having her stay behind with Warren. Although Raxtus assured her he could often see through distracter spells, Kendra knew they might need her to find Roon’s hidden fortress. Besides, even if she had no pivotal role to play, Kendra felt she needed to help. Perilous or not, too much depended on protecting the Eternals to relax on the sidelines.

“What do you think we’ll find there?” Kendra asked.

“Let’s just hope we beat our enemies to Roon’s stronghold,” Bracken said, twisting and stretching. “If not, we’ll have to assess the situation on the spot. I wish the Sphinx would get in touch and give us a better idea of what we’re dealing with.”

“You keep trying to contact him?” Kendra asked.

“I don’t think he’s retrieved the communicator from my cell yet. I’m sure he’s trying to juggle a number of concerns. For all we know, Graulas may have already imprisoned him.”

“I never thought any part of me would be rooting for the Sphinx,” Kendra said.

“A calamity like the opening of Zzyzx can forge peculiar alliances.” Bracken walked over to Raxtus and patted the dragon on the neck. “How are you holding up?”

“You don’t need to keep asking. I’m fine. The two of you are light. I could go like this for days.”

Bracken nodded thoughtfully. “You fought valiantly against the harpies. How would you feel about joining another fight, if it comes to that?”

Raxtus scratched at the ground. “I’ve always quietly wanted to be a hero. Putting that desire into practice has always been . . . complicated. When opportunities to prove myself come along, I have this tendency to run or hide. But my confidence is better than ever after those harpies, and having you two along should boost my motivation. After all, we’re trying to prevent the end of the world. Hard to argue against that. It ends up amounting to option A, risk death now, or option B, die for sure later. I’m well aware that the demons will want to lynch me for killing Navarog. If we have any chance of winning, I’ll join the fight.”

“Fair enough,” Bracken said.

Kendra looked out toward the sea. She had long imagined touring Europe, but had never pictured doing it by dragon. They had made good time. Raxtus flew much faster with only two passengers. It was just yesterday that the Sphinx had helped them escape Living Mirage. With luck, they would soon convince Roon to come away with them to a safe hideout, and Zzyzx would be a little safer. She knew they should hurry.

“I’ve thawed,” Kendra said.

“You sure?” Bracken asked, coming to stand beside her.

She glanced up at him. He looked so young! He could be in high school. She could almost picture them studying together for a science test. But of course, he was really older than her grandparents. Much older. And a unicorn besides.

He definitely didn’t seem like a unicorn. His perfect skin, those keen eyes looking at her, fringed by long lashes . . .

She fought to derail her train of thought. “I’m sure. We should hurry.”

Raxtus swooped over and snatched them, and they glided off the ledge. Banking to take advantage of air currents, Raxtus followed the winding

course of the deep, narrow fjord. Kendra wished she had a camera. Instead, she tried to imprint the spectacular scenery on her memory.

After growing somewhat narrower and shallower, the fjord came to an abrupt end. Raxtus veered to the northeast. The dragon's shadow rose and fell against rugged terrain. They flew over craggy hills, sheer ravines, stony ridges, ice-rimmed lakes, and scattered copses of fir trees.

"Up ahead," Kendra said, as a squat keep of gray stone came into view, situated on a flat rise between two rocky hills. Reaching well beyond the hills, a tall stone wall ringed a vast tract of wilderness. A heavy wooden gate in the wall had been smashed open and now hung askew from a single huge hinge.

"I see it now," Raxtus said. "My eyes kept straying away from there."

"I see it as well," Bracken said darkly. "The splintered gate is an ominous sign. Raxtus, take us down onto that ridge." He indicated a jutting spine of rock outside the breached wall.

Raxtus circled down. Kendra looked for movement inside the wall or around the keep, but saw none. The dragon landed gently.

"Would you like me to check it out?" Raxtus asked.

"Do you mind investigating?" Bracken asked.

Raxtus turned invisible. "It's a specialty. I'll be right back."

Kendra felt and heard Raxtus fly away. Bracken stared after him, seemingly following his flight path. "Can you see him?" Kendra asked.

"Barely," Bracken said. "You were wise to befriend him. There is a profound goodness to Raxtus that few dragons possess."

"Are we too late?" Kendra asked, eyes straying to the quiet keep.

"Almost certainly. I see no evidence of an ongoing struggle. The gate was destroyed recently. You can tell by the unweathered portions of the broken wood."

"You can see that from here?"

"Yes."

Kendra frowned. "Then what now?"

Bracken looked at Kendra, disappointment in his eyes. "Once Raxtus finishes his preliminary reconnaissance, we'll go see what we can learn, hope for some useful hints or clues. If all else fails, perhaps we'll rejoin Warren." Bracken sat down.

Kendra sat beside him. A chilly breeze ruffled her hair. “What’s it like, being a unicorn?”

Bracken scrunched his brow. “Funny, I’ve never been asked that. Let’s see. It’s very different from inhabiting a human form. Peaceful. Almost passionless by comparison. We love, but from a distance. We experience extraordinary clarity. We wander, we heal, we serve. We’re the guardians of the fairy world.”

“So you feel different as a human?”

“I’m still the same being deep down. But my experiences as a human have changed me. Unicorns are generally solitary creatures. Spending all this time in a human form has helped me learn to socialize. At times I even enjoy it! I’m still trying to improve. Old habits die hard. But I would have liked you even in my former state. My kind have always had a weakness for virtuous maidens.”

Looking down, Kendra willed herself not to blush. “Even in human form, you’re not really mortal.”

“No, I retain a connection to my horns. They would have to be destroyed for me to really age. I could be killed, but not by sickness or time.”

“How exactly did you lose all of your horns? Is that too personal? You’ve told me the basics.”

He grinned. “It’s very personal. A unicorn’s horn is his glory. But I’ll tell you. It’s almost impossible to take a horn from a unicorn. We normally have to give them. I gave my first horn as a gift to a man who saved my life. It has passed through many hands. I can still sense it out there.

“The next horn I gave away was my third horn. This was highly unusual. I’m not sure if any other unicorns have given theirs away, save perhaps Ronodin, the dark unicorn, who willfully corrupted his horns. To part with my third horn meant parting with my form as a unicorn, but it also meant sealing away the demon horde, so I surrendered it to Agad the wizard.”

“Agad? The same Agad who lives at Wyrmoost?”

Bracken nodded.

“He helped seal the demons away?”

Bracken grabbed a pebble and tossed it off the ridge. “He was one of the five wizards who created Zzyzx.”

“And you helped him?”

“Only by allowing my horn to be crafted into the Font of Immortality.”

Kendra stretched her legs out. “And you’ve been stuck as a human ever since?”

“That was the price.”

“Why did you care so much?”

He regarded her pensively. “Gorgrog, the Demon King, destroyed my father.”

Kendra felt she had pried too deeply. “I’m sorry.”

“It wasn’t your fault. All of this happened long ago.”

“No wonder you want to keep the demons inside of Zzyzx.”

“Little matters more to me.”

“What about your second horn?” Kendra wondered.

“The Sphinx took it when he captured me. I mentioned that it is almost impossible to steal the horn of a unicorn. The protections on our horns attack the emotions, but the Sphinx is a shadow charmer, and he was immune to the effects. He took my horn with impunity and cast me in a dungeon.” His eyes were far away. “I tried to make the best of it, tried to bond with other prisoners, tried to find life down in the darkness. But my lifelong love is what now surrounds us: a fresh breeze, wild plants thriving, rushing rivers, the sun and moon and stars.”

“It must have been hard being locked up,” Kendra said, crossing her ankles. “Especially for a unicorn.”

“Any creature hates a cage,” he said. “And any creature can cope if he tries. The hardest part has been adapting to my human form. I had taken human shape before, but never for a prolonged period. After becoming human, for years—centuries, really—I lived alone, wandering. The solitude was a hard habit to break. As the seasons changed and the years slipped by, my identity began to feel diluted. Over time I experimented with human society. I dabbled with friendship and duty. There are aspects of humanity that I have grown to cherish. I have worn many masks, filled many roles. It is difficult living as an unchanging being in a temporal world.”

“I bet,” Kendra said.

“Don’t waste any sorrow on me. I’m at peace with my choices. I feel sorry for you, so young, yet forced to confront so much.”

“I’m all right.”

“You cope, but you’re not all right. I understand your worries and your pain. Kendra, I promise you that I will do everything in my power to protect you and your family.”

Feeling tears threatening, Kendra turned her head away. “Thanks.”

“These are dark times, but every generation has its challenges.”

Bracken stood. “Raxtus returns. I was starting to worry.”

Kendra scanned high and low but could discern no sign of the dragon until she felt the whoosh of his wings as he landed nearby. Once on the ground, he flickered back into view. “It was a bloodbath,” Raxtus reported.

“Do any foes remain?” Bracken asked.

“None,” Raxtus said. “I searched carefully.”

“Roon?” Bracken asked.

“There was a throne in the main hall. A big, charred man now sits on it. If it was Roon, he’s very dead.”

“He had guards?” Bracken asked.

“At least two dozen,” Raxtus confirmed. “It must have been quite a skirmish. Severe losses on both sides. A boar the size of a hippopotamus was savaging some of the corpses, but I drove it away.”

“Any women or children?” Bracken inquired.

“No.”

Bracken gave a quick nod. “Let’s have a look.”

They glided down to the gate first. Inside the wall, a few armored men lay where they had fallen, surrounded by a dozen goblin corpses. Kendra allowed herself only brief glances at the deceased warriors. Bracken paced around the area, crouching, fingering footprints, rolling bodies, moving aside battered shields.

“Anything between here and the keep?” he finally asked.

“Not really,” Raxtus said. “You’ll see. It looks like everyone retreated to the main hall to make a last stand.”

Raxtus flew them up to the keep. The heavy doors had been blasted to splinters.

“There was magic at work here,” Bracken said.

Kendra instantly pictured Mirav.

“You can wait out here with Raxtus,” Bracken offered.

“I’ll come with you,” Kendra said.

The cavernous hall was built around a long hearth where embers still smoldered. Huge trophy heads of exotic magical creatures stared down from the walls—triclopeses, wyverns, trolls, and strange horned beasts. Kendra regretted joining Bracken the moment she entered the room. She had never imagined such carnage.



A score of armored men lay butchered among a host of fallen foes. Kendra saw dead minotaurs and cyclopes, as well as a grisly variety of goblins and hobgoblins. Arrows or spears protruded from many of the bodies. Some limbs were missing.

Seated in a throne on a raised dais at the far side of the room, a carbonized cadaver presided over the massacre. A slain tiger lay beside the

throne, fur matted with gore. Kendra tried to pretend she was looking at a phony scene on a gruesome carnival ride, but the smell kept persuading her otherwise.

“Quite a fight,” Bracken murmured.

“Yes, it was,” answered a masculine voice.

Kendra jumped. For a moment, she had a horrible certainty that the charred corpse on the throne had spoken. But then the tiger arose.

Bracken drew his sword and strode forward. “Who are you?”

“Peace, unicorn,” the tiger said in a slow, tired voice. “I assume you are no friend of the raiders.”

Bracken kept his sword out. “We came to warn Roon.”

The tiger sighed. “Would that you had arrived last night.”

“They attacked at dawn?”

“Two hours before sunrise.”

“Who?”

“A wizard. Several skilled warriors. Some lycanthropes. And the rabble you see strewn around the room. Minus the wizard and a couple of the more skilled warriors, we would have won the day. Roon always loved a brawl.”

Bracken stepped closer. “Who are you?”

“I am Roon’s guardian. He called me Niko.”

“May I approach you?”

“You wish to verify my identity? Considering the circumstances, I will take no offense.”

Bracken crossed to the tiger. Despite the deep, rational voice, it was still a tiger, and Kendra reflexively clenched with fear as Bracken knelt and placed his hands on the large paws.

After staring the tiger in the eye, Bracken backed away. “You’re a shape-shifter.”

“Correct,” Niko said. “Which is how I survived. I had retained this form throughout the skirmish. Once Roon fell, I pretended to succumb to my injuries.”

“Healing yourself internally while leaving some external damage,” Bracken said.

“You have the idea.”

“Tell me about the battle,” Bracken invited.

“First tell me more about your purpose here.”

“A demon called Graulas has taken control of the Society of the Evening Star,” Bracken said.

“I remember Graulas. Shouldn’t he be dead?”

“It’s a long story. The short version is that he’s healed. The Society now possesses all five artifacts. They’re using the Oculus to track down the Eternals.”

Niko arose, shaking his fur as if shedding water. His wounds disappeared. “I have been waiting here to see who might come. I honestly did not expect allies.”

“You wanted a bite of whoever planned this,” Bracken said.

“Something like that. You desire knowledge of the battle?”

“Please.”

The tiger stretched, claws extending. “As a glance at the walls will reveal, Roon son of Osric was a master hunter—a giant of a man, with a magnificent beard and a taste for mead. For centuries, this stronghold has served as his private hunting ground. He maintained two other secret hunting arenas not far from here. On all of his properties, he bred extremely dangerous game. The men who served him came here as apprentice huntsmen. To serve Roon meant to renounce the outside world. He never shared his secret, but they knew he had an unusual arrangement with Death. He drew the best to him. One to three perished every year on the hunts, but still they came.

“Blindsided, outnumbered, his men stood with him in the end. Old and young fought fiercely and died bravely. We all tried to save him. Roon felled more foes than any of us, first with bow, then with spear, then with mace, then with sword. His silver knife slew the pair of lycanthropes on the steps of his dais. But magic made the fight unfair. In the end, the woman whose arrows were fletched with phoenix feathers found her mark. In crimson flames Roon fought on, until alone, finally beaten, he staggered to his throne to die.”

Kendra had never pictured a tiger shedding tears.

“Tragic,” Bracken said solemnly.

“Hunting alongside Roon was the joy of my existence,” Niko said. “In the end, I failed him. There were too many foes, several of them powerful. This is a dark hour. Putting my personal bereavement aside, the loss of another Eternal is the real tragedy today.”

“Two left?” Bracken asked.

“Two left.”

“You don’t happen to know where we might find them?”

“To what end?”

“They must be warned,” Bracken said. “They still imagine concealment to be a protection. Instead, I will encourage them to travel to Wyrmoost, where Agad now resides. Walls that strong might protect them.”

The tiger began to pace. “Perhaps fortune smiles amid calamity. I am the single being in the world who might be able to help you. You see, I am the chief guardian of the Eternals, appointed by Agad eons ago. As such, I can sense the positions of the other guardians. Our lives are bound to those we have sworn to protect. When they die, we die. Except for me. I live on as long as any of the Eternals remain.”

“Can you be killed?” Kendra asked, speaking up for the first time.

“I can,” Niko replied, “although none of my opponents have proven clever enough to succeed yet.” The tiger regarded Bracken coolly. “Tell me about your fairy princess.”

“Her name is Kendra,” Bracken said. “She’s fairykind, and here to help.”

“I can see. Does she know who you are?”

“She knows enough.”

“And the dragon who was nosing around earlier?”

“Our ride.”

“I’ve never seen a dragon like him.”

“He’s one of a kind.”

The tiger growled. “Our enemies have struck a crippling blow. Roon was the mightiest of the Eternals. We must hurry before our cause is lost.”

“Tell me about the other Eternals.”

“I know of them,” Niko said. “I lack specifics. The wizards kept the details secret. But I can sense the location of their guardians. One of them

was in South America for years, until recently fleeing to North America. That one is now in Texas, near Dallas. The other is an inveterate wanderer. That guardian has been around the globe dozens of times, but is currently in the Los Angeles area.”

“Both in the United States,” Bracken said. “That could be fortunate. They could be much farther from Wyrmoost.”

“But not much farther from here,” Niko said dryly.

“Can you assume human form?” Bracken asked.

“I lack that ability,” Niko said. “No humanoids. Closest I can get is an ape. But I can do a variety of animals approximately my size. I can fly. I can swim.”

“We don’t have paperwork to travel,” Bracken said. “We may have to cross the Atlantic using old-fashioned means.”

“How long will it take our adversaries to find the others with the Oculus?” Niko asked.

“I don’t know. We have an inside man at the Society, but he has been out of touch. Our problem is that Graulas may place the Oculus into the hands of Nagi Luna.”

The tiger roared. The outburst made Kendra jump, awakening a primal fear. She felt like her heart must have paused. Raxtus poked his head in. “Everything okay?”

“It will not take Nagi Luna long,” Niko snarled. “We must depart at once.”

“Who’s the tiger?” Raxtus asked.

“He helps guard the Eternals,” Kendra explained.

“Can you fly us across the Atlantic?” Bracken asked Raxtus.

“Like to America? Sure. We’ll want to follow shipping lanes so we can rest as needed.”

“How quickly?”

“What’s the destination?”

“Texas or California.”

“Carrying you two, if we go hard, maybe three days.”

Bracken turned to Niko. “Could you keep up?”

“No. But I’ll follow as fast as I can.”

“We’ll want to keep in touch. I’ll leave you with a communication node.”

“Very well.”

“Roon must have an impressive armory,” Bracken said. “Mind if we comb through it to better equip ourselves? We recently escaped from a dungeon.”

“Help yourself,” Niko said. “I’ll show you the way. Have you a name, dragon?”

“Raxtus.”

“Dragon fire would be a suitable way to consume these fallen warriors.”

“I’d be honored, but I have no fire,” Raxtus said awkwardly. “I’m something of a disaster as a dragon. My breath makes plants grow.”

“I see,” the tiger said. Transforming into a hulking gorilla, Niko walked over to the throne and retrieved an iron key ring. “Follow me.”

The gorilla led them out of a door in the rear corner of the hall, then underground by way of a winding stairwell. In the gloomy hall at the bottom, the gorilla used a key to open an iron door, then changed back into a tiger. Bracken conjured up a light.

Beyond the door they found a room stocked with weapons and armor. Kendra gawked at the racks of halberds, spears, javelins, tridents, axes, cudgels, maces, mauls, and an endless supply of arrows and quarrels. The armor ranged from heavy plate mail that would transform the wearer into a human tank to light leather pieces that would hardly hinder movement. Shields of countless shapes and sizes hung on two walls.

“Who is in here?” the tiger snarled. “I could smell you from the corridor. Come out at once!”

A pile of shields in a far corner of the room shifted and clattered as a shamefaced man stood up. He wore black leather armor studded with iron. His thick black hair fell in a braid to his waist. A long mustache drooped around his mouth.

“Jonas,” Niko accused sharply. “How could you?”

“I fear no beast,” he said, rough voice quavering, his English heavily accented, “but sorcery dissolves my courage.”

“You were his sworn man!” Niko bellowed.

Jonas hung his head. "I am an oathbreaker."

"You are an undertaker," Niko said. "I task you with disposal of the remains of the fallen, friend and foe. The cairn for Roon had best be a monument to outlast the ages. After that, go where you will, but take nothing with you. May you never forget the shame of this day. Pray we never meet again."

"As you say." The man bowed stiffly and exited the armory, avoiding any eye contact.

"I suppose there had to be one coward in the bunch," Niko grumbled. "Jonas was never the most eager man on a hunt. He tended to hang back when things got dicey. He should at least have enough sense to erect a proper cairn."

"Are any of the arms off-limits?" Bracken asked.

"Take what you need and more," Niko offered. "I can envision no more fitting use for these armaments than to wreak vengeance upon our destroyers."

Bracken turned to Kendra. "Let's get you fitted into leather armor. We have work to do."



The Singing Sisters

Before embarking on this trip, Seth had forgotten how fast Vanessa drove. Now she was zooming along Missouri back roads near the Mississippi River. As they careened around corners, he swayed back and forth, held in place only by his seat belt. Several times he had felt certain that the enormous pickup would flip over, but the tires had remained flat on the road, seldom even squealing.

After leaving Fablehaven in an SUV with the satyrs in the back and Hugo sprawled on the roof, Vanessa had driven nearly an hour to reach an old contact who dealt in high-end automobiles. A few minutes on a computer informed Vanessa that four of her seven false identities had been compromised, but she assured Seth that the remaining three personas had valid passports and licenses, as well as access to millions of dollars.

Transferring the funds electronically, Vanessa had purchased a powerful black pickup with an extended cab and burly tires. Seth had felt like he needed a stepladder to climb into the passenger seat. The satyrs enjoyed plenty of room in the backseat, and the presence of Hugo in the bed did not seem to strain the formidable engine. At first Seth had felt exposed with the golem in the back, until Vanessa reminded him that to most people, Hugo looked like a pile of dirt.

So far, they had slept only in the truck. Seth and the satyrs dozed whenever they wanted. Vanessa caught a few hours here and there when they stopped for fuel or meals.

Finally slowing her aggressive pace, Vanessa pulled off to the side of the road. They had come south from St. Louis on I-55 for some distance before leaving the highway. Now she consulted her GPS, the letter from Patton, and a detailed map of the area.

The letter from Patton had plenty of details about finding the Singing Sisters, but lacked much information about what to do once they got there. After the many specifics Patton had shared about handling Cormac, Seth felt disappointed to have considerably less advice for the bigger challenge. All he knew for sure was that he needed to strike a bargain with the Sisters or they would take his life.

“Want me to drive?” Newel offered. “Then you can concentrate on navigating.”

“Not in this lifetime,” Vanessa replied calmly.

“I can’t be a crazier driver than you,” Newel pouted.

“It’s more complicated than it looks,” she replied. “I think we’re almost there.” Shifting the truck into drive, she set the map aside, accelerated, and turned onto a rutted dirt road.

“Can we get more fast food?” Doren asked.

“After,” she answered tersely.

“I want burritos,” Newel said.

“No way,” Doren disagreed. “Cheeseburgers and curly fries.”

“Toasted ravioli,” Newel countered.

“Those were interesting,” Doren conceded.

Thanks to Vanessa’s illegal speeding and indefatigable driving, they had only been on the road two days since leaving Fablehaven. Every time the satyrs had spotted a fast food joint that they recognized from a commercial, they had hollered for a meal break. Vanessa had not always conceded, but whenever an opportunity was presented, Newel and Doren had inexhaustibly consumed milkshakes, burgers, sandwiches, tacos, nachos, pretzels, nuts, beef jerky, trail mix, soda, doughnuts, candy bars, cookies, crackers, and aerosol cheese. Of the fifty most impressive belches Seth had witnessed in his life, all had occurred on this road trip.

“I hate to interrupt the feasting,” Vanessa said, “but we did come here for a purpose. Let’s try to focus on something besides sweet fat and salty fat for the next little while.”

“Some of us have fast metabolisms,” Doren mumbled.

“We just want fuel in the tank before we risk our necks,” Newel complained.

“You want nutrition?” Seth asked. “Remind me to teach you guys about the food pyramid.”

“A pyramid made of food?” Doren said reverently.

“We are your humble pupils,” Newel pledged.

Up ahead, the Mississippi River came into view again. Perhaps twenty yards across the water, a long island paralleled the shore. The dirt road ended at a sprawling, ramshackle shack roofed with aluminum siding. A rusted, antique truck sat on blocks off in the weeds. Beyond a dusty tire swing, Seth spotted a run-down dock and a weathered raft.

Several dogs ran up to the pickup, yapping and snarling. Vanessa brought the truck to a stop. When Hugo climbed out of the back, the dogs ran away yelping. Apparently they didn’t require magic milk to sense that the golem meant trouble.

The door to the shack swung open, and an old man emerged, bald on top with white stubble around the sides of his head. He wore fading black trousers with suspenders and no shirt. Gray hair curled on his wrinkled chest. He stood on the sagging porch, a carved walking stick in one hand.

“He’s the sentinel,” Vanessa said.

In the letter, Patton had warned that to get to the island, they would have to pass a sentinel. He explained there was no sure way to do this, but the goal involved convincing him that the Singing Sisters should grant Seth an audience.

Vanessa rolled down the window.

“Private property,” the man said abruptly.

“We need to cross to the island,” Vanessa explained.

“There’s nothing on that island you’d care to see,” the man replied grumpily. “This ain’t a public road. You’re on my land. Order the golem back in the truck and go.”

Seth leaned toward the open window. "I need to see the Singing Sisters."

"You'd best turn around before I call the police," the man said, retreating into his shack.

"Should we hijack the raft?" Newel asked.

"We need to settle this with him," Vanessa said. "Newel, Doren, wait in the truck. Seth and I are going inside."

"Should I bring my sword?" Seth asked.

"I have a feeling it would provoke him without being much use against him. This old guy is more than he appears. Leave it."

As Seth climbed down from the truck, he felt nervous. But he supposed if his end goal was to talk with the Singing Sisters, he had better at least have the courage to confront their guardian. No doubt they would be creepier than the old man and his dingy shack.

Hugo stayed near while they approached the house. Flies buzzed around them as Seth and Vanessa climbed the porch steps. Hugo paused at the bottom step, stamping and leaning forward as if trying to proceed.

"Wait here," Vanessa instructed. The golem stopped testing the unseen barrier.

Seth glanced down at a shabby tin washtub full of rotten apples. Vanessa tugged open the dirty screen and rapped on the flimsy door.

Nobody answered.

She knocked again. The third time she pounded loudly. The door shuddered as if a little more force would bust it open. Still nobody answered.

Vanessa turned the knob and opened the door. The old man stood facing them in the middle of the room, his walking stick clutched in both hands like a baseball bat.

"You ought not come here," the man warned, showing his grimy teeth.

"This young man desires an audience with the Sisters," Vanessa said, stepping cautiously into the shack, as if entering the cage of a lion. Seth moved forward with her.

"Shadow charmer, is he?"

"Yes," Vanessa said.

“And you’re a narcoblix. And a couple of satyrs in the truck. And a sentient golem. I’ll grant that you’re the oddest group to come my way since time out of mind.”

“You’re the sentinel for the Singing Sisters?” Seth asked.

He turned and spat on the floor. “You could say that. Not many folk choose this road anymore. From that island, not more than one in five return.”

“How’d you get this job?” Seth asked.

The old man’s lips twitched. “I had a need long ago. The Sisters helped. Might be you can take over my watch.”

“How do I get to the island?” Seth asked.

“You’re the one who wants to go?” the old man asked.

“I’m the one,” Seth said.

The old man held Seth’s gaze. “Why not ask the little lady to step outside?”

“I want to go with him to the island,” Vanessa said.

“Have you business with the Sisters as well?” the old man asked, eyes never leaving Seth.

“I mean to accompany Seth to their door,” Vanessa replied.

The old man compressed his lips. “Tell you what. Leave me with the petitioner. If he earns passage to the island, you can join him. But not the golem.”

“Go,” Seth said. “I’ll have to face worse than this before we’re done. It’ll be good practice.”

Vanessa touched Seth’s shoulder, then exited. Seth refused to watch her, keeping his eyes on the old man. The screen banged shut.

“Close the door,” the old man said.

Seth obeyed, shutting it softly. He and the old man stared at one another.

“What now?” Seth asked.

“You eat sandwiches?”

The question surprised him. “Um, yes.”

“How about peanut butter and marshmallow fluff?”

Unlike the satyrs, Seth had been eating sensibly. He had room for a sandwich. "Is there a catch?"

"You mean will the sandwich bind you to me as my eternal slave? No, just a sandwich. Want one?"

"Sure."

"Come inside."

Seth followed the sentinel into the humble kitchen. Looking down, he saw gaps between the floorboards. Chips and scratches scarred the round table.

"Need help?" Seth asked.

"Have a seat," the old man said, leaning his elaborate walking stick against the wall.

Seth sat down by the table on a three-legged stool that wobbled when he shifted his weight. A battered old door on a pair of sawhorses served as the counter. The old man produced a jar of peanut butter and a container of marshmallow fluff, laid down a paper towel, and took two slices of white bread from a bag.

"Tell me why you want to visit the Singing Sisters," the old man said, carefully spreading peanut butter onto a slice.

"Some demons are about to open Zzyzx," Seth said. "I want the Singing Sisters to help me find the Sword of Light and Darkness."

The old man paused, blunt knife held motionless. "That sword has a name."

"Vasilis."

The old man resumed spreading. "Brother, sounds to me like you have a need."

"The demons are holding my parents hostage. Others in my family, too."

The old man wiped the knife clean on the paper towel, then started spreading marshmallow fluff on the other slice. "The Singing Sisters do not offer guidance lightly. They will require much of you. If you fail to strike a bargain to their liking, they'll destroy you."

"I have no other choice."

The old man set the paper towel in front of Seth and cut the sandwich in half diagonally. Folding his arms, he stared down at Seth broodingly.

“Those are the magic words.”

“Magic words?”

“I’m here to prevent people from going to the island who have no business there. I try to run folks off, scare them, talk them out of it. Having no other choice is the only appropriate reason for visiting the Sisters. I’ve been doing this a long time. I believe you. Try the sandwich.”

“Aren’t you having anything?”

“I just ate.”

Seth took a bite. It tasted really good. “Yum,” Seth said, mouth gummy with peanut butter.

“My specialty,” the old man said, sitting down on the other stool.

Seth swallowed. “So I can go to the island?”

“Even if you can cajole the Sisters into pointing you in the right direction, retrieving Vasilis won’t be easy. I can tell you’re coping with a gigantic problem. You sure you want to bet the farm on Vasilis? Sure you’re going to the Sisters with the right question to fix your problem?”

Seth held up a finger as he chewed and swallowed. “Unless you can tell me a better one.”

The old man sat in silence as Seth finished his sandwich. Seth wiped his lips on the back of his hand.

“You can use the napkin,” the old man said.

“It has crumbs from the sandwich. I didn’t want to spread them all over.”

The old man almost smiled. “This old place has much bigger problems than a few crumbs. But I appreciate the courtesy.”

“What now?”

“I’ll pole you over to the island. There is one condition.”

“What?”

“You must never tell anyone what you did in here to gain permission.”

“I hardly did anything, except eat a sandwich and explain my problem.”

“Exactly. I don’t want word getting out, or I’ll have to change my approach.”

Suddenly Seth understood why Patton had been vague in his letter about how to convince the sentinel. "I promise."

"I'll hold you to it." The old man stood, wadded up the paper towel, and threw it in the trash. "Care for a root beer?"

"Sure."

The old man retrieved a bottle and uncapped it. Seth took a sip. It was room temperature, but sweet and good. The old man waited while Seth drank. When Seth was finished, the old man dropped the bottle in the trash and retrieved his delicately carved walking stick. Seth followed the sentinel to the door.

The old man hesitated before exiting. "I don't normally give out hints."

"Okay," Seth said.

"I might be convinced if asked politely."

"Do you have any advice for me?"

The old man rubbed his chin. "That's a good question. You know, I've parleyed with the Sisters before. And I've talked to others who have returned from the island, posing questions now and again. I can't get too specific, but over time I've noticed a pattern. The Sisters ask for a lot, and won't accept much less. You'll have to give until it hurts and then some. My advice would be to stall after the first offer. Given time, they will each extend an offer. In the end, you can accept one of their propositions, or make a counteroffer. I've never heard of anyone returning from that island who has not accepted one of the initial offers or had their first counteroffer accepted. You follow?"

"I think so."

"Just a word to the wise. Do what you will with my observations. Once again, let's keep this conversation between ourselves."

"You got it."

The old man opened the door and led Seth outside. The satyrs had exited the truck. Newel, Doren, Vanessa, and Hugo waited together expectantly.

The old man noisily cleared his throat. "Well, it doesn't happen once in a month of Wednesdays, but the blasted boy bested me, so it seems I'll be poling whoever wants to come over to the island. With the exception of the golem."

Hugo hung his head.

“It’s okay, Hugo,” Seth said. “We need somebody to guard the truck.”

“It’s for the best,” the old man said. “First off, he would swamp the raft, and second, his kind wouldn’t be able to set foot on that island any more than he could enter my domicile.”

They all followed the old man down to the swaybacked dock, where he retrieved a long pole at the edge of the water. He paused when they reached the raft. “At this point I’ll have to ask you to relieve yourselves of all weapons. It’s for the best. Don’t try to get cute. I’ll know.”

Newel set down his sling. Doren tossed a knife onto the planks. Vanessa removed a hidden knife strapped to her leg, a blowgun from inside her sleeve, and several darts from various locations on her person.

The old man gestured for them to climb aboard, then knelt to untie the raft from the iron cleats at the edge of the dock. A moment later, he sprang aboard and started poling them out onto the water. His appearance belied his strength. With seemingly casual shoves of the pole, he held against the current and propelled them swiftly to the sandy shore of the island.

“The island is narrow,” the old man said as the raft ran aground. “What you’re looking for is that way.” He waved his hand along a line diagonal to the shore. “Up against the highest bluff that runs across the island you’ll find the door. Can’t miss it. I’ll be here to take you back, Seth, or just your companions, depending on the outcome.”

“Thanks,” Seth said, hopping off the raft.

Pushing her way through thick foliage, Vanessa led the way in the direction the old sentinel had recommended. Seth followed, mind racing as he tried to anticipate what requests the Singing Sisters might make of him in exchange for their services. He wondered what the old man had asked of them to end up serving as their sentinel.

They did not travel far before finding a door in the side of a rocky bluff. Despite the faded red paint peeling like a nasty sunburn, the door appeared solid. To one side of the island Seth could see the broad expanse of the Mississippi, placid as a lake, to the other the much narrower strip of water separating them from the western shore.

“Do I knock?” Seth asked.

“It’s traditional etiquette,” Newel said.

Seth rolled his eyes. "I meant do you have any final advice?"

"Don't let your guard down," Vanessa advised. "You know they'll ask a lot of you. Come out of there with a bargain you can live with. We'll be waiting."

"You can do this," Doren said.

"If all else fails," Newel counseled, "throw sand in their eyes and run."

Chuckling, Seth strode to the door and knocked three times. It opened right after the third knock landed. Vanessa had brought walrus butter from the house, so Seth was able to properly recognize the scaly green troll with gill slits in his neck. Broad and heavily muscled, the troll stood a head taller than Seth.

"What business have you here?" the troll inquired in a low, slobbery voice.

"I want to talk to the Singing Sisters."

"I can make no promises that you will come out alive."

"I get it."

The troll smacked his thick lips. "I need you to declare that you willingly enter as an uninvited visitor."

Seth glanced over at Vanessa, who gave a nod. "I willingly enter as an uninvited visitor."

"Step inside," the troll said, pivoting to allow Seth access.

Seth squeezed by and the troll closed the door. Carved stone stairs descended in an irregular series of curves. The troll walked in a slouch behind Seth, flat feet slapping the steps. He carried a clay lamp.

"What sort of troll are you?" Seth asked to end the silence.

"River troll," came the answer from behind. "Western variety. We're not as lanky as our eastern cousins, nor as afraid of the sun as the northern breed. How'd you learn Duggish?"

"Picked it up along the way," Seth said vaguely, not wanting to reveal more about himself than necessary. "Do many trolls live here?"

"Many. Only trolls serve the Sisters. Goblins are too stupid. It is a high honor."

At the bottom of the long stairwell, several short trolls with puffy builds and oversized heads greeted Seth. They had wide mouths with thick lips, gaping nostrils, and large ears. Huddling around Seth, the trolls

ushered him along a hall. Thick lime coated the walls, giving the corridor the appearance of a pale gray throat. The river troll did not join them.

The hall opened to a damp room with multiple puddles on the floor. Each puddle contained a huge, white maggot, glistening segments flexing grotesquely. Around one of the largest puddles, three women stood in a ring, hands joined. The tallest was also the thinnest, the shortest had lost most of her hair, and the other was excessively flabby. All three looked to be approaching the end of middle age.

Another troll with a bloated head stood on a stool feeding leeches to the tallest woman off of a platter. The short trolls guided Seth toward the women. A closer look showed Seth that the women were not holding hands—they had no hands. Their wrists were fused together, creating a conjoined ring of three.

“Seth Sorenson,” said the flabby woman. “We expected you. Draw closer.”

Seth edged forward. The trolls fell back. The three women stared at him. The tallest had to look over her shoulder.

“He’s nervous,” cackled the short one.

“Are you the Singing Sisters?” Seth asked.

“We are known that way collectively,” said the tallest. “I’m Berna.”

“I’m Orna,” said the shortest.

“And I am Wilna,” said the flabby one. “Tell us why you have come.”

“I need to find Vasilis, the Sword of Light and Darkness.”

Orna cackled. “He has his bravado!”

“He looks like him,” Berna said.

“Vaguely,” Wilna sighed. “Takes a little wishing.”

“Like who?” Seth asked.

“Patton, of course,” Orna said.

“You know we’re related?” Seth asked.

“We know whatever we choose to know,” Wilna said importantly.

“Do you know I’m trying to save the world?” Seth asked.

“Told you,” Orna snickered. “Patton Burgess all over again.”

“We have no interest in your motives,” Wilna said. “Like all of our other supplicants, we take for granted that you have your reasons. We care

only about what you can offer us.”

“What did Patton offer you?” Seth asked.

“Every negotiation is different,” Berna said. “Patton came to us more than once, and the cost of our aid was never the same.”

“Patton was our favorite,” Orna whispered, blushing.

“He was a splendid specimen,” Wilna said aloofly. “Come closer.”

Seth stepped close enough to touch the ring of women. He looked down at the puddle over the conjoined arms of Wilna and Orna. The maggot in the puddle slowly reared up and twisted. It was as long as his leg and as thick as his forearm.

“Vasilis is no trivial prize,” Wilna said, speaking with sudden vehemence. “It is one of the six great swords, a shining remnant from an age of wonders, its present location heavily shielded from prying minds. You ask much, Seth, and must give us much in return.”

“Three lives,” Berna hissed. “We want three lives. A friend, an enemy, and a relative. Give us three lives and we will share the location of Vasilis.”

“You mean kill three people?” Seth asked. “Kill a relative?”

“Yes,” Berna said.

He tried to think of a relative he would be willing to sacrifice in order to save the others. Nobody came to mind. “Why do you care if I kill a relative? Why not have me kill three enemies?”

“Our needs are simple,” Berna said. “We principally care about the price you pay. We only aid those who are willing to prove how highly they value our assistance.”

“Don’t explain so much,” Wilna snapped.

“He’s so young,” Berna said.

He remembered that the old sentinel had suggested they would each make a proposal. “Is there any other choice?” Seth asked.

“We can give you three trials,” Wilna said ominously. “If you succeed and survive, we will grant your request.”

“What are the trials?” Seth asked.

“You must agree in order to know,” Wilna replied.

“The trials are rigged,” Orna blurted. “Nobody ever survives. They’re just for our entertainment.”

“Orna!” Wilna shrieked.

“They are!” Orna protested.

“Orna, really,” Berna chastised.

“I’d take trials over killing a friend,” Seth said. “Any other offers?”

Wilna gave him a hard stare. “Did somebody tell you to expect multiple offers?”

“You’d know,” Seth said.

Wilna scrunched her nose. “The sentinel. He should know better.”

“The boy is disarming,” Orna said.

“Enough out of you, sister!” Wilna spat. “This negotiation is on sandy ground. Seth, you do not get to pick and choose. Do you accept the bargain offered by Berna? Yes or no.”

“No.”

“Do you want the trials?”

“No.”

Wilna nodded at Orna.

“What?” Orna asked, still hurt from being reprimanded. “Now I can speak? Are you sure?”

“Go ahead,” Wilna said.

Orna cleared her throat. “In return for information on how to retrieve Vasilis, one year after you acquire the sword, you will return to us as our lifelong servant.”

“Too generous,” Berna scoffed.

“I like him,” Orna said.

Seth considered the offer. Would a lifetime of slavery to these sorceresses be worth saving the world? Probably. But what if he could get a better deal?

“Can I make an offer?” Seth asked.

“We will hear a proposition from you only if you turn down Orna,” Wilna said.

“Take the offer,” Orna said. “You look too much like him to become maggot food.”

Seth pondered. Even if he succeeded in recovering Vasilis, he would probably be killed when Zzyzx opened. The chances were that he would not

live to carry out this sentence of servitude. Accepting the deal would guarantee access to the sword.

But what if he somehow survived the opening of Zzyzx? The goal was not to fail. Patton had dealt with the Singing Sisters without becoming their lifelong slave. He must have worked out his own bargains.

“I turn down the offer,” Seth said, going with his deepest instincts.

Orna pouted.

Wilna glowered. “If you do not have a better alternative, then we will have to terminate this interview.”

“Let me get something straight,” Seth said. “Part of the reason you’re asking for so much from me is because Vasilis is so valuable.”

“Yes,” Berna said. “The worth of the prize influences the price.”

“How would you like Vasilis?” Seth asked.

“Is that your offer?” Wilna questioned.

“I’m just curious,” Seth said.

“It would be quite a trophy,” Orna said, “but you want it much more than we do.”

“No hints,” Wilna hushed.

“It would cost me a lot to give up a powerful magic sword,” Seth said. “That’s part of the point, right?”

“Partly,” Orna said.

Seth could tell that the sword alone would not be enough. He tried to think what else would be hard to give up. He tried to imagine what might please them. What could they use?

“An offer,” Wilna stated flatly.

“Okay,” Seth said, rubbing his hands. “Let’s mix some ideas. Within a year after finding Vasilis, I will bring it here to you. And I’ll bring you a wraith, to use however you like.” Orna nodded, quietly urging him to offer more. “And, um, at your request, using the sword, I will serve as your champion, to retrieve whatever item you desire.”

“What say you, sisters?” Orna asked briskly.

“This is Patton all over again,” Berna muttered.

“The offer is meager,” Wilna said. “He denied our proposals. Only one option remains. The boy must die.”

“Yours is not the only voice here,” Orna carped. “Being the pushiest does not make your opinion matter more. You demanded the death of our last petitioner. How entertaining was that? What say you, Berna?”

Seth held his breath as Berna studied him. “He makes a reasonable bargain,” she assessed. “Three gifts: the sword, a wraith, and one of our choosing. Consider the possibilities.”

“I am inclined to accept as well,” Orna said. “Is it unanimous, sister, or shall we outvote you?”

“Very well,” Wilna declared bitterly, casting a venomous glare at Orna. She turned to Seth. “We will accept your dubious proposition, upon one condition. You must not divulge the terms of our proposal to anyone, or share the particulars of our other offers.”

“Agreed,” Seth said.

“Gromlet,” Wilna cried. “Bring us a covenant knife.”

A stubby troll waddled over, an embroidered cushion in his hands. A sleek dagger with a black hilt rested on the cushion.

“Let the knife taste your blood,” the three women sang in unison, eyes focused on the puddle.

Seth picked up the knife and pricked the side of his thumb. The blade was so keen that he hardly felt the incision, but when he pulled the knife away, blood oozed from the tiny slit.

“We vow to show you how to find Vasilis,” the sisters chanted in an eerie harmony. “Knife in hand, make your vow!”

Seth kept hold of the knife. “I promise to bring you Vasilis within a year after I find it, to bring you a wraith bound to serve you, and to retrieve an additional item for you upon your request.”

“Once we perform our obligation, you will be bound,” the women sang. “If you fail to perform your duties, or if you divulge the particulars of our arrangement, this knife will take your life. So be it.”

The women relaxed, seeming to awaken from a trance. Seth replaced the knife on the cushion, and the top-heavy little troll toddled away, overlarge head tilting from side to side.

“What now?” Seth asked.

“You’ll see,” Orna answered.

“Concentrate,” Wilna commanded.

The conjoined sisters raised their inseparable arms above their heads and began to hum. At first they held a single note in unison, but soon the humming became a tangle of discordant harmonies. The humming grew to singing, although Seth comprehended none of the words. The harmonies became beautiful for certain stretches, but most of the time the chords they sang were unsettling.

The puddle at the center of their attention started to glow, and the maggot inside began to writhe. Droplets splashed as the maggot thrashed with increasing vigor. The singing grew more urgent. During a long, minor chord, the maggot burst. An inky cloud of deep purple roiled in the luminous puddle. The light in the puddle began to pulse unevenly. Amid the agitation, Seth glimpsed a ravine and several emaciated faces.

The sisters finished their song abruptly, and the puddle went dark, the water almost black. Berna began to cough violently, and the other sisters were breathing raggedly.

“We should have called for a steeper price,” Orna wheezed, drool seeping from the corner of her mouth.

Wilna scowled, blood leaking from one nostril. “Had you forgotten what it required to seize such guarded knowledge?”

“It has been so long,” Orna apologized.

“Quit wasting words,” Berna panted. “The bargain is made.” Her eyes had become badly bloodshot.

“Seth Sorenson,” Wilna intoned. “You will find Vasilis behind the legendary Totem Wall.”

“What’s the Totem Wall?” Seth asked.

“The Wall serves an oracular purpose similar to ours,” Orna said. “We never knew it also hid Vasilis.”

“The Totem Wall awaits you in Canada,” Wilna continued. “Our servants will produce a map of British Columbia.”

“Tibbut!” Berna called.

A troll with a bulging forehead tottered forward. Berna closed her eyes, and he closed his. A moment later he bowed and hastened away.

“How do I get past the Totem Wall?” Seth asked.

“The Totem Wall demands sacrifices in exchange for favors,” Berna said. “Everything depends on which totems you involve.”

“The Wall can be more finicky than we are,” Orna tittered. “Chance plays a major role.”

“Without our help,” Wilna corrected. “Insights gained through our vision can eliminate much of the chance. We will provide guidance. After all, it is in our interest to see you succeed.”

“Unless we would rather watch you fail and die than collect on your promises,” Berna mused.

“We have already expended much effort to view the way to Vasilis,” Wilna asserted, jowls flapping. “We will impart what knowledge we can.”

“The Totem Wall has many heads,” Orna said.

“You will have to select four totems to treat with,” Berna added.

Wilna stared at Seth purposefully. “In order to open the hidden door, speak with Anyu the Hunter, Tootega the Crone, Yuralria the Dancer, and Chu the Beaver.”

“Addressing them by name should surprise them,” Orna said.

Seth practiced the names.

“They will require an offering to open the hidden door,” Wilna said. “Tell them you will eradicate the evil entombed within.”

“Even if they doubt you,” said Berna, “they may enjoy the sport of the attempt.”

“What evil?” Seth asked.

“Only you will be permitted to pass through the door,” Wilna said. “You are uniquely suited to accomplish the task. Beyond the door is a room full of the Standing Dead. Only one without fear may pass. If they sense fear, they will seize you, and you will join them.”

“In the chamber of the sword awaits a greater threat,” Berna murmured.

“An entity of terrible power,” Wilna agreed solemnly. “You must slay that entity to gain Vasilis. Therefore, your promise to the Wall will not increase your burden. Those particular totems should accept the offer.”

“So much depends on what heads you address for any given issue,” Orna said. “We really are removing most of the guesswork.”

“What if the totems deny my offer?” Seth asked.

“Then it will be time to improvise,” Berna said. “Tibbut! The map!”

The troll hustled over to Seth, a scroll in his hand. Seth accepted the rolled parchment.

“He just drew this?” Seth asked.

“Tibbut works fast,” Orna said.

“Do you have any other advice to share?” Seth asked.

“None,” Wilna said.

“Hold true to your end of the bargain,” Orna advised.

“I would never lie to a magical knife,” Seth said. “Thanks.”

The short trolls escorted Seth back the way he had entered. The river troll awaited at the foot of the carved stairs.

“You survived,” the brawny troll said.

“For now,” Seth replied.

“You did better than most,” the troll approved, leading the way up the serpentine steps.

At the top, the troll opened the door, and Seth stepped out into the late afternoon sunlight. The troll closed the door unceremoniously behind him.

“Told you,” Doren trumpeted. He gave Newel a shove. “You owe me five gold coins!”

“You bet against me?” Seth asked Newel.

“We were bored,” Newel apologized.

“He wouldn’t let me join in,” Vanessa said, “or he would have lost another ten.”

“With your record, I didn’t expect to win,” Newel explained. “I figured I could get five coins back from Doren without much trouble.”

“We’ll see about that,” Doren huffed.

Newel folded his arms. “How about, double or nothing, we see who can eat the most tacos at dinner?”

“No way,” Doren said. “I’ve learned never to bet against your stomach.”

“I’ll take on all three of you,” Newel challenged.

Doren paused. “Maybe. Assuming we go someplace with tacos.”

“I see you have a scroll,” Vanessa said.

“It’s a map to a place called the Totem Wall,” Seth said.

“The Totem Wall?” Vanessa exclaimed. “Couldn’t the Sisters see the location of the sword?”

“They saw it,” Seth said. “The sword is hidden behind the Totem Wall. They gave us a map that should lead us there, and advice on how I can get inside.” He handed the scroll to Vanessa.

“What did you have to do?” Newel wondered.

“They made me promise not to tell,” Seth said.

“I just hope you didn’t promise to assassinate a couple of handsome satyrs,” Newel said.

“I don’t have to kill anybody,” Seth said. “I think I can say that much.”

Vanessa studied the map. “The road trip continues. We should get under way.”

They returned to the raft to find the old sentinel leaning on his pole. While the others boarded the raft, the shirtless old man pulled Seth aside.

“I know you can’t say too much,” the old man said. “But you made it back alive. I don’t need to know particulars. Did they make more than three offers?”

“No.”

“Did you make more than one?”

“No. I think they could tell you coached me.”

The old man scratched his shoulder. “There was risk involved for both of us. But if my hints were open violations, you would not have succeeded. I’m glad you survived. I hope the knowledge you gained will take you places.”

Seth regarded his friends on the raft. “The first place it will take us is Canada.”

Chapter 22



Mark

Kendra and Bracken earned plenty of stares as they strolled along the Third Street Promenade in Santa Monica. She had carefully draped her wolf-hide cloak to conceal her sword and crossbow, just as Bracken had hidden his weapons beneath his bearskin cape, but even with a number of odd dressers in the crowd and an unusual assortment of street performers pandering to the pedestrians, they stood out in their rugged clothes and armor.

A guy with dark eyeliner and a ring in his lip came up to Bracken. “What are you supposed to be?” the skinny stranger asked.

“The Santa Monica Seaside Players are putting on *Henry V* next weekend,” Bracken replied warmly. “Sorry, I’m out of flyers.”

“Sweet outfits,” the guy muttered as Bracken and Kendra moved away.

Bracken had already employed a similar story several times. He had even sidestepped the suspicions of a police officer.

Up ahead, a ring of onlookers watched a man balance a chair on his chin while juggling rubber balls. A young woman kneeling beside him added live accompaniment to the spectacle on a small keyboard. Eyes roving high and low, Kendra and Bracken wandered through the crowd.

They were looking for a cat. Bracken had maintained contact with Niko, who had pinpointed the shape-shifter among these trendy blocks of shops and eateries near the Southern California coastline. Niko had no communication with his fellow shape-shifters, but his sense of their location remained precise, even though he had only just reached the East Coast. Niko could also discern that their current quarry was at the moment inhabiting the form of a black cat with white markings.

Kendra passed a triceratops with a metal head and hedge body. She studied the street and glanced up at the surrounding rooftops, expecting to glimpse the cat at any moment. The descending sun gave everything a pink glow, and a gentle sea breeze kept the warm evening fresh. In an effort to suppress her raging hunger, Kendra tried to ignore the diners eating on a patio at small, round tables. Raxtus had recently dropped them off after three days of relentless flying, with irregular breaks for meals. They had left Europe with provisions, pausing on cargo ships and ocean liners to eat and rest. Kendra would have never imagined that she could fall asleep in the claws of a dragon while soaring over the ocean, but she had succeeded. Raxtus had kept up a grueling pace, with Kendra sharing energy with him through touch.

The dragon was currently circling above them, invisibly keeping watch. A day ago, Bracken had received a brief message from the Sphinx warning that an Eternal named Mark living in California would be the next target. The Sphinx had further cautioned Bracken that Nagi Luna had seen him, Kendra, and Raxtus in the Oculus. They had been constantly on edge since receiving that unwelcome news.

Warren had also contacted them. The healer had reluctantly released him early, and he was on a plane over the Atlantic headed to New York. The plan was for him to contact Bracken once he landed for guidance on where to fly next.

Seth had been in touch as well. He was working on an assignment Patton had laid out for him, along with Vanessa, Newel, Doren, and Hugo. Bracken had advised him to keep the particulars vague unless a time came when their paths needed to converge.

A striking redhead in her early twenties sauntered toward them, wearing tall sandals and a snug, stylish outfit. Her eyes lingered on Bracken, who ignored her attention as he scanned the rooftops. The girl

shot Kendra a catty glare before she passed them. Kendra had already observed several women interested in Bracken for more than his outlandish apparel.

“There,” Bracken murmured, nudging Kendra.

She followed his gaze to a narrow balcony above a restaurant. A cat stared down at them, black with a partly white face and a white chest. Bracken curled a beckoning finger at the animal. Looking away, the feline started licking a paw.

Bracken walked closer to the restaurant, eyes glued to the balcony. The cat continued licking obliviously. Bracken crouched to grab a pebble and tossed it. The little rock missed the cat but clanged against the wrought-iron railing.

The cat looked up, and Bracken waved it down. After a languid stretch and a toothy yawn, the cat sprang from the balcony to an awning, from there to a planter, and then took off along the street. Bracken ran after the darting feline, with Kendra close behind.

The cat raced into a narrow alley between some shops. Jostling through a group of boisterous high school kids, Bracken tried to keep up. Kendra followed less forcefully, overhearing comments like “Take it easy, Robin Hood,” and “I think that dude had a sword.”

Shouldering through the amused group, Kendra stumbled and fell. A pair of hands helped her up. It was a husky boy with red hair. “What’s with the outfit?” he asked.

“I’m helping advertise for some play,” Kendra said. “Seven bucks an hour. Worst job ever.”

Several of the high school kids were listening. “Is that a real crossbow?” the redhead asked.

After the fall, Kendra had failed to keep it hidden. “I wish,” she said. “I’d shoot my boss. I have to go.”

Kendra hurried to the alleyway. When she arrived, she found Bracken edging toward the cat with his palms up. “I really am a friend,” Bracken was saying. The cat watched him warily, coiled, ready to bolt. “I’ve been talking to your leader, who goes by the name Niko. Three of the Eternals have perished. We need to talk.”

“What about the girl?” the cat asked suspiciously. “She’s no unicorn.”

“She’s fairykind,” Bracken explained. “We’re on your side. But bad people are heading this way. We need to find Mark.”

“Follow me,” the cat sighed.

Kendra and Bracken walked down the alley with the cat, and then along a different street, until they reached a parking lot. The cat led them to a corner of the lot, where they found a bench beside a low hedge. The cat leapt up to the bench. Kendra and Bracken sat down.

“Is Mark nearby?” Bracken asked, looking around.

“Not too far,” the cat replied. “A few blocks. I’ve learned to give him some space. We don’t really get along anymore.”

“But you’re sworn to protect him,” Bracken said.

“I do my job,” the cat replied. “It’s become a little complicated. Look, I can tell you’re a unicorn, and the girl has a peculiar aura, but before I take you to him, I need to hear your whole story.”

Bracken told the shape-shifter about Graulas, the Sphinx, and the Oculus. He recounted what they had found when they had tried to warn Roon Osricon. He explained about the recent warning from the Sphinx, and told how a dragon sanctuary might offer protection.

“So we have assassins closing in as we speak?” the cat asked.

“We don’t know exactly when,” Bracken said. “Could be now, could be tomorrow, but soon.”

“Mark is fine at the moment,” the cat said. “I can clearly sense his location and his mood, but I have no way of anticipating trouble. I’ll know only when it arrives. I should have stayed closer to him. Come with me. I’ll explain our problem on the way. Don’t say more than necessary. Wearing armor makes you conspicuous enough. Talking to a cat on top of that might be too much, even for Santa Monica.”

The cat led them down a street toward the beach. “You can call me Tux, by the way. This is my favorite shape. The name started as a joke, but now it’s all he calls me. He thinks I hate it, but I actually don’t mind. He’s called me much worse things.

“Marcus began his journey as an Eternal with a clear sense of purpose and commitment. Despite all that has happened since, I still look back on those early years fondly. We enjoyed many good decades. But the centuries

gradually eroded his character. He began to regret his long life and the commitments he had made. His dedication wavered. Then it floundered.

“Mark has tried to kill himself many times. To tell you the truth, I don’t know how much he really wants to end his life. He might just like pretending to die. He has never sought out anything that could actually kill him. Instead he jumps off bridges or drives motorcycles into oncoming traffic. He ends up injured, but he heals rapidly, and I watch over him. I’ve had to fish him out of the sea more than once. He has come to blame me for his immortal state, even though I’m just doing my job. Wouldn’t you rather be miserable on dry land than miserable bobbing around in the ocean?”

“So he might not listen to us,” Kendra said.

“I’m not sure,” Tux replied. “Maybe the prospect of assassins who truly know how to kill his kind will snap him out of his depression. Or maybe he’ll run to them with open arms. If we’re lucky, a couple of new faces and voices might help rekindle a sense of duty.”

“The danger is real,” Bracken said. “We could all lose our lives. Dozens of men defended Roon, and high walls, and he wanted to live, but they got him.”

Tux sped up. They crossed Ocean Avenue to a narrow park with paved paths, green lawns, and lots of palm trees. The cat approached a long-limbed man sleeping on the lawn in a filthy green army jacket and frayed jeans. He had long hair and an unkempt beard. His odor made it clear that he had not bathed in many days.

“Wake up, Mark,” Tux ordered.

The man shifted his position and smacked his lips. “Lay off, Tux. What’s the idea?”

“We have visitors.”

The man sat up, eyes flicking between Kendra and Bracken. “What is this? Circus come to town?”

“We know who you are,” Bracken said gently.

“You have no idea,” the man replied. “You want me to move along? I’ll move along. Leave me alone.”

“You’re Mark, one of the Eternals,” Kendra said.

He started, naked surprise flashing across his face, then took a swipe at Tux, who avoided the swat smoothly. “What’ve you been blabbing?” he

accused the cat.

“Tux told us nothing,” Bracken said. “Only two Eternals remain alive. Your enemies have the Oculus. They’re coming.”

Mark grunted. “About time.”

“Don’t be a fool,” Tux said.

Mark brushed greasy hair away from his eyes. “You think we can do anything if somebody with the Oculus wants to find me? Catching me here will be the same as catching me down the street, or a couple of towns over.”

“We need to move,” Bracken said. “If we stay in motion, changing course unpredictably, we can shuttle you to a safe haven, like Wyrmoost.”

“A dragon sanctuary?” Mark scoffed. “You want me to hide out in a dragon sanctuary? Isn’t my life pathetic enough?”

“This is bigger than you,” Bracken said, trying to stay patient. “We are two Eternals away from seeing Zzyzx opened.”

“Had to happen eventually,” Mark said, rising. He stood half a head taller than Bracken. “I can see where this is heading. Listen, I’m tired, guys, really tired. Weary in every way. Mind, body, soul—everything that can wear out wore out long ago. You don’t spend years getting mugged by hoboes and chased off park benches until you’re pretty close to gone. Might be wiser to go focus on that last Eternal.”

“We may not make it to the last one in time,” Kendra said.

“Look, Mark,” Bracken said, starting to lose his cool. “I’ve been around a long while myself. Longer than you. Quitting is not an option. The commitment you undertook doesn’t fade away once you’re no longer in the mood. You need to man up. The struggle between light and darkness hinges on this. Billions of lives are at stake. If you want to rest, live simple, why not do it at a dragon sanctuary?”

“He’s stubborn,” Tux warned in a singsong tone.

“Stay out of this,” Mark spat.

“And touchy,” Tux added.

Mark kicked at the cat. Tux scampered back to a safer distance.

“We have a dragon with us,” Bracken said. “A little one. He can fly you to Wyrmoost. He can take a circuitous route, alter his heading a lot. It’s your best chance.”

Mark put his hands in his pockets. “What’s your name, stranger?”

“Bracken.”

“I’m Marcus. Mark to most people. How about the girl?”

“Kendra.”

“Is she a person?” Mark asked. “A human?”

“Yes.” Bracken said.

“You’re not.”

“I’m a unicorn.”

Mark chuckled. “Perfect,” he muttered, wiping his lips with the back of his hand. “How am I supposed to know whether I’m insane? My only friend is a talking cat, and here I’ve got a unicorn dressed like a Viking who wants me to come live with the dragons?”

“You’re not insane,” Bracken said evenly. “Take my hand.”

Mark stepped away. “No, no. So sorry. All I have left is my free will.”

“I wasn’t—”

“Don’t try to convince me you don’t want to manipulate my emotions,” Mark said. “I know what you’re after. Same thing the cat wants. You want me to pay for my mistake forever.”

“What mistake?” Kendra asked.

“The mistake of agreeing to become a lock!” Mark snarled. He closed his eyes and took a breath, regaining his composure. “It was for a good cause, I know. You two have honorable intentions. I take no issue with the cause. Nobody lied to me. I simply didn’t understand the cost. Not really, not fully. The exacting toll of existing, and existing, and existing, long after you want to stop, long after all meaning has died. That price is much too high. My intentions were pure. I remember why I volunteered. I simply lacked the vision to see myself ending up this way. I’m just not cut out for this much living. Becoming an Eternal was a mistake, and nobody will let me off the hook.”

“I can sympathize with you,” Bracken said. “Life can wear a man down. Especially a long life on the run. Still, mistake or not, you have to fulfill your duty. The stakes are too high. This is not the time to let your existential crisis come to a head.”

“This is exactly the time,” Mark argued, eyes intense. “Do you know how long I’ve been waiting for this? I’ve toyed with death, sure, mostly to sample the illusion of an end. To pretend I had some control over my fate.

But I've never sought out a dragon or a phoenix to conclude my life prematurely. If I had put my mind to it, I could have. Now a natural end is coming. Not suicide. Just the inevitable finally catching up. After all of these centuries, I have a right to stop fighting."

"You don't have that right," Bracken said. "If this was just you, I'd agree. But you can't let the rest of the world pay for your mistake. This became about more than just yourself the day you agreed to help keep Zzyzx closed."

Mark clapped his hands over his ears. "You need that to be true. I get it. Here's the problem. I am still a person. Like it or not, I have a will. All the guilt and all the accusations and all the compulsion in the universe can't fully take that away. Is it wrong of me to have accepted this responsibility and then not follow through? Yes. Tux tells me, my heart tells me, a few others like you have told me. Wrong or not, it remains my promise to break. I'm not the one trying to end the world. If you want to blame somebody, blame them. I'm just a guy trying to finally move beyond a mistake I made centuries ago. You can try to force me to live. But since we're talking about vows, let me make a new vow. First oath I've taken in a long time. If you drag me to a dragon sanctuary by force, I will immediately and without hesitation seek out a dragon to end my life. You'll be putting me in a place with limitless opportunities. I'll probably last longer if you leave me be."

"Please," Kendra said. "Think of all the lives that will be destroyed."

"I have," Mark said. "Believe me, darling, I grasp all aspects of this, I really do. But how much has the public I'm protecting worried about me? My sanity, my happiness, my right to find peace?"

"They made no promises," Bracken said. "They are not preventing the end of the world. Those who know about your sacrifice appreciate you immeasurably. Your life may not be fair, but it is absolutely necessary."

"Leave me alone," Mark growled. "I don't need to justify myself to you. This conversation is over. Trust me, I have no feelings left to manipulate. You'd have better luck tickling a corpse. At least there's one other Eternal. Hopefully somebody as tough as you, Mr. Unicorn. Take the other sucker, I mean hero, to your sanctuary. Leave me be."

Mark turned and ran. Bracken and Kendra watched him in silence. "Raxtus is following him," Bracken said. He crouched beside the cat. "What do you make of this?"

“I’m unsurprised,” Tux said wearily. “This was the most likely response, but I quietly hoped the confrontation might go differently. I’m so familiar to Mark, like a nagging sibling; I hoped he might put on a bolder face for noble strangers. I was also hoping the prospect of actual impending death might shake him up. After this display, I’m convinced that Mark really is as hollow as he claims to be. He was a good man, once.”

“What now?” Kendra asked.

“We abduct him,” Bracken said. “Raxtus will carry him to Wyrmoost. Agad will have to lock him up. Meanwhile, we’ll get a car and track down the last Eternal.”

“I have to stay with him,” Tux said. “If he gets too distant, I start to feel like a chain is dragging me toward him. I agree with you, by the way. Incarcerating us has become the only option.”

“I don’t reach that verdict lightly,” Bracken said, walking in the direction Mark had run. “I’ve spent time in prison. It’s inhumane. But prisons serve a necessary purpose. Prisons protect the freedom of the masses from those who abuse their freedom. On my scale, the freedom of the world outweighs Mark’s personal rights. He may have made a mistake in becoming an Eternal, but the rest of the world shouldn’t pay for his error. Like it or not, it remains his chore to pay for his decision.”

“Amen,” the cat approved.

“Are you in touch with Raxtus?” Kendra asked.

“I just told him to grab Mark,” Bracken replied. “Okay, Raxtus has him. We’ll meet up on the beach so Tux can join him.”

“This way,” Tux said, hurrying. Bracken and Kendra broke into a jog.

Tux led them along a path to a footbridge that spanned the Pacific Coast Highway. They hurried onto the bridge. Cars zoomed beneath them, most with their headlights on. The sun had dipped below the horizon, leaving the hazy sky above the ocean streaked pink and orange. The footbridge led down to a deserted parking lot where pulverized glass glimmered in the fading light. A barren expanse of sand separated the lot from the foamy breakers. Unmanned lifeguard stations stood guard along the beach at regular intervals. Off to the left, a larger parking lot alongside the Santa Monica Pier contained dozens of cars and several people.

Mark lay sprawled on the sand not far from the water. Seagulls wheeled and cried in the air above.

Kendra, Bracken, and Tux crossed the parking lot and a jogging path and started across the sand. The way the sand absorbed each step made walking a little awkward. Kendra glanced over at the roller coaster on the pier. Between the beach, the pier, the shops, the weather, and the restaurants, this could be a really fun place under different circumstances.

They reached Mark. He glared up spitefully. From his posture, Kendra could tell that Raxtus was holding him down. "You're thugs," he accused.

"And you're a sorry joke of a man," Bracken said. "I'm out of patience. We're going to save your life, so you had better get used to the idea."

Mark glowered at Tux. "What have you got to say for yourself?"

"Meow," the cat replied, pronouncing the word the way a human would.

"Raxtus, take Mark and Tux to Wyrmoost. Explain the situation to Agad. Give him this stone, so we can communicate." Bracken held out a small pouch, and the invisible dragon took it. "Take an unpredictable route."

Raxtus flickered into view, his neck craning up. "We have company."

Kendra's gaze went to the sky. A pair of large winged creatures were quickly approaching. "Wyverns," Bracken muttered.

Mark started laughing.

A Hummer screeched to a halt in the parking lot near the footbridge. "Fly!" Bracken urged, drawing his sword. "Take Kendra!"

"Wait," Kendra protested, reaching for her sword. Without hesitation, Raxtus turned invisible and seized her around the waist. Kendra, Mark, and Tux rose into the air, the unseen dragon's fierce wingbeats stirring up gritty clouds of sand.

As they soared out over the water, Kendra looked over her shoulder at the people exiting the Hummer, at Bracken striding across the sand, and then up to the oncoming wyverns.

"More wyverns," Raxtus warned, veering up the coast.

Scanning the horizon, Kendra saw a wyvern approaching from out to sea. Another was coming toward the pier from the south. Yet another was streaking down the coast from the north. As Raxtus fought to gain altitude,

the wyverns closed in from all directions. They had wolfish heads, batlike wings, and long black claws.

“Wyverns are quick,” Raxtus panted. “They’re built like me. I’m not sure I can lose five, not with visible passengers.”

“Over here!” Mark yelled, waving his arms. “Come and get me!”

“Shut it,” Kendra snapped, readying her crossbow.

As the nearest wyverns swooped at them, Raxtus rolled and dove. Kendra fired her crossbow, but the evasive maneuver made her quarrel go astray. Claws clashed against dragon scales and Kendra felt Raxtus shudder; then the ocean came rushing up at them with alarming speed. Raxtus pulled out of his dive and skimmed the wave tops, paralleling the shore. Wyverns descended from both sides, keeping pace. With a triumphant howl, one crashed down onto Raxtus, and all of them plunged into the brine.

After recovering from the shock of the impact and of the cold water, Kendra found herself blinded by bubbles. Tearing free from her wolf-hide cloak, she stroked to the surface, the weight of her leather armor and sword slowing her ascent. She found herself beside Mark, fighting to keep her nose and mouth above water. Huge bodies surged and lashed nearby, snarling and splashing, sending up fountains of spray.

A wyvern who had not yet joined the fray swooped at them. Mark raised his arms invitingly, and the wyvern seized him. Kendra grabbed Mark’s leg and was yanked up out of the water, heading toward the beach.

“Leave me alone,” Mark growled, kicking at her arms with his free leg.

Kendra clung desperately for a few seconds, then lost her hold and dropped into the foamy surf. The water helped break her fall, but she still hit the seafloor hard, and then a curling wave sent her tumbling forward. Regaining her feet, Kendra staggered through the shallows toward the shore, throat burning as she coughed up salt water.

On the beach, an arrow thunked into Bracken’s shield as a pair of swordsmen descended on him. Blocking one sword with his shield, Bracken deflected the second sword with his blade, then dispatched one of his assailants with a vicious counterstroke. The other swordsman backed away, weapon ready, waiting for Bracken to make the next move.

The wyvern had dumped Mark on the far side of the beach, near the parking lot and the Hummer. Beside the Hummer, bow in hand, Kendra recognized Torina. Sand clung to Mark’s clothes as he knelt on the sand

facing his executioners. He shed his army jacket and tore open the shirt underneath, baring his chest in an unmistakable token of surrender. Torina nocked an arrow, and a man robed in gray from head to foot strode forward, a slightly curved sword in each hand. Kendra recognized him as the Gray Assassin from Obsidian Waste.

“No!” Kendra shouted, running across the damp sand, fumbling with the hilt of her sword, much too far away to reach Mark in time.

Swords clashed as Bracken engaged his foe. Their blades met several times before Bracken skewered the other man. Wrenching his sword free, Bracken raced toward Mark, kicking up sand with every stride.

Kendra reached drier sand and it slowed her. Her waterlogged clothing clung heavily. The parking lot remained hopelessly distant. A falcon dove at the warrior in gray but he slashed it out of the air with a casual sweep of his sword. Bracken shouted in frustration as the Gray Assassin stood before Mark and issued the killing stroke. Instantly, Mark dissolved into dust, wet clothes flopping emptily to the sand.

Torina switched arrows and took aim at Bracken, who lifted his shield as he charged. She released the arrow, and he caught it on the very bottom of his shield.

“Kendra!” Raxtus called from somewhere behind her.

Turning, she saw a wyvern diving at her. With rage and frustration, she swung her sword above her head. Ringing against razor claws, the sword flew from her grasp. Kendra fell to the sand, hands stinging, the wyvern’s swiping claws missing her by inches. The wyvern banked to come back around, then abruptly crumpled to the sand, head askew. A moment later, with a rush of wind, Raxtus alighted beside her, becoming visible.

Tires squealing, the Hummer roared out of the parking lot. Kendra and Raxtus joined Bracken beside the wet army jacket and jeans. Bracken smoldered impotently. His eyes softened when he saw Kendra. “Are you all right?”

“I’m fine,” Kendra said.

Sheathing his sword, Bracken plucked an arrow from his shield. “We were so close!” He glanced at the sky, then at Raxtus. “How many wyverns did you get?”

“All five. Two in the water, three in the air. Hardly a fair fight. Their claws couldn’t penetrate my scales, and I was invisible. They have this

really fragile spot, right where the neck joins the back of the head. My dad taught me that.”

“What happened to Tux?” Kendra asked.

“He changed into a falcon and tried to help,” Raxtus said. “The shape-shifter turned to dust along with Mark.”

Bracken kicked the army jacket. “Blasted craven! If only I’d been a little quicker.”

“They were watching,” Raxtus said. “They knew just how to thwart us. If we’d been a little faster, they might have still tracked me and gotten Mark.”

“How did that sword kill him?” Kendra asked. “I thought it had to be phoenix or dragon fire or unicorn horns.”

“He had magic swords,” Bracken said bitterly. “The hilts were made of dragon teeth, and the blades were enchanted. The magic must have been equivalent to dragon breath.”

“Torina was with them,” Kendra noted.

“She had a few arrows fletched with phoenix feathers,” Bracken said. “Magical as well. They would have done the job too.” He pulled the other arrow from his shield and held it up. “She didn’t bother to use the special ones on me.”

“They ran from you,” Raxtus encouraged.

“I expect they were running from you,” Bracken said. “As well they should. You’re becoming quite formidable. I’d give chase, but it could be a trap, and our only priority now is the Eternal in Texas. We could waste time pursuing these clowns while another hit squad moves in on our last hope.”

Raxtus exercised his wings. “After our last trip, Texas is just around the corner. Hmmm. Might be time to make an exit.”

“The police are coming,” Bracken said.

After the comments, Kendra noticed the distant whine of sirens. She looked over to the pier. “People must have seen us.”

“I’m not sure what I look like to bystanders,” said Raxtus. “Not sure about the wyverns either. But onlookers certainly could have glimpsed people flying around and firing arrows and stabbing each other. Bracken left a couple of bodies on the beach. The police probably received multiple calls. It’s time to flee.”

“You’re right,” Bracken said. “I’ll try to contact the Sphinx. Meanwhile, get us out of here.”



Vasilis

Seth sat on the rocky hillside while Vanessa consulted the hand-drawn map he had received from the Singing Sisters. She compared it to a second map, consulted her compass, and checked the GPS reading. Up ahead, Newel and Doren were fencing with their walking sticks, wood clacking sharply as they slashed and blocked and stabbed. Hugo loomed over Seth, waiting silently as Vanessa got her bearings.

After leaving the paved roads of British Columbia, Vanessa had driven almost tentatively. Seth supposed isolated dirt roads that skirted sheer drops of hundreds of feet would make anyone a little cautious. Vanessa had piloted them along obscure, pitted roads for hours, winding among rugged mountains and picturesque bodies of water until, with dawn approaching, the latest road had ended at a small camping area, where she had proclaimed they would proceed on foot.

“We’re close,” Vanessa said. “If I’m correlating these maps correctly, around this hill, we should find a long valley that narrows into a ravine. The Totem Wall awaits at the end of the ravine. Let’s make this a real break and have a snack.”

“Foo-ood!” Seth called. The satyrs quit their duel and trotted over, opening their packs.

“Would you care for a sandwich, Mike?” Newel asked, referring to the false passport Vanessa had used when bringing Seth over the Canadian border. It was the same passport he had used when traveling to Obsidian Waste. Elise had held their documents, so his passport had made it home to Fablehaven with her. Vanessa had recovered it during her foraging at Fablehaven, and had added forged documents establishing her guardianship. Her extensive experience with international travel had come in handy.

“Pretzels, Mr. McDonald?” Doren asked, using the last name from Seth’s passport. He held out an open bag and shook it enticingly.

“Sure,” Seth said, accepting a pretzel. “At least I didn’t have to walk over the border and then get picked up on the far side.”

“Best to assume the Canadians would have objected to foreign goats,” Newel said, handing Seth a deli sandwich.

“Or a huge dirt pile in the back of the truck,” Doren added. “Or weapons. We did you guys a service, kept all the possible contraband out of your vehicle.”

Newel flung his arms wide, stretching. Appraising the nearest mountaintops, he filled his lungs with the cool morning air. “I’m surprised more people don’t live up here. This is some of the prettiest country I’ve seen, and it’s also the least populated.”

“Harsh winters,” Vanessa said. “We’re lucky they seem to be having a gentle spring. At higher altitudes or farther north I bet we could still find deep snow.”

Seth compressed the tall deli sandwich with his hands and bit into it, crisp lettuce crunching. The satyrs had kept the sandwiches in a cooler, so it was chilled. The sandwich had more mustard and pickles than he liked, but helped satisfy his hunger nonetheless.

Doren tossed pretzels at Newel, who caught them in his mouth. Vanessa ate half her sandwich, then leaned back and closed her eyes. After all the driving she had done, she had to be exhausted.

Seth tried not to obsess about the upcoming task. He wished they could reach the Totem Wall and get started. The anticipation was driving him crazy.

The satyrs returned to fencing with their walking sticks. Vanessa didn’t stir. Seth supposed she had earned a brief rest. To distract himself, he pulled out the coin Bracken had given him.

“You hear me?” Seth mouthed.

I hear you. I should have tried to reach you earlier. We failed to protect another Eternal. Only one left. We’re on our way to Texas. How are you?

“I’m about to carry out one of the hard parts of my mission. If I succeed, maybe we can meet up before long. Is Kendra all right?”

We’re all fine. Uninjured, I mean. Just a little discouraged. Hopefully we’ll both have more success in the near future.

“I’ll be in touch,” Seth whispered.

Keep that coin handy.

“Talking to Bracken?” Vanessa asked, sitting up.

“They lost another Eternal,” Seth said. “Only one left.”

“Which makes our role in this ever more important.” Vanessa arose.

“You shouldn’t communicate too much with the coin. With our enemies in possession of the Oculus, everything we say and do can give away our purposes.”

“I’ve been keeping my language vague,” Seth assured her. “For all we know, they’ve been watching us all along.”

“Not so,” Vanessa said. “I expect their gaze has been directed elsewhere. To the Eternals, mostly, and to Zzyzx itself. If they knew what we were after, we would have encountered opposition long before now. Thanks to all they’re dealing with, our little road trip seems to have escaped their notice thus far. Of course, that could change at any moment.”

Newel’s walking stick broke. Doren started chasing him around the hillside, poking him in the back.

“No fair!” Newel cried. “I’m unarmed!”

“Touché!” Doren exclaimed with each new stab.

“We need to move on,” Vanessa said.

“This game was just getting interesting,” Doren complained, halting the pursuit.

Newel pointed at Doren. “I’ll remember this.”

“You’d do better to forget it,” Doren advised. “It looked humiliating.”

Hugo scooped up Seth and Vanessa. She gave the golem directions, and the satyrs fell into step behind them.

They found the valley where Vanessa had expected, and, as predicted, it narrowed to a steep, dry ravine. When Hugo reached an invisible barrier

that prevented him from proceeding, they knew they had almost reached their destination. Hugo set down Seth and Vanessa.

“I guess this is where I go forward alone,” Seth said.

“We have only one favor to ask the Totem Wall,” Vanessa said. “We mustn’t risk the rest of us encountering it.”

“I have my instructions from the Sisters,” Seth said. “Can’t be too bad, right?”

Vanessa arched an eyebrow. “It might be pretty bad. But I’ve developed faith in you. Bring back the sword.”

“Should I take my sword?” Seth asked. He had buckled on his adamant sword and brought his adamant shield when they had left the truck.

“I don’t know much about the Totem Wall,” Vanessa said. “It’s old magic. Considering what the Sisters shared with you about what lies beyond the wall, I’d guess you might want a sword. Just don’t use it to make any powerful entities unnecessarily angry.”

“Take the sword,” Newel seconded. “Chop up anybody who gives you trouble.”

“I’ve heard it’s easier if you break their weapon first,” Doren added, earning a punch in the shoulder from Newel.

“Okay,” Seth said. “See you soon. You might as well take naps, let Hugo stand guard.”

Seth turned and started walking along the ravine, treading carefully due to the many loose rocks. He looked back once and caught the others watching him somberly. They immediately cheered up and waved, but his initial glance had revealed a level of concern that his companions had been hiding. He wished he hadn’t looked back.

The meandering ravine grew shallower and steeper as he proceeded. Back where the others waited, Seth thought he could have scaled the walls. Now an attempt to climb would be impossible.

Up ahead, a totem pole came into view, brightly painted, as if created recently, standing straight and tall in the middle of the ravine. The stacked images included a squat, chubby warrior on the bottom, three fierce faces above him, and a winged eagle at the top. The grotesque caricatures leered at him, wooden teeth bared, and on some instinctive level, Seth realized the elaborate pole was a warning.

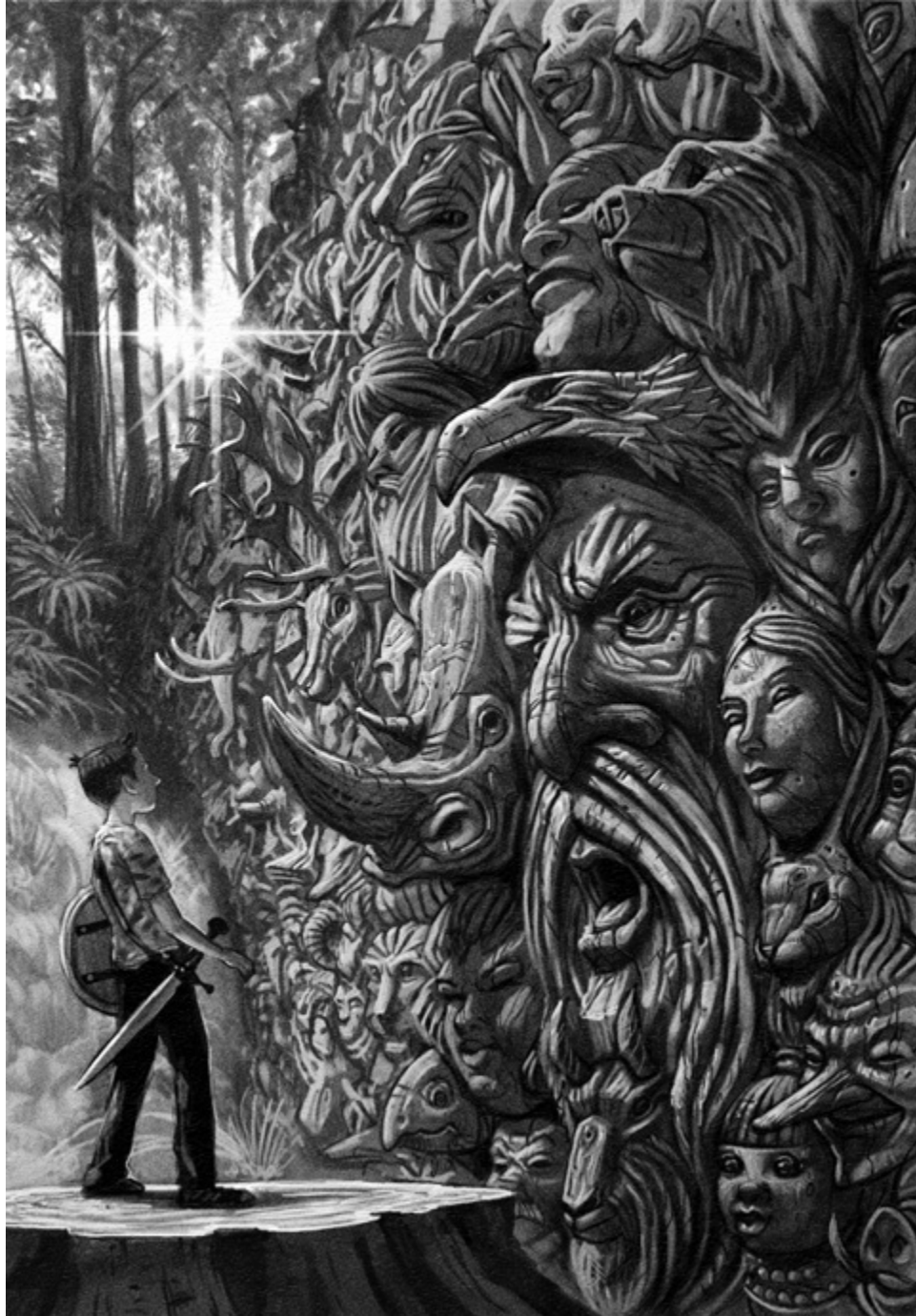
Passing the pole, Seth grew more anxious. The ravine seemed unnaturally silent. He heard no buzzing of insects, no birdcalls, no rustling leaves. The air felt still and heavy. He sensed eyes spying, but could detect nothing to confirm the suspicion. He kept one hand on the hilt of his sword.

Around the next curve, the ravine abruptly ended, and Seth beheld the Totem Wall. Six times his height, built into the rear wall, the Totem Wall spanned the entire ravine like a dam. Hundreds of faces made up the seamless wooden monument, weatherworn, timeworn, but well crafted, each face still very recognizable. A wide variety of animals were represented—bears, wolves, deer, moose, elk, lynxes, beavers, otters, seals, walruses, eagles, owls, and many others. People were depicted in even greater diversity—male and female, old and young, fat and thin, fair and hideous. Some looked friendly, others furious, others wise, others ridiculous, others crafty, others ill, others smug, others frightened, others serene.

Seth had never seen anything like it. He could imagine the Totem Wall as the featured exhibit in the world's finest museum. It was that impressive, that detailed, that unique.

A low stump dominated the ravine in front of the Totem Wall. Seth approached it curiously. No higher than his chest, the stump was at least eight paces across. Seth tried to imagine how tall the tree might have been before it was cut. Judging from the countless visible rings, it must have been thousands of years old.

His intuition told Seth that he should address the wall from atop the stump, using it like a stage or platform. As he climbed up, he noticed that some of the exposed rings were spaced wider than others. He walked to the center, standing on the cluster of concentric circles that formed the innermost rings.



With a cacophony of muttering, grunting, barking, growling, shrieking, and coughing, the Totem Wall came to life. The wooden faces blinked and sniffed and yawned. Tongues wagged. Expressions shifted. The jumbled words spoken by the human faces came out in a language that Seth didn't comprehend.

"I'm Seth Sorenson," Seth said. "I've come to speak with the Totem Wall."

The heads fell silent. A broad male head, old and proud, near the bottom center of the wall, spoke in a profound, resonant voice. "We are many. Choose four to treat with."

"Do all of you speak English?" Seth asked.

"You will hear your language," the head replied. "Choose." He sounded somewhat impatient.

"Very well," Seth said, trying to keep his manner official. "I will speak with Anyu the Hunter, Tootega the Crone, Yuralria the Dancer, and Chu the Beaver."

A surprised murmur rippled across the wall, ending as quickly as it began.

"I hear you," said a rough-hewn male face halfway up the left side of the wall. A knot in the wood disfigured one cheek like a scar.

"I hear you," said a shrewd, hooded face near the bottom right. Intricately carved, she had the most wrinkles of any totem.

"I hear you," said a young, beautiful face with high cheekbones near the top of the wall. The polished smoothness of her features betrayed little evidence of damage from the elements.

"I hear you," said the furry, bucktoothed face of a beaver just below the young woman. His voice sounded adolescent.

After this acknowledgment, the Totem Wall waited, all eyes on Seth. Shifting his weight from side to side, he clasped his hands behind his back. "I seek Vasilis, the Sword of Light and Darkness. I know you guard it. I want to enter and retrieve it."

Another outburst of muttered exclamations fluttered across the wall.

"Silence," demanded the Crone. "How do you know the location of Vasilis?"

"I paid a price," Seth said.

The Hunter spoke in a gruff tone. "Then you should understand that we grant favors only upon receiving an acceptable sacrifice."

"I understand," Seth said respectfully.

"Yet you have little of value," said the Beaver, "save perhaps the sword and the shield. They are unworthy shadows of the treasure we guard."

“Do not press him so hard,” the Dancer fussed. “He is young.” Her voice softened. “What have you to offer?”

“Along with the sword, you house great evil,” Seth said. “Permit me to retrieve the sword, and I will purge the evil inside of you before I exit.”

“Others have come to us in search of Vasilis,” the Crone mused. “Rarely have they already suspected the location. We have admitted some. None have returned.”

“The youth speaks with confidence,” the Hunter approved.

“Any simpleton can speak with confidence,” the Dancer said. “Sometimes the greatest fools have the most bravado. The boy is young and naïve. He will come to harm, and he will not deliver on his promise.”

“The wise do nothing,” the Beaver complained. “The wise sit and advise. Their understanding prevents action. Do not underestimate the young.”

“What deeds have you accomplished?” the Hunter asked.

Seth hadn’t planned on turning in a resume. He tried to recall his highlights from the past couple of years. “I pulled a dark talisman from the neck of a revenant. I caught a leprechaun. I awoke Olloch the Glutton and put him back to sleep. I found the Chronometer, one of the keys to Zzyzx. I stole the horn of a unicorn from the centaurs at Grunhold. I have bargained with the giant Thronis and left him satisfied. I killed the dragon Siletta in order to retrieve an item from the dragons of Wyrmoost. I survived the Dreamstone at Obsidian Waste and helped retrieve the Translocator, another key to Zzyzx. And I’ve bargained with the Singing Sisters.”

“He speaks true,” the Crone said.

“And I’m telling you the truth now,” Seth said. “I don’t feel fear. I can get this sword and rid you of the evil hiding near it. And then I’ll use the sword to save the world.”

“He means what he says,” the Crone said.

“Tootega knows truth,” the Dancer admitted.

“He has accomplished much,” the Hunter granted.

“We should not measure him by age or appearance,” the Beaver said.

“He seeks no knowledge,” the Crone murmured. “No divination is required. What say you, Kattituyok?”

The proud face who had spoken first answered in a booming voice. “The evil behind the Alder Door has plagued us for many summers. The youth has named the four who control the Alder Door. This seems a good omen.”

“He may not return,” the Dancer said. “He should leave us tokens.”

“The sword and the shield,” the Hunter said.

“And the magical items from his bag,” the Crone added. “The tower and the fish.”

“Won’t I need my sword to fight?” Seth asked.

“Your sword and shield are well crafted from fine material, but they will avail you nothing beyond the Alder Door,” Kattituyok said. “Leave behind the requested items to seal the pact.”

“And I can reclaim my things if I succeed?” Seth verified.

“Purge the evil lurking beyond the Alder Door,” the Crone said, “and you may depart in peace with Vasilis and the rest of your items.”

“I say the same,” the Hunter stated.

“I say the same,” the Beaver echoed.

“I say the same,” the Dancer sighed.

“Do you accept?” Kattituyok asked.

“I accept,” Seth said, unbuckling his sword belt.

“The pact is made and sealed,” Kattituyok thundered. His resounding words made the stump vibrate.

Seth set down his sword and shield. Then he fished out the onyx tower and the agate leviathan. He set the items down. A previously unseen door swung open near the bottom right of the wall. The Crone’s withered face filled the center of the door.

“Can I go?” Seth asked.

“Away,” Kattituyok said. “Good hunting.”

Seth climbed down from the stump and walked to the doorway, conscious of the many eyes of the Totem Wall scrutinizing his movements. Cold air wafted from the dark corridor beyond. A primitive torch on the wall ignited spontaneously. Stepping through the door, Seth pocketed his flashlight and picked up the torch. Behind him, the door swung shut with the finality of a coffin lid.

The crude, rounded corridor sloped gradually downward. No beams or stonework supported the crumbly walls and ceiling. The air grew colder as Seth progressed, and he held the torch close for warmth.

The Singing Sisters had warned him about the Standing Dead. He was unsure what exactly to expect, but he imagined they might be like the revenant. He lacked a sword, but perhaps the fiery torch would serve him better. The Sisters had told him that he could pass the Standing Dead only if he remained without fear. He knew that magical fear would fail against him, and tried to prepare his mind to resist the more natural variety.

The corridor stretched onward, deeper and colder. He walked briskly, partly to stay warm, partly hoping that haste might help keep him from freaking himself out.

At last the corridor opened into a rectangular room where the top of his head almost reached the ceiling. Despite the great width and length of the room, the low ceiling gave it a claustrophobic feel, like a sprawling basement. The frigid air suggested the presence of magical fear, although, as expected, he felt no paralysis.

As the light from his torch revealed the scene, the hair stood up on Seth's arms, and goose pimples erupted on his skin. Row after row of standing corpses filled the expansive room. And not just any corpses. They were bony and dry, as if their ancient remains had been mummified. What meat remained on their discolored bones looked like black jerky. What skin survived looked brown and stretched and utterly dehydrated. Evenly spaced, the cadavers stood upright, arms at their sides, like an army at attention. Rank upon rank of empty eye sockets stared vacantly.

Seth had been prepping himself not to react with fear. He had told himself that no matter what he saw, or heard, or smelled, he would shrug and continue onward. After all, if the Standing Dead only preyed on fear, he didn't need to fret about them. He just needed to maintain control of his emotions.

But despite his intentions, Seth felt his control slipping. The sight of the torchlit bodies surprised him. It was creepier than he had imagined. This was how corpses looked when they had been buried in the desert for centuries. They should not be standing in orderly rows and columns, deep underground.

Some of the nearest corpses began to twitch. The movement made Seth gasp, and a few of them took steps forward. Rustling movements rippled through the entire assemblage. Doubt fully awakened inside of Seth. He became scared that he was becoming scared. Dry bones scuffed against the dirt floor. Desiccated arms reached toward him.

His mind scrambled. What was his problem? Why was he losing his grip? Was it being alone? Was it self-doubt? Was it the thought of walking through the undead crowd? Was it the cold? Was it the low ceiling? The quantity of corpses? The inhumanity of their appearance? The way their joints creaked when they moved? The fact that he had lost control enough to start them moving? Some snowballing combination of all these factors?

Perhaps he had been too overconfident, too assured that his immunity to magical fear would prevent natural fear. Like anyone, he still got scared.

He realized that he couldn't hear their minds. He had gotten used to hearing the undead. For some reason, these were silent. That had helped them surprise him and made them feel more foreign.

Entire rows of mummified bodies shuffled toward him. The nearest had almost reached him. He could see stringy ligaments and tendons working. Was he about to die? What about his family? Who would save them? Would they ever learn he had perished because he was afraid?

Shame blossomed in his breast. He could almost hear Kendra disbelieving that cowardice had killed him. Courage was supposed to be his best attribute!

How could he change his feelings? When he had nightmares, the experience was always worst when he was alone. If there was ever a friend in his dream, somebody to protect, the fear lost potency. At this moment, as fleshless fingers grasped for him, he needed somebody to be brave for, somebody to not let down. He struggled to summon images of his family—his parents, his grandparents.

What came was the memory of Coulter. He saw his friend pinned under a beam, heard him gasping his last breaths. Coulter, who had saved him in the grove with the revenant, when magical fear had frozen them. Suddenly Seth no longer felt alone. There was no way he was going to let Coulter down. He had promised.

“Stop!” Seth yelled, swinging his torch angrily. The corpses paused. “I’m not afraid anymore! You just startled me.” As he said the words, he

realized they were true. Apparently the Standing Dead could sense it as well. None of them stirred.

“You guys have got to be the shabbiest dead people I’ve ever seen,” Seth accused. He strode forward, passing between the unmoving corpses. “You’re what’s left after the vultures give up. You make zombies look healthy. If you want to scare people, you better pool your funds and rent a wraith or something.”

Making fun of them helped his spirits, and the Standing Dead didn’t seem to mind. He saw them with new eyes, pathetic puppets without wills of their own. Slaves to his mood, unable to harm him if he simply refused. Decrepit, frail, pathetic. He hurried past them, too full of purpose and new confidence to leave room for doubt.

A black door stood at the back of the room. It had no knob, no keyhole. When he pressed on it with his free hand, the door swung inward.

The torch went out immediately. One instant it was blazing, the next not a spark remained, leaving behind impenetrable darkness. Trying to keep his courage steady, Seth stepped into the room and closed the door, relieved to have a barrier between himself and the Standing Dead. He dropped the torch and pulled the flashlight from his pocket. He switched it on, but no light came out.

“Why have you intruded on my privacy?” a weary, male voice rasped from further in the room.

“Who’s there?” Seth asked.

“It took courage to pass the Standing Dead,” the voice said. “Especially after you initially lost your composure. Yet they are nothing compared to me. I could slay you with a word.”

“Who are you?” Seth asked again.

“I am one of the undead,” the voice answered. “Aren’t you supposed to be a shadow charmer, Seth? Can’t you probe my thoughts?”

“How do you know my name?”

“Your mind was open to me the moment you entered the Alder Door. More open than most would be. What do you suppose your parents are doing right now? Dying, perchance, like your friend Coulter?”

Seth squeezed his flashlight. “I don’t care what you are, you better shut up.”

“Careful,” the voice warned. “Down here, I am judge, jury, and executioner. Why do you want Vasilis?”

“Well,” Seth said, gathering his thoughts, wondering what the voice wanted to hear.

“Don’t bother with words,” the voice said. “I just needed to get you thinking along the right track. Zzyzx is really so close to falling? And Graulas is running the Society?”

“Yes. You know about Zzyzx?”

“Perhaps I should introduce myself.” A sword appeared toward the back of the room, standing vertically, blade in the ground, visible only as a black silhouette, but surrounded by a corona of pristine white light that illuminated the entire chamber. It was not a large room, round with a domed ceiling. One other person inhabited the room, off to one side, a strange, decaying zombie. Every part of his body except his head and one arm had turned to stone.

“What happened to you?” Seth asked, aghast.

“I am Morisant,” the zombie answered. His voice seemed very lucid considering how corroded his head and arm appeared. “I can tell the name means nothing to you.”

“Sorry,” Seth said. “Should it?”

“I was the chief architect of Zzyzx.”

“What? I thought wizards made Zzyzx.”

“Precisely,” the semipetrified zombie answered.

“You’re a wizard?” Seth asked.

“I am all that remains of a once powerful wizard. Ages ago, some might have considered me the most influential wizard in the world. I see you know Agad. I am glad to know he is well. He assisted me with Zzyzx.”

“How did you end up here?” Seth asked.

“There is more than one answer to that question. I am here because Agad put me here. That is an accurate response. I am here because I was master of Vasilis. Also accurate. Best answer? I am here because of hubris.”

“Hubris?”

“That unhealthy variety of pride which leads a man to destroy himself. You see, sometimes, when a person gains too much power, he believes he is

above the rules that apply to others. You're aware that wizards live a long time."

"Right."

"I was the eldest of the wizards who created Zzyzx. The eldest by far. Wizards age slowly, but nevertheless we age. To a human, we may seem immortal, but death still awaits us in the end. Even enormous quantities of time inevitably pass. When my end drew near, in defiance of the wisdom my long life should have granted, I opted to cheat death."

"What happened?" Seth asked, fascinated.

"I turned myself into one of the undead," Morisant said with regret. "I wove a complicated spell of my own design, a spell so complex and potent that I believed I could fully preserve my mental faculties and continue my life in an undead body."

"Sounds like it failed."

"Something was lost," Morisant said. "I did manage to sustain most of my intellect. But certain sensitivities abandoned me, unforeseen appetites awakened, and my sword, Vasilis, began to lose its luster. I found ways to ignore the changes. I refused to admit my mistake, particularly to myself. Over time, I became a different person. Indeed, I became a threat to the safety of the world. My most trusted colleagues were forced to capture me and bind me here in this prison, changing most of my body to stone in the process. I vowed they would never take my sword, and, as they lacked the power to do so, they chose to hide me away with Vasilis, making me the guardian of the blade I had wielded in life."

"Wow," Seth said. "You seem to be back in control of yourself."

"Do I? Centuries trapped in this cell have provided ample opportunity for reflection. I have recognized my mistakes and mastered my inability to slake my appetites. But don't be fooled. I am no longer the same man I used to be. My nature is fundamentally corrupted. I fought against darkness my whole life, only to become everything I despised. My only hope for atonement is to undo the perversions I sired and submit to the inevitable."

Seth glanced at the sword. "So what now? Do I have to pass a test?"

"I have waited a long time for the arrival of one worthy to wield Vasilis. Some candidates have been slain by the Standing Dead. The rest were slain by me, after I examined their minds. Your need is just, as are your intentions. Should you fail, Vasilis will have been honorably

employed. Should you succeed, the Singing Sisters will serve as suitable guardians. They will certainly never wield it. The sword is yours under one condition.”

“What?”

“You use it to dispatch me, then put to rest the Standing Dead.”

Seth stared at the pathetic zombie. He had almost forgotten that part of his mission was to rid this area of evil. “But you’re nice.”

“Many would disagree. I prolonged my life unnaturally. Please remedy this mistake, or I will have to slay you and wait for another. Believe me, Seth, you will be killing me in self-defense. My death is the only way for both of us to get what we need.”

“What about the Standing Dead?” Seth asked.

“I created them,” Morisant said. “A mindless undead legion, loyal only to me. After my capture, I turned them into effective guardians. It will be a mercy to unmake them. Not to mention, you must keep your promise to the Totem Wall, or you will never escape with your life. Will you do as I ask? Don’t lie, I will know.”

“I’ll do it,” Seth said, thinking of Coulter, and of his family.

“Thank you,” Morisant said with great relief.

“Do you have any advice? Can you help me? If Zzyzx falls, I’m not sure what to do.”

“You’re on the proper course, in ways you may not yet understand. I tried to design Zzyzx intelligently. I am glad that Bracken is with you. Try to get word to Agad. He could be useful. Ancient magic bound the demons; ancient magic might save you. Not to minimize the threat. This horde of demons is stronger than any force you could possibly muster. Should the chance arise, give Bracken and Agad my regards. Thank them for me, and please convey that I hold no grudges.”

“Is there any trick to the sword?” Seth asked.

“None. Vasilis reflects and reinforces the heart and mind of the wielder. As a young, loyal, courageous, well-intentioned shadow charmer, you should find the sword formidable in your grasp. I see you have a sister. Fairykind. That could prove interesting.” Morisant paused as if lost to internal musings.

“You were saying?” Seth prompted.

Morisant snapped out of his stupor. “The sheath rests beside the door. Do not unsheathe the blade more often than necessary. Should you fall, no enemy can claim Vasilis, only a friend. In life, the sword can only be given away voluntarily. A single caution? Vasilis is powerful, and power can have an adverse effect on the heart and mind, which can in turn alter the sword. Many have acquired the sword while walking in the light, only to lose it in darkness.”

“I’ll do my best,” Seth promised.

“Coulter would be proud. Now, Seth Sorenson, I hereby transfer Vasilis into your care, on condition that you release me and my fellow abominations from our necrotic prisons. Take up the sword and keep your promise.”

Seth crossed the room to where the sword stuck out of the ground. He could hardly believe he had made it this far. Maybe he really would keep his promise to Coulter! Maybe he would find a way to stop the demons and save his family.

When he grabbed the hilt, warmth flooded through him. The dark blade burst into red flames, and the white radiance became scarlet. The blade came out of the ground easily. The sword felt less like something in his grasp and more like an extension of his arm. His emotions were magnified—his fury at Graulas keener, his sense of purpose clearer, the concern for his family more poignant. The courage he had struggled to find when facing the Standing Dead now seemed to spring from an unending well.

Seth whirled to face Morisant. The undead wizard looked even more wretched by the blazing red light.

“Yes,” the wizard said, obviously delighted. “You will be most formidable.”

Seth strode forward and raised the sword. He knew what he had to do, yet he hesitated.

“You promised, Seth,” the wizard reminded him. “It is a true act of mercy.” The wizard raised his voice. “Let it be known that Morisant the Magnificent died in possession of himself! Better late than never.”

The pathetic ruin of a man closed his eyes, and Seth brought the sword down with a fiery whoosh. Morisant instantly burst into flames. Within seconds his corrupted flesh had been entirely consumed.

Seth walked out of the room to where the Standing Dead waited in their columns and rows. Was it his imagination, or did Vasilis feel eager in his hands, tugging him forward? As he stalked through the room cutting down the Standing Dead, setting those tinder-dry corpses ablaze, he found himself wondering if he was wielding the sword, or if the sword was wielding him. The weapon felt alive in his hands, seemingly rejoicing at the massacre. Or was he the one rejoicing? Minutes ago, these burning figures had tried to kill him. Now he was mowing through them like the Grim Reaper during a manic phase. Every swing of the sword felt so natural, so perfect, it was as if he were performing some violent, predestined dance. Without screams, without blood, without any evidence of pain, the Standing Dead crumbled to ash around him, until he stood alone, surveying the empty room by the flaming glare of his sword.

Only then did he realize that he had forgotten the sheath.

Seth returned to the room where Morisant had perished and picked up the sheath. Without his torch, he would need the light from his blade to guide him out, so he held the sheath in one hand and Vasilis in the other. The coldness of this subterranean lair forgotten, Seth marched out radiating fervent heat.

The Alder Door opened as he approached, and he stepped out into the noonday sunlight. The door closed behind him. For a pregnant moment, the Totem Wall watched him in silence.

“Now, that is a sword!” the Hunter exclaimed.

Seth sheathed it, and experienced an immediate sense of loss. He suddenly felt tired, and clammy, and much smaller. The faces of the Totem Wall chattered and cheered as Seth crossed to the stump, scrambled up, and retrieved his things. He paused, studying the animated wall. The jubilant clamor was unintelligible. He heard no English.

Satisfied that the Totem Wall seemed content, he climbed down from the stump. Without a backward glance, Seth hurried to rejoin his friends.

Chapter 24



Civia

With an overcast sky hiding the sun, Raxtus landed silently on a side street near the grocery store parking lot. Remaining invisible, the dragon took off again, leaving Kendra and Bracken behind. Bracken raced along the sidewalk, bearskin cape flapping, Kendra at his heels. Jumping over the low bushes bordering the sidewalk, they dashed across the parking lot and hurried into the back of an SUV.

Warren waited in the driver's seat. "Nice outfit, Bracken. You really blend."

"Is she still in the store?" Bracken asked.

Warren checked his wristwatch. "Almost eight minutes. I've been tailing her for about two hours. The info you relayed from Niko took me right to her apartment."

"Good," Bracken said. "No sign of our adversaries?"

"Not yet. Without an evident threat, I didn't want to approach her solo. I'm not a unicorn, I'm not fairykind—I have no way to prove I'm an ally."

"Probably wise," Bracken agreed. "Besides, there wasn't much you could do to help her escape until Raxtus arrived. Our inside source at the Society told me a new assassin was dispatched to help bring down the last

Eternal. He said the others have orders to wait for the newcomer before moving in. It should buy us some time. Apparently they tried to take her out a couple of weeks ago in South America but blew the chance. She's supposed to be slippery."

"Her name is Civia?" Warren asked.

"So I hear from our source," Bracken said. "The source also hinted that the new assassin they sent out might somehow work in our favor."

"Let's hope your source is reliable," Warren said doubtfully.

"I'd rather not bet the fate of the world on it," Bracken said.

"Don't you have armor?" Warren asked Kendra.

"Everything I had got soaked," Kendra explained. "We had to stop and get dry clothes. I'm actually glad. Armor isn't my thing. I felt clunky."

"Armor gets much more convenient once people start trying to cut you open," Warren said.

"At least I look normal," Kendra said.

"I see you wrapped your sword in a sheet," Warren observed.

Kendra held it up. "Best disguise we could manage on short notice."

"I think we should let Kendra approach Civia," Bracken suggested.

"We don't want to spook her."

"Approaching her could be dangerous," Warren cautioned.

"True," Bracken agreed. "Civia will be on the defensive and may react desperately. But Kendra will feel much less threatening than either of us, and you can go in with her to keep an eye on the discussion."

"Since I'm not dressed in animal hides," Warren said.

"I'm expecting a fight," Bracken said. "I'll wait out here. Sorry it took us longer than I had hoped to meet up with you. Raxtus had to rest for a couple of hours in Arizona. He has flown a lot of miles in very few days."

"No problem," Warren said. "I barely got to Texas ahead of you. My plane only landed three hours ago."

"Should I bring the sword?" Kendra asked.

"Leave it," Bracken said. "We don't want to make her even more nervous. Niko said her guardian is female, and is currently shaped like a bichon frise."

"A bichon frise?" Kendra asked.

“A *female* shape-shifter?” Warren wondered.

“A bichon frise is a lapdog with curly white fur,” Bracken said. “I’m not sure how gender works with shape-shifters. But Niko called her female.”

“Is Niko getting close?” Warren asked.

“He’s not far,” Bracken said. “Should catch up within the hour.”

“We should probably get in there,” Kendra said. “I’m scared the bad guys will show up again.”

Bracken nodded. “What was Civia driving?”

“The little compact over there,” Warren said, pointing. “Nondescript. She knows how to blend.”

“Try to bring her back here,” Bracken said. “Keep in touch with the stone.”

“You got it,” Warren said. “Kendra, follow me after about thirty seconds.”

Warren got out of the SUV. Kendra counted to thirty in her mind and then exited the vehicle. She walked to the front of the store, chose a cart, and wheeled it past the checkout counters, in case a girl with a bichon frise was on her way out. She saw several women checking out, but none had a dog.

Kendra doubled back across the front of the store, looking down the aisles. When she saw Warren selecting cereal, he jerked his head toward the produce section.

In the produce section, Kendra immediately spotted a young woman with dark, straight hair examining apples. She wore jeans, running shoes, and a TCU sweatshirt. Her brown skin suggested she might be Indian or Middle Eastern. A fluffy white dog sat patiently in the infant seat of a well-laden shopping cart.

The dog took an interest in Kendra, so she looked away. She wheeled her cart over to the oranges and started handling them. The woman pushed her cart over to the broccoli. The dog caught Kendra staring again. Deciding to be direct, Kendra steered her cart toward the woman.

The dog seemed to mumble something, and the young woman studied Kendra as she approached. Kendra maintained eye contact with the woman.

“Can I help you?” the woman asked with a relaxed smile.

“Please believe me,” Kendra began, glancing at the dog. “I’m here to help. The Society is moving in on you again.”

“What society?” the woman chuckled, slipping a hand into her purse. “You must have mistaken me for someone else.”

“No, Civia, I’m serious.”

The woman’s eyes widened. She quickly surveyed the area. They were currently the only shoppers in the produce section. “What are you doing?” she whispered uncomfortably.

“They have the Oculus,” Kendra said in a quiet voice. “I’m here with a unicorn, a dragon, and a friend, to try to save your life.”

“The girl has an uncanny glow,” the dog murmured in a female voice.

Civia stepped toward Kendra, resting a hand on her shoulder. Her other hand covertly held a switchblade at her side. “Listen, sweetheart, I don’t know who you are, but I’ve been doing just fine on my own for a long, long time. I work alone.”

The knife at her side had Kendra’s full attention. She realized that the wrong words or action might get her stabbed. “You’re the last Eternal,” she whispered.

Civia faltered for a moment; then her gaze hardened. The tip of the switchblade pricked Kendra. “Leave your cart,” Civia ordered. “Walk out of here with me.”

“I’m not alone,” Kendra said.

Warren stepped into view, hands on his shopping cart, eyes on Civia. Kendra had never seen him look quite so serious. Civia glanced at him.

“Presumably your friends don’t want you killed,” Civia hissed. “I believe you’re trying to help, or I’d have already gutted you. But I don’t work with partners. No exceptions. I’ve obviously been identified here. I’ll move on.”

“Your enemies can follow you with the Oculus,” Kendra argued. “And we can track you with help from the leader of your shape-shifters. He’ll be here soon.”

“I’ve killed many people over the years,” Civia whispered. “I could end you right now, then take care of your glaring friend.”

“You won’t defeat the people who are coming for you,” Kendra warned, braced for the switchblade to rip into her at any moment. “They

have a big team, and all the right weapons. You need to change your strategy and flee to Wyrmoost. Agad is there. He may be able to protect you.”

Warren trundled his cart toward them.

“That’s close enough,” Civia told him.

Warren stopped. “I don’t care who you are,” he said. “You harm Kendra and I’ll break your neck.”

Civia frowned, the knife moving slightly away from Kendra’s side. “Okay, you win,” she sighed, shoulders sagging. Then she shoved Kendra at Warren and sprinted for the back of the store.

As Warren steadied Kendra, the bichon frise sprang at Warren from the shopping cart, transforming into a small wolverine in midair. Warren batted the wolverine with the back of his fist, sending it flying into a bin of potatoes. “Go back to the parking lot,” he told Kendra as he took off after Civia.

“Don’t fight us,” Kendra scolded the snarling wolverine.

The wolverine changed into an owl and flew after Warren. From the back of the store, an unseen woman screamed. Kendra retreated out the front of the store in time to see the SUV screeching out of view toward the rear of the building. Apparently Warren was in communication with Bracken.

Running to the side of the store, Kendra sprinted along the asphalt toward the back. Upon arrival, she found the SUV parked crookedly, and saw Warren using a mop to fend off a furious owl. Civia was pinned to the ground as if by an unseen force. Raxtus.

“We’ve caused a scene,” Bracken warned Civia. He stood over her, holding her switchblade. “Whatever our future arrangement, we need to get away from here.”

“Fine,” Civia spat.

“Into the car,” Bracken said.

Suddenly able to rise, Civia hurried into the SUV. Warren claimed the driver’s seat. Kendra took shotgun. Civia, Bracken, and the owl settled in the back. Warren started driving toward the street.

“A dragon?” Civia sputtered. “Really? Who are you people?”

Bracken took her hand. The act seemed to calm her. "We're here to help," he said. "I can see that you've been running for a long time."

She jerked her hand away. "Get out of my head."

"Leave her alone!" the owl shrieked.

"Quiet the owl," Bracken said.

"Janan, be still," Civia said.

The owl turned back into a lapdog.

"I didn't mean to intrude," Bracken said. "It's just quicker if I examine your mind."

"I prefer words," Civia insisted. "You say the Society is after me. How do I know you aren't an enemy?"

"He really is a unicorn," Janan said. "They have distinctive auras."

"If we wanted you dead, we had you," Bracken reminded her.

Civia closed her eyes and leaned her head back. "Involving others in my life leads to failure and heartache. Most of my near misses have resulted from relationships. I've gotten good people killed. I've done much better on my own."

"Until recently," Bracken prompted.

She opened her eyes. "I was in a small village in Ecuador just a couple of weeks ago. Way off the map. I ran a modest bakery. I had a few casual friends. Nobody knew my secret. I had been there three years. And I was ambushed. No warning. Until you mentioned the Oculus, I had no idea how they found me. I killed a couple of my assailants and escaped into the jungle. Had I not been well prepared, they would have had me. But I'm careful. I hide weapons in convenient locations. I hide motorcycles and watercraft. Even helicopters. I set traps. My job is to stay alive, and I take it very seriously."

"The rules have changed," Bracken advised. "Your enemies now have the Oculus. They possess vast resources, and they know what it takes to kill you."

"I have identities all over the world," Civia protested. "I'm fluent in over thirty languages, passable in thirty more. I have access to huge sums of money. I'm an expert at altering my look."

"Even if you stay in constant motion, they'll catch you," Bracken said. "You have to change tactics and get behind unassailable walls."

“No walls are unassailable,” Civia muttered.

“But many afford better protection than a grocery store,” Warren commented. “Do we have a destination?”

“Do you have an opinion?” Bracken asked Civia.

“I have a storage locker loaded with equipment. Hand me the GPS.”

Kendra took the GPS off the dashboard and handed it to Civia. She began punching in a destination.

“Our dragon can fly you to Wyrmoost,” Bracken said. “Agad will grant you safe haven once he knows the particulars.”

“Who is wielding the Oculus?” Civia asked.

“A demon named Graulas has wrested control of the Society from the Sphinx,” Bracken explained. “Another demon, Nagi Luna, has proven to be most adept at employing the Oculus. Two Eternals have died in the last week. An inside operative has confirmed that assassins are presently moving to eliminate you.”

“The last one,” Civia sighed. “Calling us Eternals was never very accurate. We are not immune to death. Anyone who can die, will eventually die. I always assumed I would be the last. I don’t know how anyone else could have been more cautious than I. I’ve studied endless fighting techniques, I keep my body well conditioned, I avoid suspicious behavior, I eschew vices, I shun close relationships, I’m always on guard, always preparing for the worst. Still, I can hardly believe the others are truly gone. There was an added sense of security knowing they were out there. The Society has all of the artifacts?”

“All of them,” Bracken said. “And they know how to get to Zzyzx. You’re their final obstacle.”

She turned and stared out the window. “It had to happen eventually. For so long, I’ve lived like I was the last impediment to the opening of Zzyzx. And now I am. It isn’t much of a life, the way I live. I’m detached. An outsider. My only companionship comes from Janan, for which I will be forever grateful. But my life is unpleasant. Funny, for a long while now, I have quietly relished the thought of an end, looked forward to the day my enemies would finally outmaneuver me. That day has finally arrived.”

“You’re not dead yet,” Warren assured her.

“We’ll get you to Wyrmoost,” Bracken pledged.

Civia shook her head sadly. “We’ll try. Based on the scenario you described, I won’t make it.”

“The dragon—” Bracken began.

“The dragon felt small,” Civia said. “Valiant, no doubt, but small. If this demon is as adept with the Oculus as you say, we will be intercepted and I will be destroyed. With the Oculus to guide them, if all of their attention is now focused on me, and they have the kind of resources you described, we have no realistic defense.”

“We have to try,” Kendra said.

“Of course we’ll try,” Civia said. “I’m sorry if I sound fatalistic. I try to assess my circumstances honestly. Experience and effort have made my judgment reliable. But maybe we’ll get lucky. You’re right that hiding at Wyrmoost could provide a temporary solution. At least we know Agad will be sympathetic to my plight. Having the dragon transport me there probably represents my best chance for survival.”

“But you don’t think it’s much of a chance,” Warren said.

“Not really,” Civia said simply.

“You’re right,” Bracken said reluctantly. “They used wyverns against us in Santa Monica. Raxtus managed to slay them, but had trouble protecting his passengers in the process. Of course, the Eternal in Santa Monica had a death wish. Even so, our enemies are too close to their goal. They’ll throw everything they have at us before they let you reach Wyrmoost. But what else can we do?”

“I’m not properly established here yet,” Civia said. “I spent the last ten days on the move. I suppose we could try to find a spot to make a stand.”

“Which creates the same problem as running with the dragon,” Warren said. “They’ll throw too much at us. But, unlike with the dragon, you’ll be cornered.”

Civia furrowed her brow. “I suppose if the dragon takes an erratic route, we might have a small chance.”

“I’ll come with you,” Bracken offered. “I can help defend you if Raxtus ever needs to set us down. I’m handy with a sword. And Niko, the leader of the shape-shifters, will catch up before long.”

“Don’t forget me,” Janan said.

Civia gave a nod. "The storage locker isn't far. Let's gather the appropriate gear." Her expression softened. She leaned forward and patted Kendra on the shoulder. "I'm sorry I reacted so harshly when you tried to approach me. You collided with centuries of habit. I see now that your intrusion into my affairs was warranted."

"Wow," Janan said. "Civia never apologizes."

"I do so," Civia replied defensively.

"Not when I'm around," the dog murmured.

"Thanks, Civia," Kendra said. "We understand how shocking all of this must seem."

"We were just happy to find you alive," Bracken said. "We'll do all we can to keep you that way."

"Lonestar Lockers?" Warren asked.

"That's the place," Civia said.

Warren pulled up to a keypad in front of an electronic gate. Beyond the gate awaited rows of squat, cinder-block structures. The evenly spaced blue doors made the storage complex look like a crowded neighborhood composed entirely of adjoining garages.

"Code?" Warren asked.

"Nine, seven, zero, one, pound," Civia recited.

Warren punched in the numbers and the gate slowly opened. Warren pulled into the complex. A wall topped with barbed wire surrounded the facility.

"Turn left," Civia directed. Following her instructions, after the first turn, he cut down the third aisle, then stopped the SUV about halfway down.

"Let's make it quick," Warren said. "We're on borrowed time."

Civia exited the SUV, and Janan hopped down after her. Bracken and Kendra got out as well. Warren remained in the vehicle with the engine running.

Producing a key chain from her purse, Civia opened the heavy padlock on her storage locker, then lifted up the door. The locker contained several trunks and tall cabinets. Kendra also noticed a pair of motorcycles, one big and heavy, the other small and sleek.

Moving around the locker purposefully, Civia opened a trunk and strapped a short sword around her waist, then added a dagger. Next she removed a compound bow from a cabinet and snatched a quiver of arrows. “What do you need?” she asked.

“Do you have swords?” Bracken wondered.

She opened a metal cabinet. “Take your pick.”

Bracken removed a sheathed sword and pulled it from the scabbard. “You really are prepared,” he admired.

“It’s what I do. Kendra, would you like a shirt of mail?”

Raxtus landed heavily in front of the storage locker. “They’re here,” he said urgently.

“Explain,” Bracken said.

“Four black vans speeding toward this storage area. Three wyverns closing in by air, along with a firedrake. They all showed up together.”

“Can you outrun them?” Bracken asked.

“I can try,” Raxtus said without confidence. “The wyverns are coming from all directions.”

“Can you take out the firedrake?” Bracken asked.

“I think so,” Raxtus said.

“Go up alone, invisible,” Bracken said. “Take care of the airborne threats, then return for Civia. We’ll hold off the others.”

Raxtus took flight, becoming invisible soon after leaving the ground. They heard the gate being smashed, followed by the sounds of tires squealing.

“Wait in here,” Bracken told Civia and Kendra.

Sword in hand, he stepped out of the locker. Civia shrugged into a leather biker jacket and put on a motorcycle helmet. Kendra grabbed a second bow from a cabinet and a quiver of arrows. She nocked an arrow, her hand shaking. Outside, Bracken conversed with Warren.

“Is this it?” Janan asked candidly.

“I sincerely hope not,” Civia replied, voice muffled by her helmet.

“Our fight is not with you,” declared a magically magnified voice. “Give us the Eternal and you may depart in peace.”

Kendra knew the voice! She peeked out of the storage locker. Black vans blocked both ends of the aisle, two at each end. In front of the vans to

the left stood Mirav the wizard, wearing a richly embroidered robe that descended to his ankles. Behind him, Torina pulled an arrow from her quiver, flanked by a quartet of minotaurs wielding hefty axes.

At the other end of the aisle, the Gray Assassin drew his swords. Trask got out of a van, carrying his heavy crossbow. By his demeanor, Kendra could tell he must be under the influence of a narcoblix. Armored goblins clambered out of the vans as well.

Kendra glanced at the overcast sky. Apparently Mirav could withstand daylight with sufficient cloud cover. She wondered if he had summoned the clouds.

“Let’s talk about this,” Bracken soothed, now holding his shield as well as his sword. Still inside the SUV, Warren clutched a sword as well.

Overhead, a wyvern shrieked and fell from the sky, neck kinked disgustingly. Mirav glared upward. Mouthing strange words, he waved a hand upward, and Raxtus became visible as he swooped to engage what looked like a flying snake about the length of a telephone pole. Upon seeing Raxtus, fire bloomed from its fanged jaws, and the firedrake took evasive maneuvers, wriggling like a ribbon in a windstorm.

“You have chosen destruction,” the wizard pronounced, yanking the horn of a unicorn from within his robes. The pearly horn was much larger than the horn Kendra had used at Wyrmoost, perhaps three feet in length. From either side of the wizard, minotaurs charged, armed with axes and maces. The Gray Assassin dashed toward them from the other direction, followed by goblins carrying swords and spears. The wizard pointed a long-nailed finger at Bracken and commenced chanting.

Laughing, Bracken threw his sword aside and extended a hand toward the wizard. “To me,” he said. Although Kendra understood the meaning of his words, she felt certain he was not speaking English.

The unicorn horn leapt from the wizard’s hand and streaked to Bracken, who caught it effortlessly. In his grasp, the horn immediately transformed into a sword with an opalescent hilt and a gleaming silver blade. Despite the cloudy sky, with the weapon in his hand, Bracken suddenly appeared as if standing in sunlight. A new glow suffused his countenance, and a sudden fire flashed in his eyes.

“The fool brought him his second horn,” Janan murmured beside Kendra.

Mirav looked stricken, but continued his spell. As the wizard finished his incantation, sizzling darts of energy began to leap from his extended finger. They blazed through the air, only to reverse their course as Bracken held out his sword. Every dart Mirav launched returned to burst against him, knocking him backward and setting his robe on fire.

As Bracken rushed forward to confront the oncoming minotaurs, Warren stepped on the gas, driving the SUV in the other direction. Trask shattered the windshield with a pair of quarrels from his crossbow, but the SUV kept gaining speed. The Gray Assassin maneuvered left and right, but Warren kept the vehicle on a line to run him down. At the last instant, the Gray Assassin flipped to one side, narrowly avoiding the SUV. The vehicle then plowed through a group of goblins, running some over and bashing others brutally to the ground. As the SUV neared the vans at the end of the aisle, Warren opened the door and dove out, rolling on the asphalt. The SUV crashed into the vans at a high speed, sending all the vehicles tumbling with a spray of shattered glass.

Kendra drew back her arrow, aimed, and fired it at the Gray Assassin. She had practiced archery a little, and the arrow was on target, but the Gray Assassin slashed it from the air with an almost casual swing of one sword.

In the other direction, Bracken dodged and spun to avoid minotaurs, cutting them down with efficient regularity. Robes ablaze, Mirav shuffled forward, a knife glinting in his hand. Bracken thrust his sword through a minotaur, ducked to avoid a mace swung with tremendous force, then yanked his sword free and sliced open his next assailant with a single spinning motion. Though strong and fierce, the minotaurs seemed slow and clumsy as Bracken danced among them, slaying one after another.

Kendra nocked another arrow, and Civia stepped out in the aisle with her, an arrow set to the string of her bow as well. The Gray Assassin drew nearer with a small group of goblins. Behind them, farther down the aisle, Warren battled three goblins with his sword. Kendra and Civia fired at the Gray Assassin together, but even at short range, he intercepted both of their arrows, one with each sword.

“Civia!” Janan shouted. Springing higher than any ordinary lapdog could, the tiny canine leapt into the path of a phoenix-feathered arrow coming from the other end of the aisle. The arrow that would have hit Civia

in the back impaled the little dog. Crimson flames promptly consumed the shape-shifter, leaving no remains.

Face contorted with grief, Civia retreated out of the aisle back into the storage locker. Kendra drew back as well, pulling the door to the storage locker shut, then fumbled to get another arrow ready. Behind her, Civia kick-started the smaller motorcycle.

A pair of goblins heaved the door to the locker up. Kendra released her arrow and hit one of them in the chest, sending him staggering backwards. As the Gray Assassin moved forward, swords ready, a growling grizzly bear slammed into him from the side, sending him somersaulting across the asphalt. When the other goblin turned to confront the threat, the bear transformed into a tiger and pounced on him, teeth tearing at his throat. Niko had finally arrived.

Another goblin attacked the tiger from behind, slashing him with a scimitar, but before Kendra could fire an arrow to help, the tiger had turned and dispatched the attacker. The wound the scimitar had opened knitted itself closed and disappeared.

As the Gray Assassin rose from the pavement, Niko changed back into a bear and reared up on his hind legs. The Gray Assassin backed away, moving toward the end of the aisle where Torina awaited with her bow, so Kendra stepped forward into the aisle to help cover Niko.

On the end of the aisle where the SUV had crumpled the vans, goblins littered the ground, several killed by Warren, a few nearer ones slain by Niko. No goblins remained standing in that direction, but Warren was currently wrestling with Trask.

The Gray Assassin continued to retreat in the other direction. Behind him, dead and dying minotaurs lay sprawled along the aisle. Near the vans, Mirav held up both hands, creating a shimmer in the air. Bracken chopped at the invisible shield, each stroke sending up a flurry of brilliant sparks and causing the badly burned wizard to flinch. Currently, the bulk of the bear prevented Kendra from having a shot at the Gray Assassin.

Wheeling the motorcycle forward, Civia peeked out into the aisle, checking left and right, then gunned the engine, heading toward Warren and the totaled vehicles. In the other direction, Kendra saw Torina climb atop one of the vans. She drew an arrow back to her cheek.

“No!” Kendra shouted, aiming briefly and releasing her own arrow, which streaked harmlessly past the distant vivi-blix, missing by a good five feet.

Torina let her arrow fly. Niko jumped, trying to intercept it, but could not quite reach it, and the Gray Assassin seized the opportunity to dart forward and start hacking the bear.

Kendra turned and watched in horror as the arrow curved down toward the fleeing motorcycle. The considerable distance combined with the rapid acceleration of the motorcycle made the shot difficult—nevertheless, the arrow pierced Civia through the center of her back. Crimson flames spread across her shoulders as the motorcycle tipped and she bounced, tumbled, and skidded across the asphalt.

Roaring, Niko became a tiger and raced toward Civia, blood gushing from his multiple wounds. Civia pushed herself up to her hands and knees, the hungry flames spreading, then fell flat.

Mirav called for help, and the Gray Assassin answered, running toward Bracken from behind. Kendra screamed to alert Bracken, who turned and engaged the attacker, blades ringing sharply as they clashed.

Atop the van, a triumphant Torina nocked another arrow, but Raxtus swooped down from the sky and sent her flying with a vicious swipe of his claws. She had drawn the arrow back, but the impact sent it wildly astray. Wings flapping, Raxtus rose to engage the final wyvern.

Kendra watched in agonized suspense as the Gray Assassin battled Bracken. She could not risk helping with an arrow for fear of hitting the wrong person. Bracken seemed on the defensive, barely able to hold off the two swords with his single blade. Whenever he attempted a counterstroke, the attack was blocked and he had to duck or spring back to avoid a deadly blow.

Kendra rushed to a cabinet in the storage locker, retrieved a sword, and ran to help. The thought of challenging a warrior like the Gray Assassin terrified her, but if she could provide a distraction, perhaps Bracken could finish him quickly.

As she returned to the aisle, Bracken held up a hand and produced a blinding burst of light. Lowering his sword, Bracken narrowly dodged two hasty slashes without parrying, and then, blade flashing like lightning, cut down the Gray Assassin with a single stroke. Bracken turned and stalked

toward Mirav, who was lying on his back, hands held up to maintain the shimmer of his magical shield.

“I’ll break you if I must,” Bracken said.

Eyes brimming with malice, Mirav spat at him.

Bracken held up a fist, his whole arm trembling. The shimmer in the air seemed to fold, then shattered. Mirav screamed. Kendra looked away as Bracken used his sword to finish the wizard.

After facing the other way, less worried about Bracken, Kendra ran to Civia and Niko. The flames had gone out. Niko lay beside her charred body. Beyond them, Warren continued to grapple with Trask.

Kendra reached the tiger, who had a glassy look in his eyes. His head turned as she crouched beside him. “She’s gone,” Niko mourned, voice groggy. “I’m going. The final Eternal has fallen. I failed.”

“You saved me,” Kendra said, patting his thick fur.

“My pleasure,” Niko mumbled, the words slurred. “Perhaps it will be enough. When Roon fell, I worried all was lost. I always expected he would be the last. Close enough. I go to him.”

The tiger went slack, and he and Civia dissolved into fine black dust.

Bracken ran past Kendra toward Warren and Trask.

“He’s a friend,” Warren grunted. “I think a narcoblix has him.”

Setting down his sword, Bracken promptly helped Warren pin Trask on the ground. While Warren held Trask down, Bracken retrieved his sword. The weapon reverted to the shape of a horn, and Bracken held the tip against Trask, who continued to struggle. “Begone,” Bracken commanded. Once again, Kendra knew he was not speaking English.

There was a harsh flash of light, and Trask no longer resisted. “Warren?” Trask asked, sounding befuddled. “Oh, no. Where are we? What have I done?”

As Warren explained the situation, Bracken hurried over to Kendra.

“Are you all right?” he asked, extending a hand and helping her to her feet.

“She’s dead,” Kendra said numbly.

“I know,” Bracken replied.

Kendra gritted her teeth, fighting back tears. “We blew it.”

“It’s a terrible blow,” Bracken admitted.

“What are we going to—”

Bracken thrust Kendra aside and held up his shield. An arrow thumped against it. Down the aisle, Torina knelt with her bow in hand. She had deep gouges in her side where the dragon had swiped her, and road rash on one arm and leg from her fall off the van. Raxtus landed on a van behind her, the vehicle wobbling beneath his weight. After a hasty glance over her shoulder, Torina tossed her bow aside and ran toward Bracken, hands in the air. “I surrender!”

“On your knees,” Bracken ordered, striding toward her.

She complied immediately, wide eyes frightened and innocent. Even injured and with her hair disheveled, she looked strikingly attractive. Bracken kept walking toward her.

“Careful, Bracken,” Kendra warned. “She bites! She can drain your life.”

Reaching her, he turned and looked back. “I’ve got it covered. She can’t possibly—”

Torina lunged forward, wrapping her arms around Bracken’s torso and sinking her teeth into his neck. Bracken went limp in her arms.

“No!” Kendra shrieked.

Torina latched on a second time. Her skin shone with an inner glow. The brilliance intensified, making her veins and bones temporarily visible. And then she burst apart in a stunning surge of white flame.

Tears falling, Kendra ran to Bracken, who rose to his feet and caught her in an embrace. She squeezed him as hard as she could, burying her face in his shoulder.

“Are you all right?” she gushed, confused.

He pulled back and smiled down at her. “Not many viviblixes get the chance to drain a unicorn. Those who do never get to warn the others. They can sense the immense supply of vitality, and they ardently crave it, but none have ever been able to handle it.”

“Kind of like filling a water balloon with a fire hose?” Warren remarked, approaching with Trask.

“That’s the idea,” Bracken agreed.

“Did you cure him?” Warren asked, jerking a thumb at Trask.

Bracken gave a nod. "With my horn back, I can undo most curses, heal most injuries." Bracken placed a hand on Trask's shoulder. "The narcoblix no longer has any hold on you."

"You have my gratitude," Trask said. "Sorry for any part I played in your troubles."

Warren looked up and down the aisle. "We're leaving a trail of destruction wherever we go."

"All in a day's work," Trask mumbled.

"We came so close," Warren grumbled in frustration. "What do we do now? This was our last chance." Warren had always been resilient. Kendra had never seen him so defeated. She felt the same way, but was striving to hold herself together.

"Our last chance to prevent Zzyzx from opening," Bracken clarified. "Unpleasant as our prospects may be, this still isn't over." He turned to Raxtus. "You get the firedrake?"

"Got him," the dragon replied. "My scales are tougher than I ever knew. I'd never really tested them. The fire barely tickled. And even though the wizard jinxed my invisibility, I managed to handle the wyverns."

"You're a chip off the old block," Kendra said.

"Hardly," Raxtus huffed. "At least I'm learning to stand my ground and fight. Small as I am, I must have inherited my dad's scales. His armor is almost impenetrable."

"What now?" Kendra asked.

"Your role in this is over, Kendra," Bracken said. "Our paths part here. I'll be going to Zzyzx. I have to make a last stand."

"You're not leaving me behind," Kendra argued. "The end of the world is coming. I'd rather help prevent it than be another random victim."

Warren folded his arms. "Just because missiles are flying doesn't mean you have to run to ground zero."

"You should go to a stronghold like Wyrmoost," Trask said. "There are a few places that might stand even against the demon horde."

Bracken took Kendra's hand in his. "I'll be sending Raxtus to Wyrmoost. You can ride with him. We'll need him to recruit whatever help Agad might offer."

“No way,” Kendra said. “You need me. You need warriors, and I can restore the astrids. I’m not hiding. I’m coming.”

“Not long ago, the astrids left Wyrmoost,” Raxtus said. “I’m not sure where they went.”

“She has a point about the astrids,” Warren said. “She’s as likely to find them with us as anywhere.”

“Perhaps more likely,” Bracken murmured, pinching his lower lip.

“And she’s been incredibly helpful during past emergencies,” Warren added.

Trask nodded. “It’s true that she’s a full-fledged Knight of the Dawn.”

“Very well,” Bracken relented. “If we fail to stem the tide when Zzyzx opens, nobody will be safe anywhere. On top of that, Kendra will surely be an early target. She may as well stay with us.”

“Good choice,” Kendra said, quietly hoping that she would not regret her insistence.

Bracken turned to Raxtus. “Could you keep an eye out for police? You should now be able to go invisible again.”

Taking to the sky, Raxtus disappeared from view.

“Wait,” Kendra realized, “does anyone even know how we get to Zzyzx?”

“I haven’t gotten into details with your brother yet,” Bracken said. “I hoped his labors might prove unnecessary, at least for a time. But from what I’ve glimpsed, I believe Seth knows a way to Zzyzx. The hour has arrived to coordinate our efforts.”



Lady Luck

Seth walked barefoot on the beach, enjoying the coarse sand and smooth shell fragments under his soles. Black-headed gulls hung suspended in the air, gliding against a breeze. Nearby, water hissed softly as it spread flat against the sand, millions of tiny bubbles bursting. As the water retreated, sandpipers darted on quick feet, stabbing for food with needle beaks.

Not far behind him, Vanessa lounged on a towel, wearing large sunglasses, a loose T-shirt, and fashionable sandals. He could see nobody else on the seashore. The only signs of civilization were some lifeless beach houses in the distance.

Seth had never been to the Outer Banks. Bridges and ferries linked a series of long, narrow barrier islands off the coast of North Carolina. He and Vanessa were on Hatteras Island. With the Atlantic on one side and the Pamlico Sound on the other, spending time on the island made him feel far out at sea, even though he could walk to the mainland.

They had arrived two days ago, flying into Norfolk, Virginia, then driving the rest of the way in a rented sedan, through towns with names like Kill Devil Hills and Nags Head. While Seth and Vanessa had eaten crab cakes at a roadside grill, locals had informed them that the tourist season

hadn't really started yet. Reportedly the summer would bring heavy traffic and abundant crowds, but currently none of the restaurants seemed busy, and many of the beaches looked desolate.

At the moment, a cool breeze prevented the afternoon from feeling warm. After wading in the cold water, Seth had decided not to swim. Instead he was content to roam the edge of the dying waves, searching through the infinite shells along the shore for the very best. Almost all of the shells were small, many bleached white or broken, but some featured alluring colors. He had most appreciated several glossy, colorful bits of shell shaped vaguely like guitar picks, and rattled his favorites in one hand.

Tonight he would try to summon transportation to Shoreless Isle. The question remained who else would join him.

Bracken had continued in touch telepathically. He had learned from the Sphinx that, as expected, Zzyzx would be opened the morning following the next full moon. Which was less than four days away.

According to the letter from Patton, the voyage from Hatteras Island to Shoreless Isle would take almost exactly three days. The ship could only be called at midnight, and picked up passengers about two hours later. Tonight was the last night they could depart if they hoped to arrive before Zzyzx opened.

From the communication Seth had received, it sounded as though Bracken, Warren, Trask, and Kendra would reach Hatteras this evening. After losing the last Eternal and contacting Seth, they had rented a car and set out to join him on the Outer Banks.

Somewhere, Hugo, Newel, and Doren were trying to catch up as well. Seth and Vanessa had flown out of Seattle, leaving the satyrs and the golem with the truck, a credit card, and the challenge to reach the embarkation point on Hatteras before the *Lady Luck* came for them. The satyrs had been thrilled at the chance to finally drive. Vanessa had helped them plan which roads to travel. If they speeded, stopped only for gas, and avoided getting involved in a police chase, they had a chance of making it.

Seth flung the bits of shell in his hand into the ocean. He had enjoyed his time on Hatteras with Vanessa. She had slept a lot, catching up from consecutive days of relentless driving. He had done his best to forget his abducted parents and grandparents, ignore the opening of Zzyzx, and

pretend he was here on vacation. But the time for pretending had almost ended.

He plopped down on the sand. No matter how much Bracken assured him that they were on schedule, he wouldn't rest easy until they arrived. What if they had car trouble? Worse, the Society could ambush them!

Seth removed the letter from Patton from his pocket and unfolded it. He skipped to the section about hailing the *Lady Luck*.

To summon the Lady Luck, you will need the bell, the whistle, and the music box from Cormac the leprechaun (see previous). On Hatteras Island, at midnight, climb to the top of the Cape Hatteras Lighthouse and ring the bell. The ship will respond only if the bell is rung at midnight from this vicinity.

Seth paused his reading. Upon arriving at Hatteras Island, he and Vanessa had learned that the Cape Hatteras Lighthouse had been moved in 1999 to protect it from the encroaching ocean. The lighthouse had not been moved very far, but Seth worried it could mess up the bell's ability to call the ship. He wondered if it might be better to ring the bell on the ground where the lighthouse used to stand.

After you ring the bell, proceed to the embarkation area circled on the map below. A hundred minutes after ringing the bell, blow the whistle three times every few minutes until a rowboat arrives to bring you to the Lady Luck. Once aboard, head aft to the captain's cabin. Regardless of who you may bring on the voyage, go alone to the cabin. A Presence inhabits it. Play the music box inside, and then secure passage to Shoreless Isle. I am not sure of everything this will entail. But the voyage will consume three days, down to the hour, so time it right.

Remember, passage on the Lady Luck is one-way. You will have to prepare some alternative method of return. Flying creatures will find it considerably easier to depart Shoreless Isle than to arrive there.

This concludes my advice. Counsel with your allies to plan how best to mount a defense on Shoreless Isle. It will not be easy. It may not even be possible. Again, do what you will with these ideas. I am simply suggesting desperate actions I might try. Good luck.

Yours always,

Patton Burgess

Seth folded the letter and tucked it away. He leaned back, stretching out on the sand, and listened to the waves. Closing his eyes and breathing the salty air, he grabbed fistfuls of sand and let it sift through his fingers.

From down the beach, a voice called his name. He sat up and saw Kendra running toward him. The sight of her brought such relief that the emotion escaped in a burst of laughter as he charged to greet her. They met near where Vanessa sat on her towel.

“We made it with hours to spare,” Kendra declared. “Bracken said you were worried.”

“Well, it would have been hard for you guys to catch the next boat,” Seth said. Behind his sister, Bracken, Warren, and Trask approached. “I’m so happy to see you.”

“Me too,” Kendra said. “Although I wish we could have saved one of the Eternals.”

Vanessa stood up as Bracken drew near, hand on his sword. They stared at each other with open distrust. “Hello, Seth,” Bracken said, eyes still on Vanessa. “So this is your blix?”

“I’m Vanessa,” she said.

“Bracken,” he replied stiffly. He held out his hand. “Nice to meet you.”

Vanessa scowled at the offered hand. “You want inside my mind?”

“Seems appropriate,” Bracken said.

“She’s been really great,” Seth affirmed. “A big help.”

“Then it should be no issue to shake my hand,” Bracken maintained.

Vanessa made no move to comply. “Who’s scrutinizing *your* secret intentions?”

“My kind enjoy a more reliable reputation,” Bracken said evenly.

“Your kind hunt blixes,” Vanessa replied.

Bracken shrugged. “From time to time. Frankly, I wish blixes had more predators. Most of them deserve to be hunted.”

Vanessa measured him with her eyes. “Debatable. But you do not deny that enmity exists between your kind and mine.”

“I do not deny it.”

“Then perhaps you can grasp why I don’t want a unicorn as spokesman for my intentions.”

Bracken lowered his offered hand. “Are you suggesting I might lie about what I see in your mind?”

“It would be the quickest way to justify my destruction.”

Bracken smirked. “So here you stand trying to insulate yourself against what I might discover. If you have nothing to hide, you have no need to object. I will tell the truth, and they know that.”

“But I don’t,” Vanessa said.

“Vanessa could have tried to take the sword,” Kendra said.

Seth glanced at Kendra. “Who told you about the sword?”

Bracken turned to Seth. “I did. We can start conversing more openly. I’ve learned to sense when Nagi Luna has directed the Oculus toward us. It required some practice. I’m accustomed to her mind reaching out to spy on me, but the extra subtlety and power granted by the Oculus confused me for a time. Regaining my horn helped. I only mastered what to look for as we undertook our recent road trip. Ever since Civia was murdered by a blix,” he shot Vanessa a meaningful glance, “Nagi Luna has essentially lost interest in us. She has only peered at us twice today, briefly, and without concern.”

“So we’re free to speak right now?” Seth asked.

“As long as I’m with you,” Bracken said. “I’ll warn you otherwise. By the way, where is Vasilis?”

“In the trunk of our rental car,” Seth said.

Bracken frowned. “Maybe not the ideal place for one of the most powerful weapons in the history of the world, but I suppose it would be conspicuous on the beach.”

“Vanessa could have tried to steal Vasilis,” Kendra repeated.

“She could have tried,” Bracken agreed, “but I’ll assume she is clever enough to know she couldn’t have succeeded. The sword can only be given to a friend, never taken by an enemy, even in death.”

“I had no idea,” Vanessa asserted sarcastically. “I’m very naïve.”

Bracken extended his hand again. “For good or ill, let’s get this over with.”

Vanessa raised her eyebrows. “First, why don’t we judge you based on your success in protecting the Eternals. How many of them survived your assistance?”

“None,” Bracken said, his tone hard, his extended hand closing into a fist.

“How do we know you’re not some rogue unicorn the Sphinx turned?” Vanessa accused. “We sure don’t have any rescued Eternals as evidence. What assurances can you provide?”

“Bracken is no traitor,” Kendra said. “The Fairy Queen vouched for him.”

“To you, personally?” Vanessa asked.

“Yes,” Kendra affirmed.

“Enough with the animosity,” Warren interrupted. “Isn’t tonight going to be long enough already? Please, Vanessa, just let him make sure. Think about your past. We’ll all sleep easier.”

Vanessa took Bracken’s hand. He stared into her eyes for a long moment. “Just relax,” Bracken said. “Think about your relationship with the Sorensens. Think about your current goals as they relate to our present mission.” He released his grip.

“Well?” Vanessa asked.

“She used to love the Sphinx,” Bracken reported.

Vanessa’s expression hardened. “Did I hear the past tense?”

“After he betrayed her, she became a true ally to us,” Bracken confirmed. “She still worries about the Sphinx. She cares about his welfare now that Graulas has taken over the Society, but not in any way that would harm our cause. Her affection is now directed elsewhere.”

“Careful,” Vanessa warned.

Bracken glanced at Warren. “Blix or not, we can trust her.”

“Did you look at Warren?” Seth blurted. “Does Vanessa like Warren?”

Warren coughed uncomfortably.

Vanessa glared at Bracken. “Very tactful. Warren and I have some history from when I served as a Knight of the Dawn. I’m glad that’s out in the open for everybody to whisper about. By the way, Bracken clearly has strong feelings for Kendra. Sometimes it doesn’t take a mind reader.”

Bracken opened his mouth, paused, and then closed it.

“Don’t be shy,” Vanessa teased, prodding his chest with her finger. “It really is the end of the world. Time to unbottle those hidden feelings. People make such a fuss about age discrepancies. Your attraction to Kendra is kind of like me having a crush on a newborn infant. Perfectly natural.”

Bracken reddened. “I think your imagination is running away with you. I’m very fond of Kendra, but not in the way you’re describing.”

“You’re right,” Vanessa chuckled. “My mistake. It isn’t quite like I described. After all, Kendra looks much more mature than an infant.”

Trask cleared his throat noisily. “Enough with the blix-unicorn rivalry. I’m afraid we have larger concerns.”

“Seth has a letter from Patton Burgess outlining our present objectives,” Vanessa said. “I already have the key to the lighthouse. We blixes have our uses.”

“There isn’t much to do until tonight,” Seth agreed.

Warren rubbed his hands together. “Anybody know where we can score some quality crab cakes?”

* * *

Less than a mile from the Cape Hatteras Lighthouse, Kendra sat in a rented SUV with Trask. Overhead, twinkling stars passed in and out of view as patchy clouds shifted. She unrolled the top of a bag of pretzels and popped one in her mouth, chewing without relish. After a shrimp quesadilla for dinner complemented by half a crab cake sandwich, she wasn’t hungry, just fidgety. She checked her watch: twenty minutes to midnight.

Awkwardness had plagued Kendra the entire evening. Vanessa’s accusations on the beach had left her profoundly embarrassed. Not only had Vanessa put Bracken on the spot about his feelings, she had publicly pointed out the age gap that separated him from Kendra. What made everything so much worse was that Kendra was developing a genuine

attachment to Bracken. He was cute, brave, protective, smart, sweet, and, maybe best of all, she knew he was for real.

All night she hadn't known what to say to him, how to look at him. In the end, she had ignored Bracken, concentrating on Seth. Her brother had been through a lot since she had last seen him. He seemed sadder, more brooding.

Kendra rolled up the pretzel bag. What if Vanessa was right? What if Bracken liked her? It was one thing to harbor a crush on an unattainable guy, but quite another to consider him actually returning her affection. Even without Vanessa stressing the point, she knew he was a unicorn, and centuries old. But most things about him seemed so human! So normal! Well, handsomer than normal. Despite the reality of his true identity, in practice, Bracken seemed like a good-looking guy only a couple of years her senior.

Of course, in those moments after Bracken had reclaimed his second horn, he had come across as otherworldly. But once the crisis was behind them, he had quickly reverted to his old self. He still couldn't assume his horse shape without his third horn. For all practical purposes he was human. And even if he was a little otherworldly, Kendra sometimes wondered whether she were entirely human herself anymore. After becoming fairykind, she could hardly view herself as a regular teenage girl.

Kendra leaned her head against the window. Was she really sitting here worrying about how Bracken felt about her when the world was about to end? How simple was she? What if he read her mind? She would be mortified!

"Can I have a pretzel?" Trask asked.

The question made Kendra jump a little. "Sure," she said, handing him the bag. "Are we just going to abandon the rental car?"

"They'll figure it out," Trask said. "We'll compensate them financially. The Knights of the Dawn always pay their debts, and a little extra. We do it anonymously because too often we'd get arrested otherwise, but we do it. Naturally, if the world ends, I think everyone will have more pressing issues to complain about."

"True," Kendra said.

She had grilled Trask about her parents and grandparents, but he had been kept in isolation at Living Mirage. She had asked Vanessa as well. The

narcoblix had traveled into Tanu's body along with some of the others, but they were kept in separate cells, locked up day and night, so she had learned nothing except that they remained in the dungeon.

Having parked where they could observe the main road, Kendra and Trask sat up as a huge pickup truck approached at high speed. The truck zoomed past their SUV; then the taillights flashed brighter and the truck turned around. Headlights glaring, the truck came to a stop facing them, and Hugo vaulted out of the back.

Kendra and Trask got out of the SUV as Newel and Doren hopped down from the truck. "Told you!" Doren said, swatting Newel with the back of his hand. "Trust the golem."

Newel cracked his knuckles. "We were heading to the rendezvous when Hugo started to sense you guys. He led us here."

"We're two hours early," Doren said proudly.

"Seth," Hugo rumbled, pointing toward the lighthouse.

"He's fine," Kendra said. "He's just calling our ride. Warren, Bracken, and Vanessa are with him."

"You boys must have disregarded some speed limits to get here," Trask said.

Newel laughed. "That truck can move! We rarely went less than twice the speed limit."

"It was exhilarating," Doren gushed.

"Did you hit any speed traps?" Kendra asked.

"Twice," Newel said. "We pulled over politely. Both times the officer looked shocked to find a goat at the wheel without a human in sight."

"They searched the car both times," Doren said. "It was easy to prick them with one of the darts Vanessa left us. They went to sleep, we put them back in their car, and no trouble ever caught up with us."

"I'm sure other officers responded when they stopped calling in," Trask said. "But they probably dismissed the report of a truck driven by goats as a hallucination."

"Vanessa had five spare sets of plates with corresponding registrations," Newel explained. "We swapped them after any trouble."

Trask chuckled. "That may have helped as well. We did some speeding to get here ourselves, but had better luck with speed traps."

Kendra regarded the satyrs. “You guys are really going to come to Zzyzx with us?”

“We’ve come this far,” Doren said.

“Seth promised us our own flat-screen TV with a generator,” Newel explained. “Besides, having front-row seats to the end of the world beats waiting for the disaster back at Fablehaven with the centaurs in charge.”

“Seth told me about the centaurs,” Kendra said.

“There will be a reckoning if we can survive the demons,” Trask vowed.

“We have a chance,” Doren said. “Seth has Vasilis. There are poems and songs about that sword.”

“Not to mention a unicorn on our side!” Newel exclaimed. “They are the superheroes of the fairy world. They’re not very outgoing, but when they decide to help, it can make all the difference.”

“Don’t join us buoyed by false expectations,” Trask said. “Consider the enemy. We’re talking about Gorgrog and his horde. We almost certainly will not be coming back.”

“We get it,” Newel said cheerfully. “If it’s the end, so it goes. We had a good run. But can’t we hope for the best?”

Trask shrugged. “I suppose we can hope.”

* * *

Above the red brick base, visible in the cloud-muted moonlight, white and black stripes spiraled to the top of the lighthouse, making it look like a giant barbershop pole. Vanessa led Seth to the door at the base and opened it quickly. He followed her inside.

They climbed the curving stairs, a small flashlight helping them see. Roughly thirty at a time, the stairs ascended to semicircular landings. Periodic windows granted higher and higher views. By the time they reached the top, Seth was panting.

An observation platform surrounded the top of the lighthouse. Vanessa and Seth stepped outside. The gibbous moon came out from behind a cloud, throwing silver highlights on the corrugated ocean and the vegetated coastline. The salty breeze and great height made Seth feel like he was in the crow’s nest of some enormous ship.

“Is it time?” Seth asked.

“Close enough,” Vanessa replied, checking her watch.

Seth took out the handbell and removed the leather muffle from the clapper. He shook the bell over his head vigorously. The bell rang loudly, but nothing about it seemed supernatural. Seth clanged the bell constantly until Vanessa told him to stop. Then he stepped forward to the railing and looked down.

Far below, Bracken flashed a light at him. After muffling the clapper, Seth tossed the bell over the edge. As planned, Bracken and Warren would now run the bell to the former site of the lighthouse and ring it again. Hopefully, ringing the bell at both locations, they could be more sure the ship would respond as desired.

Seth followed Vanessa down the long flights of steps and out of the lighthouse. She locked up, and they trotted back to where they had parked. Before they reached their vehicle, a huge humanoid shape came stomping toward them out of the darkness. After a brief fright, Seth recognized Hugo. He ran to the golem, who scooped him up in a rocky embrace.

“You made it!” Seth said.

“Drove fast,” Hugo replied.

“Did the truck arrive in one piece?” Vanessa wondered.

“Truck fine,” Hugo assured her.

Newel and Doren gamboled over to them. Hugo set Seth down.

“I can’t believe you guys made it,” Seth said. “I expected you’d take your time, running up the credit card at fast food joints.”

“Not a bad way to confront the end of civilization,” Newel conceded. “But after enough fast food, it starts to all taste the same.”

“Good, but greasy,” Doren said. “Besides, driving fast is another new pleasure we both enjoy.”

“We may not come back from this,” Seth said seriously.

“We know,” Newel said. “Everyone keeps warning us. If I didn’t know better, I’d suspect you guys were trying to ditch us. Here’s the thing—if we succeed, we don’t just save the world. We save television. We save fast food. We save soft drinks and doughnuts and candy bars and ice cream.”

“We save Frito-Lay,” Doren said solemnly.

“You’ve enjoyed a lifetime of these marvelous conveniences,” Newel accused. “You take them for granted. Doren and I are just getting introduced.”

“Nobody is going to mess with Hostess,” Doren said. “Not on my watch.”

“We’ll be honored to have you,” Seth said.

“Hugo could pose a problem,” Vanessa observed. “If the ship is sending just one launch to shuttle us aboard, the golem might swamp it.”

“I don’t want to go without Hugo,” Doren said. “Did you see him beat up those centaurs with his bare hands?”

“Do we need to hijack a watercraft?” Newel asked.

“You’ll have to be careful,” Vanessa said. “These waters are famously treacherous. This area is called the Graveyard of the Atlantic for a reason. The shifting shoals off this coast have claimed hundreds of ships.”

“Which explains the lighthouse,” Newel said. “We’ll figure it out. The golem should be able to discern your location. Come on, Hugo. We’d better hurry.”

“See you on the water,” Doren said.

The satyrs climbed into the truck, and Hugo settled into the back. Vanessa explained to Trask what the satyrs intended to do, and he agreed with the idea.

Kendra walked over to Seth. “How did it go?” she asked.

“I rang the bell. We’ll see if it works.”

“Want a pretzel?”

“I’m stuffed. I overdid it on the crab cakes.”

They stood in silence for a moment.

“Do you get the sense that this is our last adventure?” Kendra asked.

Seth rubbed the hilt of Vasilis. “Yeah. You too?”

She nodded. “It’s sort of obvious since we haven’t even prepared a way back. We couldn’t stop any of this when we had a chance. And we had lots of chances. The artifacts. The Eternals. Now we’re out of chances. I guess going to Zzyzx is better than nothing. It will be better to die bravely among friends than to die in hiding.”

“You don’t have to go,” Seth said.

“Neither do you.”

“I’m going. That was the whole point of getting Vasilis. If I’m going to die, I’ll die fighting demons, not running from them. It helps to imagine what Patton would do. It helps to think about Coulter.”

“I’m going too,” Kendra said. Her lip trembled. “I wish I could say good-bye to Mom and Dad.”

“Don’t think like that,” Seth said. “Think about winning. Think about protecting the world.”

His sister managed a faint smile. “I’ll try.”

When Bracken and Warren returned, everyone got into the SUV and the sedan and drove to the location marked on Patton’s map. After checking their gear, they walked down to the edge of the water and waited for the proper time to start blowing the whistle.

Seth noticed Bracken sitting down beside Kendra. He couldn’t resist casually eavesdropping.

“I’m sorry about Vanessa earlier,” Bracken said. “She was trying to lash out at me for embarrassing her.”

“Don’t worry,” Kendra said. “I get it.”

Bracken took Kendra’s hand, regarding her intently. “Vanessa wasn’t wrong.”

Seth knew it was time to stop listening. Thrusting his hands in his pockets, he strolled up the beach. He could not help dwelling upon what Kendra had said about this being their last adventure. Alone in the dark, he had to admit she was right. Vasilis was cool, and Hugo was tough, and Bracken probably had some tricks up his sleeve, but then he considered the raw power of Bahumat, pictured Olloch the Glutton tearing off Hugo’s arm, and recalled Graulas demolishing the house at Fablehaven. Demons were nightmarishly powerful, and Zzyzx held the worst of them in huge numbers.

What if Raxtus succeeded in getting Agad involved? A wizard could be useful. Especially if he brought some dragons. But supposedly the horde inside of Zzyzx was even more powerful than dragons.

“Strange time to roam this beach,” a conversational voice said behind Seth.

He whirled to see a grayish man with a bristly beard wearing a hooded slicker and sturdy boots. He had not heard the man approach. “I’m here with some friends.”

“So I noticed,” the man said, staring out to sea. “Word to the wise: This beach may be getting some unsavory visitors shortly.”

This was no ordinary man. When Seth stared hard, the stranger seemed slightly translucent. “I know,” Seth said. “I called them.”

“Sure you want to be doing that?”

“I need to get somewhere.”

The man turned his head and looked at Seth. “There are plenty of ways to get around.”

“Not where we’re going,” Seth explained. “We have to reach Shoreless Isle. Some demons are going to open Zzyzx.”

The man looked back out at the water. “Can’t say I know much about that. Sounds like you have your reasons. Watch yourself when negotiating passage. She can be un-reasonable.”

“You have any advice?” Seth asked.

The man looked at him again. “I don’t mean to intrude.”

“Please.”

“You have quite a sword there. Don’t forget it, if she gets temperamental. Some people only respect those who might do them harm. Myself, I would steer clear of the *Lady Luck* altogether.”

Bracken came jogging down the beach. Seth took a step toward him, waving him over. When Seth turned back, the gray man was gone. There was no place he could have hidden. Chills tingled across Seth’s shoulders.

“Did you see him?” Seth asked as Bracken came near.

“An apparition,” Bracken said. “He’s what brought me this way. Benevolent, by the feel of him. Some sort of guardian spirit.”

“He talked to me about the *Lady Luck*,” Seth said.

“I hope you listened,” Bracken said. “You all right?”

“Good enough. I saw you chatting with my sister.”

“Vanessa made things uncomfortable. Some words had to be exchanged.”

Seth grinned. They walked back to the others together. Once there, Seth kept his eyes on the water, hoping to see Hugo, Newel, and Doren show up in a stolen boat. The six of them sat in silence. Kendra leaned her head against Bracken’s shoulder. Trask and Vanessa dozed.

Eventually Bracken eased away from Kendra and nudged Seth. “Time for the bosun’s whistle.”

Seth removed the whistle from the case, stood, and gave three long calls. Two minutes later, he repeated the calls. And again two minutes later.

The moon went behind heavy clouds, dimming their view of the sea. Seth continued to toot the whistle every couple of minutes. When the moon came out again, a large rowboat was approaching, still some distance out.

The whistling had awakened Vanessa and Trask. Seth stowed the whistle, and everyone gathered their gear. The rowboat ran aground, and a pair of seamen splashed out into the water. Seth had seen zombies, and he had seen wraiths. These figures appeared to be somewhere in between. Not as dark or graceful as wraiths, they moved with much more agility and competence than zombies. Their brown, knotted flesh looked lean and tough.

After scanning the murky ocean a final time for any sign of Hugo or the satyrs, Seth waded into the cold water with the others, accepting help from an undead seaman to climb into the rowboat. A second pair of undead sailors awaited inside, manning the large oars. Once everyone was aboard, the pair of seamen on the beach pushed the boat back into the water, then scrambled inside.

The boat accommodated all of them comfortably, but would have barely fit the satyrs. Hugo would certainly have been too big. Seth consoled himself that they had not left Hugo behind needlessly.

The sailors at the oars managed the craft with efficient competence. If there were dangerous shoals nearby, Seth saw no sign of them. The rowboat progressed quickly away from the shore, bobbing up and down on the swells.

Seth listened carefully to the undead sailors, but, as with the Standing Dead, he detected no thoughts. He tried to start conversations mentally, but sensed no response.

The moon hid behind the clouds again. Rowing across the black, undulating water felt creepy. Everything was surreal: the rolling motion of the vessel, the salty tang in the air, the undead mariner sitting beside him, an oxidized ring dangling from his shriveled earlobe. Seth noticed that Bracken had an arm around Kendra.

They had been rowing for a long time when Bracken arose. He held up a hand, and a bright ball of white light rose from his fingers, casting a ghostly light over the wooden ship looming beside them.

“Whoa,” Seth mouthed, impressed by the size.

The ship had three tall masts, hung with complex rigging, but no sails. Far above the water awaited decks of different heights, bordered by ornate railings. The wood looked old and weathered but not rotten. Seth could see the name of the ship engraved in metal. An elaborately carved mermaid figurehead hung at the front, face panicked, arms chained to her sides.

Paying no heed to the added radiance, the undead sailors maneuvered the rowboat alongside the *Lady Luck*. Seth heard the buzz of a motor. Turning, he saw a motorboat approaching over the water.

“They found us,” Trask said.

“Up the ladder,” Bracken instructed.

Seth waited while the others climbed, until only he and Bracken remained in the rowboat with the four undead seafarers. One of the sailors motioned for them to scale the ladder.

“We have friends coming,” Seth explained.

Showing no evidence of comprehension, the sailor gestured once again for them to climb. Taking his time, Seth shuffled over to the ladder. The motorboat was drawing near. He adjusted his sword belt and fiddled with the case Cormac had given him.

“Wait,” Newel called. “We’re here. Sorry it took so long. I think we damaged the boat. Hugo had to rescue us from a few sandbars.”

The engine died, and the motorboat drifted forward to thump against the rowboat, jostling the occupants. Newel and Doren sprang into the rowboat.

“These are our friends,” Bracken said. “They travel with us.”

The undead sailors made no move to stop them. Seth started up the ladder, followed by Bracken. Looking down, Seth saw Hugo transfer gingerly into the rowboat, the vessel wobbling beneath his weight. A moment later, the golem was following Doren up the side of the ship.

When Seth reached the top, he found the others huddled together, confronted by a crowd of twenty undead deckhands. Although the raggedly dressed sailors made no aggressive movements, a threat was implied by

their grouping and their posture. Bracken, Newel, Doren, and Hugo joined Seth and the others.

“The captain’s cabin will be at the stern,” Bracken said, pointing. “I imagine they’ll want us to wait here while you secure our passage. We need this to work. Whether or not we could stand against these cursed seamen, we can’t make the ship ferry us to our destination.”

“No problem,” Seth said, gritting his teeth. He walked away from his friends, passing among the undead sailors. He kept one hand on the hilt of Vasilis and tried to betray no fear. None of the sailors impeded his way, and, as he left them behind, some of his concerns faded.

He walked to the door of the captain’s cabin, considered knocking, then just opened it. The shadowy room looked richly furnished. A fine rug covered much of the floor. Detailed maps and charts hung on the walls. The desk was small but ornate, and the generous bunk had silky sheets.

The room appeared to be empty.

Kneeling, Seth opened the case, removed the music box, wound it, and placed it on the floor. Nothing happened. He opened the lid to the music box, and it began to chime.

Immediately the air started to swirl, and the temperature plunged. The door banged shut, and the shadows suddenly became much deeper. Maps and charts fluttered on the walls, and papers took flight from the desk. He saw no personage, but Seth knew that he was no longer alone. An inexplicable Presence had joined him.

Why have you imposed upon me? inquired a girlish voice in his mind. Although she sounded childlike, Seth intuited that the speaker was ancient.

“I have to reach Shoreless Isle,” Seth said. “This is the only way I know to get there.”

You did not come alone. What is the meaning of the unicorn? The golem? The girl was clearly displeased.

“I am traveling with friends to prevent a catastrophe,” Seth said. “Will you take us?”

Will I take you? The words stung his mind, and he flinched. *I will not. I hate that island. You and your companions will join my crew. Except for the unicorn and the golem, who will go into the deep.*

“That’s not acceptable,” Seth said, worried, hand straying to the pommel of his sword.

Not acceptable! Have you any idea who you are dealing with? I heeded the summons, as promised. After you come aboard, I do as I will. You do not belong here. I will not bargain with you. Away! Deliver my verdict to your companions.

Seth drew Vasilis, and the warm comfort of rage awakened inside of him. Confidence crowded out his doubts and fears, and he felt shame for how he had been cowering. His friends were counting on him! The sword flared red, brightening the room and revealing a faint form in the corner. It looked like a sparse cloud of dust motes in the shape of a woman with long hair. Vasilis tugged him toward the hazy entity.

“Enough nonsense,” Seth commanded, resisting the eager pull of his sword. “I’ve been through too much to argue with a thousand-year-old child. My friends and I go to our deaths. You are merely the ride. I summoned you politely. You will provide us with safe passage, or your existence will end as I carve your ship into matchsticks and your crew into fish bait.”

Silence.

My apologies, came the timid response, all menace gone. You carried yourself like a fraud at first. You are cruel to tease us so. Cause us no harm, and I hereby grant you and your companions passage to Shoreless Isle.

“You have three days,” Seth said. “We need to be ashore well before sunrise.”

As you say, Great One.

Seth turned to go. “I’d prefer if this were the last time we have to speak.”

With no disrespect intended, I would prefer the same.



Shoreless Isle

Kendra leaned against the railing near the front of the *Lady Luck*, gazing out over the gloomy water. Although clouds currently obscured the full moon, she could see for a good distance. The ship advanced smoothly and steadily. Even during the storm the day before, the *Lady Luck* had remained miraculously level, cutting through the heaving water with unnatural haste.

During their three days at sea, the undead sailors had never raised a single sail. In fact, once the sailors had dispersed after Seth returned from the captain's cabin, Kendra had not seen much of her undead shipmates. They mainly stayed down in the hold, never venturing into the forecastle where she and her friends were sleeping.

Bracken had wakened her a few minutes ago. Their voyage almost over, her friends were readying their equipment. Kendra had come up here to peek at Shoreless Isle, but she had not yet glimpsed land.

"See anything?" Seth asked, startling her.

"Not yet."

"How far can you see?" he asked.

"I don't know. A few hundred yards, I guess."

Her brother chuckled. "I can't even see the water."

"We'll all see land soon enough."

They stood together in silence.

"Have you smooched Bracken yet?" Seth asked.

"No, sicko," Kendra replied with annoyance. "That's none of your business!"

"You've been pretty cuddly," Seth observed.

"He's just keeping me warm," Kendra said. "He's trying to comfort me. And he might need a little comfort."

"I know what might give him some extra courage," Seth said, puckering his lips.

Kendra shoved him. "Don't be an idiot."

Seth laughed. "Just for the record, you may not have many more chances."

Kendra scowled. "I know. Hey, I see something."

"What?"

"Mist."

Seth rolled his eyes. "Mist doesn't count as news."

"No, lots of mist. A wall of mist. You'll see, we're getting closer to it."

"See anything in the mist?" Seth asked after a moment.

"No. It's too thick."

Kendra watched as the bowsprit pierced the vaporous wall. A moment later, she felt the dampness on her face and hands, and tasted it when she inhaled.

"You're right," Seth said. "That was sudden."

Bracken came up from behind. "All our gear is ready."

"Any word on reinforcements?" Seth asked.

"Agad is on his way," Bracken said. "I can't get into specifics. Nagi Luna has been watching us a lot lately. We caught her eye once we boarded this ship. She's watching us right now."

Kendra shivered. "Can you tell where she is?"

"She's nearby, on the island," Bracken said. "Inside the dome. I can't discern much else. She's not really worried about us, just interested."

"Can you brighten up the mist?" Seth asked.

“I’m not sure you’d like what you saw,” Bracken said. “Undead guardians on jagged teeth of rock.”

“I’m starting to hear them,” Seth said. “Most of them are moaning. A few sound thirsty. Some are inviting us to join them.”

“You can see them?” Kendra asked Bracken.

“I can sense them,” Bracken said. “Huge beasts in the water as well. They keep away from our ship, though.”

As the ship continued forward, Kendra heard a churning, sucking sound up ahead and a little to the right. “Do you hear that?”

“The whirlpool?” Bracken asked. “It will get louder.”

The *Lady Luck* passed right by the gurgling vortex, never swerving or rocking. As the ominous sucking of the whirlpool receded, the mist began to thin.

“I see the island,” Kendra said. “It’s big. I can’t see the whole thing. There are lots of sharp rocks in the water. I don’t see any beach, just waves pounding rugged stone.”

A moment later, the *Lady Luck* slowed to a halt.

“This must be our stop,” Bracken said.

They descended to the main deck, where a pair of undead mariners ushered them over to the side. Down below, two rowboats awaited them, crewed by more undead sailors.

“They even brought Hugo a boat,” Seth said.

“These zombie pirates think of everything,” Warren said. “I’m going to recommend the *Lady Luck* to my friends.”

Kendra climbed down the side of the ship between Bracken and Seth. All of them went in one boat, except for Doren and Hugo. Once the passengers were situated, the rowers began maneuvering away from the ship.

As the launches glided toward the island, the moon broke through the clouds, brightening the scene. Everywhere Kendra looked, water sprayed against treacherous rocks, the frothy foam reflecting the moonlight. She could not envision how they would reach the shore without drowning.

In the volatile water, the smaller boat did not enjoy the same supernatural stillness as the *Lady Luck*. Kendra clung to the gunwale as the boat pitched and rocked, cold spray slopping over the sides. Fighting hard,

the rowers guided the craft through a turbulent slalom course of menacing boulders. Three times Kendra closed her eyes as a crash seemed imminent, but each time the undead seamen managed to dodge the obstacle.

The forbidding shore drew near, fountains of brine exploding over angular rocks and blasting up through blowholes. The rowboat surged forward with the breaking waves, and Kendra braced for the inevitable collision, ready for the craft to shatter against unforgiving stone. At the last moment, oars thrashing, the rowboat veered left, lurching sideways under a stone arch into a small, hidden cove.

Although mostly sheltered from the breakers, the water in the cove rose and fell erratically. The boat containing Hugo entered after them. Steep rock faces surrounded the cove on all sides. The rowers piloted the boats over to the most climbable face.

Hugo lunged out of his boat, finding purchase on the steep slope. The golem reached out, and, as the water level in the cove rose high, Bracken guided Kendra into his hand. Holding Kendra in one earthen hand, Hugo quickly scaled the face. From the top, Kendra peered down as the others disembarked and scrambled up the steep slope. Bracken created a floating ball of light to help illuminate the climb.

By the time everyone reached the top, the rowboats had exited the cove to return to the ship. Kendra could hardly imagine how the launches could row against the incoming barrage of breakers, but as far as she could see, the undead sailors made a smooth escape.

Bracken increased the size and brightness of his light ball and left it hovering about twenty feet above his head. Not far from the craggy shore, the island became vegetated, with tall trees draped with vines overshadowing exotic ferns. Nearby lay a timeworn statue of a lion, webbed with cracks and missing three legs. Standing, it would have been almost as tall as Hugo.

Bracken took the lead, guiding them along the coast until they reached a sandy lagoon. A barricade of dark rocks, jutting like rows of fangs, shielded the far side of the placid lagoon from the fury of the sea. Huge stone slabs and broken pillars littered the beach, as if graceful structures had once stood here. Kendra ran a hand over the crooked base of a broken column, examining the remnants of intricate carvings.

“This looks like a good spot for a picnic,” Seth said, sitting down on the edge of a half-buried foundation. “These are sort of like benches.”

“I could eat,” Warren said.

“This might represent our best chance for a meal,” Bracken agreed.

Kendra sat down, digging into her backpack for water. The voyage on the *Lady Luck* had used up much of their food and water, but enough remained for one last decent snack. At this point, it would consist mostly of jerky, nuts, crackers, and dried fruit. As everyone took inventory, Kendra realized they had packed their provisions on the assumption that after today they would need no more food. If they somehow survived, she supposed they could fish.

Nobody spoke as they ate. The dangerous trip to shore had left Kendra shaken, and the mysterious atmosphere of the dismal beach did little to brighten her spirits. The knowledge that they were all about to die hung over the meal. None of them discussed their impending doom, but Kendra felt certain they were all pondering it. She ate mechanically, the nuts and jerky tasteless in her mouth.

As the eating slowed, Bracken stood. “I can sense the shrine to the Fairy Queen farther along this coast. The shrine lies near the east side of the dome encasing the door to Zzyzx. If I understand the lore correctly, the dome should open to face the rising sun, so the shrine might be a good place to make our final preparations.”

“Lead on,” Trask said.

“You realize we have to live through this,” Warren said, shouldering his pack. “There’s no way my last meal is going to be hiker food.”

Newel and Doren laughed. Nobody else could muster the effort. They started walking, Bracken in the lead.

“Come on, people!” Newel chided. “Warren made a joke. He has a point! We don’t have to trudge to Zzyzx like mourners at our own funerals! We came on this mission knowing the outcome would be our demise. Doesn’t that remove most of the stress? I’d be a lot more nervous if I thought I had a chance.”

“It’s like Bodwin the Bold,” Doren agreed cheerfully. “He faced his executioners with a smile on his face and tipped the headsman. We may be doomed, but why not enjoy ourselves? It will lessen the victory of our adversaries.”

“I like that,” Seth said. “I’m going to smile at the demons. I really am. You guys watch me.”

“I’m glad to be off that ship,” Kendra said. “At least we’ll die on a tropical island.”

“I kind of like Warren’s plan to not die,” Vanessa said. “Any of you have last messages you want me to deliver?”

“You’re all nuts,” Trask chuckled.

“This beats letting it gnaw at us,” Warren said. “I bet I’ll be the last one standing.”

“You wish,” Seth said. “That will be Bracken. I bet he takes some demons with him.”

“And I won’t?” Warren exclaimed.

“Maybe a little one,” Seth laughed.

“Not many weapons can harm a greater demon,” Bracken said. “Seth’s blade is our best by far. My horn can do it. Warren has the adamant sword, and it should pierce most demonic hides. The swords we took from the Gray Assassin will cut demon flesh. Trask has both at the moment, but he should give one to Vanessa. I saw her mind. She’s very talented with a blade. The rest of you should hang back and take up our arms when we fall. And, for the record, if you want to place bets on the last of us standing, my money goes on Hugo.”

“No,” the golem rumbled. “Not last. Hugo save Seth. Hugo save Kendra.”

Tears stung Kendra’s eyes.

Newel raised a hand. “How do I get added to that list?”

This time everyone laughed, even the golem, stony shoulders shaking.

The banter continued for a time, fueled mostly by Warren, Seth, and the satyrs. Eventually the conversation died. Kendra felt glad they had acknowledged the danger and tried to laugh at it. The peril remained the same, but the camaraderie had helped lighten her mood.

Walking behind Bracken, Kendra tried to imagine how she could help in the final battle. If they didn’t find any astrids to transform, she doubted she could contribute much. Everyone else was better than she was with weapons. Besides, Torina had used all of her phoenix-feather arrows, leaving none to appropriate. Based on what Bracken had said, regular

arrows like Kendra had brought would only annoy the demons. Maybe the Fairy Queen could grant her some sort of weapon. She would definitely ask.

They reached a second lagoon, this one sheltered by spiny reefs. A jumble of fallen walls, arches, and columns cluttered the crescent-shaped beach. Scattered architectural remnants continued inland among the trees. Farther inland loomed the bulk of an immense stone dome.

“The first hints of dawn remain an hour away,” Bracken said. “The shrine is not far off.”

Bracken led them inland from the beach through a grove of tall palm trees. They passed a headless statue of a horse. Up ahead, Kendra saw a large ring of pillars connected by arches. In contrast to the other stonework they had found, the impressive circle of archways appeared perfectly intact.

“Is that the shrine?” Kendra asked.

Bracken nodded. “The rest of you may want to wait here.” He took Kendra’s hand.

“You don’t need me,” Kendra said.

“I need all the help I can get,” Bracken said, coaxing her forward. “We have a lot to ask.”

Hand in hand, Bracken and Kendra approached the wide ring of connected pillars. Passing beneath an engraved arch, Kendra found the ground paved with stone. Shallow steps led down to a circular pond with a small island in the center. A single delicate arch spanned the water to the island. They walked to the near end of the fragile bridge, where Kendra hesitated.

“What are we going to ask the Fairy Queen?” she asked.

“You’ll see,” Bracken replied. “Let’s wait until her majesty can help shield our words. Nagi Luna keeps prying.”

“Can the Fairy Queen block the Oculus?” Kendra asked.

“Not really, but she has ways of encouraging Nagi Luna to gaze elsewhere. Come.”

He led her onto the narrow arch. Without his hand to hold, Kendra would have worried about her balance, but he felt so stable that she crossed without difficulty. The moment she set foot on the island, Kendra sensed electricity in the air, as if lightning were about to strike. The fine hairs on her arm stood up.

“Do you feel that?” she asked.

“Yes.” Bracken led her to the tiny statue of a fairy beside a golden bowl. They knelt together, and powerful aromas washed over them. The desert during a rainstorm. The inside of a decaying log. Honeycombs dripping with sweetness.

So it has come to this. The words arrived with a flood of conflicting emotions. Profound sadness. Deep exhaustion. Simmering wrath. Tender concern.

“We both saw it coming,” Bracken said simply. “I did everything in my power to prevent this.”

Try as we might to postpone them, days of reckoning inevitably arrive.

“Is this going to be the end of the world?” Kendra asked.

It could be.

“I’ve been in touch with Agad,” Bracken said. “He will arrive as planned. You have received my messages?”

Yes. I agree with your assessments.

“You can talk to her away from the shrines?” Kendra asked.

“Not really,” Bracken said. “Without my third horn I can’t hear her. But she can hear me. I counted on that.”

Kendra stared at the little fairy statue. “Can you help us?”

I must help you. The realm where I rule is connected to your world. For all its splendor and beauty, my kingdom is an extension of your reality. Without the terrestrial influence of the shrines, my unspoiled realm of light would eventually fade.

“Are you prepared to go all the way?” Bracken asked.

Emotions warred inside the Fairy Queen, and Kendra momentarily experienced them as if they were her own. Hesitation. Doubt. Concern for her realm. Concern for her subjects. Concern for the world. Concern for Bracken, specific and desperate. A desire to hide. A desire to rest. And an old hatred, a yearning for vengeance that had quietly smoldered for years.

Only as a last resort. It would be a desperate gambit.

“It’s our only choice,” Bracken said. “It’s why this shrine was placed here. Their final obstacle.”

What if I open my realm to you and your friends? Kendra, Seth, even the golem. We could find a way to shield ourselves.

“Open your realm to us?” Kendra asked. “Wouldn’t that make your realm vulnerable?”

It might be safer than open battle.

“This is unbecoming,” Bracken said. “Do not give utterance to these fears. My presence makes you weak.”

You cannot imagine how you strengthen me. Kendra felt such a surge of love that she gasped and clutched her chest, tears spilling from her eyes.

“We can’t win this battle,” Bracken said. “There is no point in deluding ourselves otherwise. But even without winning the battle, we might earn a chance to win the war. Hours of crisis often call for sacrifice. In matters of consequence, when have doubt and fear given the best advice? Why not heed faith, courage, duty, and honor? Kendra has, her friends have, and without reason for hope.”

Sound counsel, as usual. I will obey your plan. Kendra felt a wave of reluctant resignation.

“Not my plan,” Bracken said. “I’m proposing we implement it, but I did not design it. This stratagem was authored by the wizards who arranged to locate a shrine here.”

“What plan?” Kendra asked.

“Only the Fairy Queen and I know all the particulars,” Bracken said. “It needs to remain that way. Agad has probably deciphered our strategy, but that was unavoidable. Should the enemy anticipate our intentions, our final hope will unravel.”

“We have a chance?” Kendra asked.

“A small one,” Bracken said. “I would never have allowed you or your friends to come here if there wasn’t a chance.”

You have an important role to play, Kendra.

“How many have you gathered?” Bracken asked.

Ninety. Three of the six rebels returned. And of course three have perished.

“Are you talking about astrids?” Kendra asked.

The pool around the island erupted with the flutter of golden wings as astrids emerged from the water. Within moments, ninety owls perched atop the linked pillars, human faces staring down at Kendra and Bracken.

“No wonder I couldn’t find any of them!” Kendra complained.

“They were out searching for you,” Bracken said. “But as events unfolded, I decided it might be best for the Fairy Queen to gather them home in preparation for this day.”

Kendra frowned at the little fairy statue. “Didn’t all that travel weaken the protections to your realm? All the astrids coming and going?”

Yes. But do not fret, I repaired most of the damage by closing all other shrines besides this one. I have marshaled all of my energy for this confrontation. Follow Bracken. His leadership is now our best hope.

“Can you give us a clear morning?” Bracken asked.

The weather is the simplest part.

“You’re ready to do the rest?” Bracken asked.

I am ready.

Bracken became sober. “If the right conditions do not unfold, we’ll have to abandon the effort.”

I understand. Make your preparations. Onward to victory.

Kendra felt a surge of hope so strong she almost believed it. Then she was left with her natural emotions. The presence of the Fairy Queen had departed.

Bracken took Kendra’s hand and guided her back over the arch.

“Gilgarol, you first!”

A golden owl fluttered down and alighted in front of Kendra.

“This is the captain of the astrids,” Bracken said. “Give him a kiss on the forehead.”

Kendra crouched in front of the owl. The solemn face stared up at her with an unreadable expression. At least she didn’t have to touch her lips to his feathers. She leaned down and gave his waxy forehead a quick peck.

Golden light flared, and, after a scintillating whirlwind of sparks, Kendra found herself crouched before a tall warrior. Gilded armor protected his muscular frame, and an owlsh helmet guarded his head. His facial features appeared much more masculine than before. He clutched a spear in one hand, a sword in the other. Broad, gleaming wings fanned out from his back.

The splendid soldier turned and knelt before Bracken, head bowed. “Forgive our failure, my liege,” he implored, his strong voice thick with emotion.

“Rise, Gilgarol,” Bracken said. “All is forgiven. We have work to do.”

The strapping warrior stood up. “We prayed this day would come. At long last, a chance for redemption.”

Kendra confronted Bracken. “Okay, seriously, who are you? The Fairy Queen treats you like her favorite. The astrids kneel to you. Are you the only unicorn left or something?”

“No, there are others,” Bracken said.

Gilgarol harrumphed. “Are you not aware of—”

A hard glance from Bracken silenced him.

“What?” Kendra pressed. “Come on, you have to tell me.”

Bracken sighed. “The Fairy Queen has five children—four daughters, one son. I’m the son.”

“The Fairy Queen is your mother?”

“Yes.”

Kendra rubbed her forehead. “No wonder she seemed so worried about you. But how could your mother be a fairy?”

“Did I say she was a fairy?”

“She’s not?”

“Unicorns were the founders of fairydom. My mother was the first.”

“The Fairy Queen is a unicorn?”

“Very few beyond our inner circle share this knowledge,” Bracken said. “The fairies honor her as the first of their kind. Gorgrog destroyed my father, which is part of the reason I want to defeat him. Time is running out. We have eighty-nine astrids to go.”

Kendra felt stunned. She had been cuddling and flirting with the son of the Fairy Queen? There was no time to sort through the implications. “Let’s get going.”

“All but the unfaithful,” Bracken called.

Kendra knelt, and one by one the astrids came forward to have their true forms restored. It took longer than she expected. Soon she started closing her eyes with each kiss to avoid the blinding blizzard of sparks that accompanied each transformation. All of the astrids looked more or less like the first. The weapons varied, as did some elements of the armor, but each had golden wings, and each looked intimidating.

At last, with eighty-seven astrids restored, three darker astrids remained. These lacked the shining golden feathers of the others, and they wore remorseful expressions.

“You turned on the Fairy Queen after she chastised you for your failure,” Bracken reprimanded. “But you came when she called. You will hereafter be considered the lowest rank of all those present. May you reclaim your honor through outstanding valor.” He nodded at Kendra.

When she kissed the final three, they grew into shining warriors indistinguishable from the others. The three knelt before Bracken. They spoke in unison. “We apologize for our disloyalty. Our rebelliousness will forever shame us. Thank you for this opportunity to prove our penitence. We will not fail you.”

“You picked the right day to prove yourselves,” Bracken said. “Behold, dawn approaches.”

Looking to the east, Kendra saw color in the sky. Overhead, the clouds were thinning. Accompanied by several astrids, Kendra and Bracken returned to where their companions waited, a short distance from the shrine.

“Looks like you recruited some help,” Trask said, sounding heartier than he had in days.

“These are astrids?” Seth said, giddy with excitement.

“This is only the beginning,” Bracken promised. “Agad is on his way with a group of dragons. Additional reinforcements may issue from the shrine. We may not have the strength to defeat our opponents, but we’ll give these demons a welcome to remember.”

“What’s the plan?” Warren asked.

“We’ll form up on the far side of the shrine,” Bracken said. “A large clearing separates the shrine from Zzyzx. Since the Fairy Queen is using the shrine as a portal, our sacred homeland will be somewhat vulnerable. We’ll try to lure the combat to other locations, and twelve astrids will hang back specifically to protect the shrine.”

“Should I build a tower?” Seth asked. “I have a little tower that will grow into a real one if I plant it in the ground.”

Bracken shook his head. “Mobility will be too crucial. These are beings of immense power. The strongest of them tear down walls and towers for sport. Save your tower for another day. The demons will try to paralyze us with fear, but the astrids and I can counter their dark auras. None of you

will feel the effects of magical fear unless the rest of us fall. Kendra and Seth will each have two astrids assigned as bodyguards; the rest of us will each have one.”

“This will be an unstoppable horde,” Vanessa reminded. “We can harass their vanguard, but more will keep coming, too many to handle. We need concrete objectives.”

“I have specific maneuvers in mind,” Bracken said. “But Nagi Luna is watching. The restoration of the astrids really caught her attention. Much of our hope depends on surprise. I’ll share the specific assignments as our adversaries emerge.”

Vanessa chuckled. “You require a lot of trust.”

“He’s the one who brought the army,” Warren said. “We don’t have much choice but to hope his plan is a good one.”

“Our situation is ridiculously perilous,” Bracken said. “Yet I’m confident that, under the circumstances, my plan grants us the only possible opportunity to win the day.”

“Don’t start saying we might win,” Newel complained. “You’re making me nervous.”

“We won’t defeat them,” Bracken clarified. “But we could survive.”

“I think he’s lost it,” Doren whispered, twirling a finger beside his ear.

“This way,” Bracken said. “When the sun rises, the prison will open.”

Kendra fell into step behind Newel and Doren.

“Think they remember?” Newel asked Doren, eyeing the astrids.

“Remember what?” Kendra inquired.

Doren placed a hand beside his mouth and whispered, “Newel used to sling rocks at the astrids for sport.”

“Hush,” Newel hissed urgently, clamping a hand over Doren’s mouth. “Doren and his stories.”

Up ahead, Kendra saw human-sized fairies rising from the pond around the shrine. Kendra had not seen fairies like them since she had helped to rescue Fablehaven from Bahumat. Tall and graceful, they carried slender spears and swords, and gave haughty looks to the astrids.

A group of the oversized fairies gathered around Hugo and started chanting. The ground rippled, and Hugo began to swell as earth and stone flowed up into his body, giving him new mass. Huge thorns sprouted on his

arms and legs. By the time they finished chanting, Hugo stood at almost twice his former height, larger than when the fairies had prepared him for battle during the shadow plague. A group of fairies brought the golem an enormous sword, longer than Trask was tall, with a broad, sharp blade.

Seth ran up to Kendra. “Did you see that? They beefed up Hugo! Maybe we have a chance!”

“Bracken thinks we might,” Kendra said.

“I’m freaking out,” Seth said, stamping his feet anxiously. “I’ll be better once the battle starts. My sword really helps my nerves.”

“Just obey Bracken,” Kendra implored. “He’s our general today. Do what he says and we might make it.”

“I’m with Newel,” Seth said. “I thought we were dead, so hearing we might beat them is messing with my mind.”

“Stay calm,” Bracken said. He and Gilgarol fell into step alongside them. “When the demons first emerge, it may look overwhelming. Remember, we don’t have to fight them all head-on. We’ll have specific objectives.”

“Where are those dragons?” Seth asked.

“All in due time,” Bracken assured him.

The sky had grown brighter. They reached the far side of the shrine. Ahead of them, a wide field separated them from a tremendous dome of rock, its entire surface etched with cryptic runes. Here and there on the field lay the eroding ruins of ancient structures.

Surveying their newly assembled army, Kendra counted at least a hundred oversized fairies. The heavily armed astrids looked grim and competent, some on the ground, some hovering in the air. And Hugo had become absolutely gigantic. Whatever the outcome, this was much better than facing Gorgrog and his horde with a team of nine.

Bracken trotted ahead of everyone and turned to speak, waving both arms to summon attention. “Our foes will emerge at any moment. Look to me for orders! Take heart—we have the support of the Fairy Queen and other powerful allies. And after centuries of exile, the astrids have returned to their true form!”

This earned a cheer.

“For ages,” Bracken went on, “you astrids served as the honor guard for my family. This regiment had a name. Would any of our human companions care to guess what they were called?”

Nobody answered.

“The Knights of the Dawn,” Bracken said. “The same name taken by the brotherhood that stands in opposition to the Society of the Evening Star. I believe this name is no accident. I believe this name makes reference to this moment. No star can abide the light of the dawn, nor has evil ever loved light. After their long incarceration in darkness, let our enemies come against us with the sunrise at our backs!”

Kendra had chills. She had no idea Bracken possessed such dramatic flair for leadership. His words had kindled real hope. All around her, fairies and astrids clapped and whistled. Many applauded by clashing their weapons against their shields, producing a soldierly ruckus.

The sun peeked over the horizon, flooding the world with golden rays. And then the dome began to quake. A thunderous rumbling arose as if from the bones of the planet, drowning out all other sound. Tremors radiated through the ground, making trees sway. Kendra stumbled against an astrid, who prevented her from falling. The quaking intensified, and a vertical crack appeared in the lower portion of the dome, growing wider by the second. As the sun cleared the horizon, the demon prison opened.



Knights of the Dawn

When the quaking subsided, the breach in the dome had become as wide as a basketball court. Seth stared at the gaping rift, waiting for a demon to appear. Around him, astrids and fairies milled anxiously.

“Steady,” Bracken called. “Await my commands.”

“Are you my bodyguard?” Seth asked an astrid who had taken up position beside him.

“Yes,” the brawny astrid replied. “I am Peredor. Denwin is assigned to you as well.”

The second astrid stood a little taller than the first. He carried a pair of short spears. Peredor wielded a war hammer, and a brace of long knives crossed at his waist.

“How did you get your assignment?” Seth asked.

“Bracken issues most of our orders mind to mind,” Denwin said. “He is only using his voice for the benefit of you humans.”

“He talks to me telepathically sometimes,” Seth said. “He gave me a magic coin.”

“Keep your fine sword ready,” Peredor advised, glancing down at Vasilis. “We will try to shield you, but this will be a host of demons such as

the world has never known.”

“I’ll do my best,” Seth said, fingering the hilt of his sword. The waiting was agony. How long before a demon would appear? Would Graulas be the first one out?

A murmur ran through the assembled astrids and fairies as the first demons emerged from the rift in the dome. Seth pulled binoculars from his emergency kit for a closer look.

In the lead slithered a muscular woman with four arms and the body of a serpent. Near her limped a pale man, considerably taller than a regular person, his body pocked with sores. His long, spindly arms and legs gave him spidery proportions, slaver dripped from his slack mouth, and buttery goo clotted around his red eyes. On the other side of the snake woman padded an enormous wolf, with crooked fangs that protruded like tusks and fur as dark as ink.

“You recognize these guys?” Seth asked.

“The tall skinny one is Zorat the Plagueman,” Peredor said. “Without unicorns on our side, he could wipe us out himself with disease.”

“Bracken will hold his influence in check,” Denwin said. “The woman is a greater demon called Ixyria, a mentor to witches and hags. The wolf is called Din Bidor. Darkness and fear increase his size.”

Behind these three demons came a figure who nearly filled the gap, a shirtless mountain of a man with an iron collar around his neck and a steel mask over his face. In one hand he clutched a gigantic flanged mace, in the other a tremendous morning star. Beneath gray, elephantine skin and thick layers of blubber, rotund muscles swelled with every movement.

“Brogo,” Peredor murmured with intimidated respect. “One of the three sons of Gorgrog. He used to attack castles unaided. The oaf has single-handedly felled forests, smashed monuments, crushed armies, and destroyed cities.”

“Arguably the strongest demon in history,” Denwin said. “He was one of the first locked up in Zzyzx.”

More demons poured out alongside and behind Brogo. Some walked on two legs, some on four, some on six. Others slithered. Others jumped. Others rolled. Others had wings. Some had horns, or tentacles, or shells, or scales, or quills, or fur. Many wore armor and bore weapons. Some had

heads like dragons, others like jackals, panthers, humans, or insects. Several stood larger than Hugo. A few lounged on litters borne by underlings.

As the nightmarish procession continued to flow out of the rift, an idea struck Seth, and he hurriedly approached Bracken, his bodyguards half a step behind. Bracken was addressing Trask, Vanessa, Warren, and Kendra.

“This is good,” Bracken said, eyes on the growing mass of demons. “Impatient after years in prison, many of the demonic leaders have emerged early. Among them I already see several notorious cowards. Although they love destruction and mayhem, many demons are hesitant to risk their own necks. They prefer bullying.”

“How do we use this?” Trask asked.

“We need to spread the fight as wide as possible. We harass and scare the weakest leaders. And we fall back before them, hoping Gorgrog will emerge with his vanguard to celebrate his freedom and observe our demise.”

“This is just the vanguard?” Warren asked.

“What you see is but a small delegation of the many demons entrapped in Zzyzx,” Bracken confirmed.

Across the field, demons continued to emerge from the rift. Groups of human-sized fairies and astrids began to attack in small groups from multiple directions, darting in, striking a few blows, then soaring away. When flying demons gave chase, astrids converged, outmaneuvering the winged attackers and cutting them from the sky.

“Bracken,” Seth said, “I have an idea.”

“Let’s have it,” Bracken replied, eyes on the battle.

Seth began unbuckling his sword belt. “Why don’t you take Vasilis? I’m sure you could make better use of it than I could.”

“A noble gesture,” Bracken said, temporarily taking his eyes off the scattered skirmishes. “But you’re wrong, Seth. A sword like Vasilis does not always connect to a new master as it has connected to you. You and the Sword of Light and Darkness complement each other. I can sense that in my hands it would be a fine weapon, but it would fail to draw power from my mind and heart as it does from yours. I will fare just as well using my horn. Keep your blade.”

“What should we do?” Vanessa asked.

“We wait,” Bracken said. “Without wings, we can’t harass the enemy like the astrids or the fairies. Our weapons will be needed as the battle unfolds.”

On the field between the shrine and the prison, the harassing raids had enraged the demons, and the battle was growing fiercer. Seth saw a couple of fairies torn from the air, and an injured astrid had to be rescued by companions. The demons spread ever wider to confront the multidirectional sorties. For the moment, Bracken had succeeded in preventing the demons from concentrating their efforts on the shrine.

Without warning, the Sphinx appeared near Bracken. Dusty and winded, he held the Translocator in his hands and supported the Chronometer in the crook of his arm. The Font of Immortality protruded from his belt.

“The other two artifacts?” Bracken asked the Sphinx, evidently unsurprised by his appearance.

“Nagi Luna will not let the Oculus out of her grasp,” the Sphinx said. “Graulas is the same with the Sands of Sanctity. This was the first moment when I had a chance to snatch any of the artifacts. Gorgrog has just emerged from confinement, and all attention was on him. As it was, I had to garrote Mr. Lich.”

“You killed your friend?” Seth asked.

“He sided with the demons against me,” the Sphinx said. “His willful treachery helped create this disaster. I thanked him appropriately.”

“Will the artifacts do us any good at this point?” Kendra asked.

“My plan depends on recovering them,” Bracken said, taking the Sphinx by the hand and fixing him with a level stare. “Will you shuttle in a strike force to recover the other artifacts?”

“It would be my honor,” the Sphinx said.

“Fair enough,” Bracken said, releasing his hand. “Targoron, Silvestrus, go with the Sphinx and retrieve the remaining artifacts.”

“I need a better weapon,” the Sphinx said.

“Take mine,” Trask offered.

The Sphinx handed the Chronometer and the Font of Immortality to a nearby astrid, and then accepted the sword from Trask. “This belonged to

the Gray Assassin,” the Sphinx recognized, hardness entering his eyes. “It should do the job.”

“You will engage the enemy only as a last resort,” Bracken said. “Your priority must be to transport the artifacts back to us.”

“And try to return my sword,” Trask added.

“Graulas and Nagi Luna will not relinquish the remaining artifacts lightly,” the Sphinx affirmed, swishing his sword through the air.

“Let me come,” Seth blurted. “I’ll take care of Graulas.”

Bracken looked at Seth’s sheathed sword. He hesitated, glancing at Kendra, who shook her head. Bracken rubbed his temple. “The Sphinx will take Targoron and Silvestrus first, then return for Seth and Peredor.” Kendra gave Seth a worried frown. He tried to reassure her with a small smile. Bracken rested a hand on the Sphinx’s shoulder. “After retrieving the artifacts, your priority will be to protect Seth and his sword.”

There came a tremendous roar from the rift in the dome, a bellow of rage and triumph, easily overpowering the clamor of battle. An enormous figure came striding from the rift, a humanoid with a tremendous rack of contorted antlers. Body covered in thick fur, the personage stood taller than Hugo but shorter than the colossal Brogo. In defiance of the direct glare from the rising sun, darkness rippled around him. One fist held a huge, elaborate sword, edges bristling with spikes and serrations. Several corpses dragged on the ground behind him, affixed to his wide belt by black chains. An iron crown hugged the base of the antlers, atop a bullish head.

“Gorgrog,” Bracken said.

“The time to move is now,” the Sphinx insisted.

“Go,” Bracken ordered.

The Sphinx twisted the Translocator and disappeared with Targoron and Silvestrus. A moment later he reappeared alone. Seth stepped forward with Peredor. They each laid a hand on the Translocator. When the Sphinx twisted the device, they were suddenly inside the dome.

Enough sunlight gleamed through the gaping crack in one wall to light the dome, but persistent shadows remained off to the sides. The ceiling seemed to curve impossibly high. At the center of the room, demons continued to emerge from a circular void in the floor, the real gateway of Zzyzx.

From this closer vantage, the demons appeared much more terrifying. Targoron was already locked in combat with a six-armed foe, and Silvestrus put a spear through a two-headed brute with teeth like knives. Peredor brought his war hammer down on the head of a stocky, bearded foe with blue skin and bright yellow eyes.

Graulas stood not far off, near the wall, away from the throng of demons parading toward the fissure in the wall of the dome. His face broke into an eager, evil smile when he met eyes with Seth. In one hand he held the Sands of Sanctity. The other hand gripped a heavy spear.

“You came looking for me after all,” Graulas said, boisterous voice penetrating the tumult. “I should have known. You have collected quite a sword. Again, you astonish me, Seth Sorenson. Sadly, my final lesson will be that any blade is only as mighty as the wielder. Come. We have unfinished business, you and I.”

Several demons had beset the Sphinx and the three astrids, but the other demons ignored Seth. Maybe he didn’t look threatening enough to worry about. Maybe they were leaving him for Graulas. Whatever the case, Seth found himself walking forward, closing the gap between himself and the demon who had tricked and betrayed him.

Seth gazed up at the ram head framed by a set of curled horns. Broadly built, thickly muscled, clad in a breastplate and greaves, Graulas did not appear sickly in any way. Seth kept his hand on the pommel of his sword, instinct telling him not to draw it yet. Graulas seemed to assume that Seth was an unworthy wielder of Vasilis, and Seth saw no reason to persuade him otherwise.

“I can sense your confidence in your weapon,” Graulas said. “Vasilis is a celebrated talisman. I almost claimed it once. Much better men than you have lost it. Your cause is hopeless. No help can avail you today. Stop delaying. The sword will function better unsheathed.”

If Graulas lunged forward, he could now reach Seth with his spear. Seth’s mouth felt dry. The wild ruckus of the cavorting demons faded from his attention. How had he imagined he could defeat Graulas? The demon had torn down a house with his bare hands! He had usurped the power of the Sphinx!

Seth clenched his jaw. There was no turning back now, nowhere to run. His only allies were fighting for their lives. And Graulas had the Sands of

Sanctity.

Seth no longer advanced. "I healed you and you killed my friend."

Graulas sneered. "Don't stop there. By healing me, you essentially opened Zzyzx."

"Yeah, well, I'm here to unheal you." As Seth pulled out Vasilis, the blade sang in his hand, glaring with a scarlet intensity he had not yet seen. The sparks of defiance inside of Seth flamed into fury and confidence.

Graulas grimaced, uncertainty flickering in his eyes. The demon glanced away, and Seth followed his gaze to Nagi Luna, who perched on a rocky outcrop cackling wildly. Grunting, Graulas jabbed the spear at Seth. The thrust seemed slow and clumsy, and Seth hacked the head off the spear with a quick sweep of his blade.

"You claimed the sword had not taken to him!" Graulas growled vehemently. Seth could tell that the demon was no longer speaking English, but he could still comprehend the meaning. Scarlet flames spread down the shaft of his spear.

"Try to claim authority over me, will you?" Nagi Luna jeered at Graulas. "Try to steal the glory of my conquest?"

Graulas threw the shaft of his spear at Seth, who dodged aside without trouble. "Curse you for this, hag," Graulas rumbled. "You'll pay. If I fall, I'll summon a curse that will—"

"Kill him, boy," Nagi Luna snapped.

Graulas and Seth sprang toward each other simultaneously. Vasilis blazed, slicing through fur and breastplate almost without slowing. Angry flames erupted over Graulas as his claws raked down Seth's sides and his teeth clamped shut on his shoulder.

Seth fell flat on his back, Vasilis still in his hand, the crushing weight of the flaming demon pressing down on him. Stripes of pain seared his sides, and the demon's teeth remained embedded in his shoulder. The stench of burning meat and fur filled his nostrils. Seth could not move. As the fire spread over Graulas, Seth realized he would be cooked along with his blazing enemy. At least he would not die alone! Coulter would be proud.

Strong hands started prying the teeth apart at his shoulder, and the weight of the fiery demon rolled off of him. The Sphinx helped Seth to his feet. Peredor stood at his side. Targoron and Silvestrus continued to fight

valiantly nearby. Beside Seth, raging flames consumed the lifeless corpse of the old demon.

“You really can use that sword,” the Sphinx said, impressed.

“The Sands of Sanctity?” Seth asked, feeling light-headed. Refreshing energy flowed into his arm through Vasilis. Without the sword, Seth doubted whether he would be standing.

“Nagi Luna grabbed the artifact the instant Graulas fell,” the Sphinx said darkly.

Turning, Seth saw her grinning on her rocky perch, the Sands of Sanctity in one hand, the Oculus in the other. Other demons had gathered around her in a defensive formation.

“Return the artifacts,” the Sphinx demanded.

Nagi Luna gave a strangled cackle. “I am no longer your prisoner! I am the liberator of demonkind!”

More demons surged to protect her. Hunched and shriveled as she was, Nagi Luna would soon get away. Seth charged forward, Vasilis held high. Strength flooded into him from the sword, and the blade blazed like the hottest coals in a forge. Demons howled and wailed as Vasilis cleaved them, often striking two or three with a single swipe. As when he had dispatched the undead behind the Totem Wall, the sword seemed to subtly guide Seth, as if they were partners working together.

Alongside Seth, the Sphinx, Targoron, Silvestrus, and Peredor joined the fray. The demons gave way before them, particularly cowering from the fiery blade that effortlessly carved through armor and shield, shell and scales, setting ablaze all who came near.

Nagi Luna began to scramble away. Across the room, a hulking, shaggy demon with antlers like a moose moved toward them, holding an enormous battle-ax.

“Orogoro approaches,” the Sphinx panted beside Seth. “The eldest son of Gorgrog. If he intervenes, all is lost.”

Seth experienced a heightened sense of awareness, absorbing all the details of the scene in an instant. Despite the ferocious attack he and the others had mounted, too many demons separated them from Nagi Luna. Orogoro would reach her first. And the artifacts would be gone, the artifacts Bracken had said were central to his plan. Without those artifacts the world would end.

The decision was made in an instant. Mustering all his strength, Seth hauled back Vasilis and flung it at Nagi Luna. The sword leapt from his hand with more force than the throw warranted, as if determined to reach the target, shedding flames and sparks as it spun through the air. The blade pierced the wizened demon through the back, and flames engulfed her shriveled form.

Seth crashed to the ground. Without Vasilis, all vitality had fled. The agony of his wounds reached new intensity, as if acid had been poured on his injuries. Dimly, Seth was aware of Peredor, Targoron, and Silvestrus springing into the air. Cheek against the ground, he foggily watched heavy boots shuffle near. Succumbing to pain and exhaustion, he did nothing to protect himself as jostling demons began to trample him. As his consciousness faded, the pain diminished.

The bite and scratches from Graulas had been poisonous. He could feel the toxins flowing in his veins. He had cheated death several times. Now he would finally die. He had done his best. Hopefully one of the others would recover the artifacts from Nagi Luna.

Then Peredor knelt at his side and slid the hilt of Vasilis into his hand. The blade glowed, and awareness returned.

“The artifacts,” Seth mumbled, sitting up.

“The Sphinx and Targoron got them,” Peredor said. “They were being swarmed, so they teleported away with them. Silvestrus has fallen.”

Cradling Seth in his strong arms, the astrid took flight. Seth looked down at the mass of demons continuing to flood from the round void in the floor, and watched the crowd marching out through the rift in the side of the dome.

“I feel . . . weak,” Seth mumbled.

“Vasilis strengthens you, but it doesn’t heal you,” Peredor said, evading a winged demon. “Hang on. There is poison in you. Stay awake. Keep talking.”

“Who got the artifacts?” Seth asked sluggishly.

Peredor dove through the rift in the dome, and a moment later they were gliding over the battlefield toward the shrine. With Seth in his arms, rather than fight, Peredor spent his whole energy dodging adversaries. Above the army of demons, Peredor employed dizzying acrobatics to keep

away from enemies, but Seth experienced the maneuvers numbly, as if from a great distance.

“You still with me?” Peredor asked. They were nearing the shrine.

“Still with you,” Seth slurred. In his hand, the glow of Vasilis had grown faint.

“Silvestrus got to the artifacts, and he passed them to Targoron as he fell,” Peredor explained. “Targoron brought them to the Sphinx. They tried to get to you, but too many demons were attacking. Our mission succeeded. Hopefully this will help restore some of our honor.”

“Your honor?”

“Targoron, Silvestrus, and I rebelled against the Fairy Queen after she transformed us into weaklings and banished us. Her consort had fallen to Gorgrog, and yes, as a body, the Knights of the Dawn had failed, but some of us found her punishment excessive. No betrayal was committed. Certain knights relaxed their vigilance, and Gorgrog got to our king in a surprise attack. Some of us felt she was assigning the blame deserved by some to all. To our everlasting shame, six of us renounced her. Three of us only recently returned, answering her call. We have much to prove. Bracken generously offered us an opportunity.”

“You did well,” Seth said. “Thanks.”

“Save your gratitude! We succeeded because of you. Seth, I have never seen a sword thrown with such ability. For that matter, who would dare to throw such a sword? I am still in disbelief.”

Seth smiled. He looked down at the shrine. The fighting looked fierce in front of it. “Is the shrine falling?”

“Our foes are hitting it hard,” Peredor said grimly. “Without intervention, it will fall shortly. Our ranks have grown disorderly. Bracken has taken to the battlefield.”

“Kendra?”

“We’ll find her. And we’ll find you a unicorn.”



The Demon King

Kendra hated watching her brother vanish with the Sphinx into the unseen heart of the demon horde. She felt angry at Bracken for allowing Seth to endanger himself. But she did not directly intervene to prevent Seth's departure. After all, their situation was desperate, and she had a feeling none of them would see the end of the day without facing extreme hardship. Assuming any of them reached the end of the day alive.

As the demons had fanned outward from the rift, the skirmishes had grown fiercer and closer. A small team of astrids lured Brogo away toward the far side of the island, taunting the gigantic demon while he swatted at them like pesky insects. Others managed to injure some of the demons who had been reclining on litters. When Gorgrog moved aggressively forward, guiding a large portion of his host toward the shrine, Bracken departed to join the fight, along with Vanessa, Warren, and several astrids.

Bracken warned Kendra to stay near the shrine until the obvious moment, and then to flee. He did not explain what would make the moment obvious.

Currently, Kendra stood between Trask and Hugo as the demons pressed back the astrids and fairies guarding the shrine. Any moment the

demons could break through, and Kendra would join the fight. Or perhaps when the demons broke through, it would be time to run away.

“This could be it,” Newel said from behind Kendra.

“What a way to go,” Doren said with relish. “Look at them. Sure, we’ve got plenty of lesser demons milling about, but I see many greater demons among them, including most of the demonic nobility.”

“We’ll go out in style,” Newel agreed. “Killed by the best.”

“I wish I had a decent sword,” Doren sighed.

“I know the feeling,” Trask added.

“At least we each have a guardian astrid,” Newel said optimistically.

“I think my astrid could take yours,” Doren muttered to Newel.

“Keep dreaming,” Newel chuckled. “Mine looks like he could break yours in half with his bare hands.”

“He’d have to catch him first,” Doren countered. “Mine looks quick and wiry.”

“Neither of us should get too cocky,” Newel replied. “I’ll wager Kendra has the best ones.”

“No doubt,” Doren huffed. “She has connections.”

Kendra glanced back at the two astrids assigned to her. Surly warriors heavily armed, Crelang and Rostimus looked impatient to join the combat. By the appearance of the battle, they and the other astrid bodyguards would not have long to wait. The massive press of demons relentlessly forced back the defending lines of fairies and astrids.

A tall, burly demon with bulky claws like a lobster rammed through the defenders, allowing several other demons to trail through the gap. Hugo rushed forward, hacking the crustaceous demon to pieces with his hefty sword. The astrid bodyguards entered the fray and drove back the other demons who had broken through.

The small victory was short-lived.

An astrid and a stunning orange fairy fell to a trio of four-armed women with spider bodies. The demonic women held a sword or knife in each hand, and turned to widen the gap they had created as other demons rushed through. Another fairy fell, and suddenly the line of defenders collapsed into disarray.

Hugo came stomping back to protect Kendra, motioning for her to retreat to the edge of the shrine. She obeyed. And then the Sphinx appeared alongside Targoron. The Sphinx tossed his sword to Trask, who waded into battle, face grim, blade flashing. Blood flowed from a gash in the Sphinx's neck, but Targoron promptly dusted it with the Sands of Sanctity and the wound closed.

"Get the artifacts to safety," the Sphinx gasped.

"I'll carry them to the fallback position," Targoron replied, taking flight with the Oculus, the Sands of Sanctity, and the Translocator.

Kendra knew nothing about a fallback position. She felt like an outsider in this battle where so many plans were conveyed telepathically. "Where's Seth?" she asked the Sphinx.

"Injured," he replied. "He was heroic. Your brother made all the difference. He single-handedly slew Graulas and Nagi Luna. Peredor is flying him back here."

Kendra was glad they had regained the artifacts, since Bracken had claimed they were essential, but she felt horribly worried about Seth. How badly had he been injured? Would she ever see him again?

Rostimus landed beside Kendra, purplish slime dripping from his sword. "I may have to fly you out of here."

After giving up a lot of ground, the astrids and fairies were making a final stand in front of the shrine. But the frenzied demons only fought harder, and the defensive formation began to buckle.

"What about the shrine?" Kendra asked. If the demons broke through into the sacred kingdom beyond the shrine, it would be the end for creatures of light.

"My duty is to protect you," Rostimus replied.

Newel patted Rostimus on the arm. "Could you lend us a couple of weapons?"

"My arrows aren't causing harm," Doren complained. "We're tired of feeling like spectators."

Rostimus drew a pair of long knives, handing one to each satyr. "Use them well," he admonished.

"For endless television!" Newel cried, charging into battle.

"Frito-Lay!" Doren yelled, waving his knife overhead.

Behind her, Kendra heard multiple splashes. Turning, she saw more warrior fairies emerging from the pool around the shrine. With them came a number of unicorns, magnificent horses with pure white fur and gleaming horns. Many of the unicorns changed to human shape, men and women wielding glorious swords.

As the reinforcements charged forward, the demons fell back before the fresh onslaught, several falling to sword and spear. Other creatures continued to emerge from the pool: the tallest dryads Kendra had ever beheld, armed with bows and spears and halberds; a group of lammasu, huge and proud; a fiery flock of phoenixes; and dripping naiads, clutching daggers. As each wave of newcomers joined the fight, the demons surrendered more ground.

Countless small fairies began to fountain up from the pool. A few bore weapons and flew to help. Most did not join the battle, but zipped off in the opposite direction. Other creatures emerged and fled as well. Many more unicorns, tiny folk like brownies and elves, white stags with golden antlers, and other strange beasts exited the pond only to run away. Kendra could hardly believe the quantity of life escaping from the shrine.

An earsplitting roar drew Kendra's attention away from the pond. The bellow came from Gorgrog. Astrids and phoenixes had flown out to confront him, and many of the tall dryads and lammasu were bullying their way through the demon army to reach him. The astrids and others had formed a ring around the Demon King, holding back his allies while a small number of them engaged him in combat. Although the combat was not nearby, the shrine occupied higher ground, and Kendra could see Bracken leading the attack. Warren and Vanessa fought alongside him.

As Kendra watched, Gorgrog hacked an astrid from the air with his serrated sword. The Demon King towered over his opponents, stomping and slashing as they tried to surround him. The attackers looked like chipmunks assailing a gorilla.

A woman stepped up beside Kendra. Tall and graceful, wreathed in light, the woman shone with ethereal beauty. Kendra immediately recognized her from a vision she had experienced while using the Oculus.

Rostimus dropped to one knee, head bowed. "Your majesty."

"Rise," the Fairy Queen said, her voice rich and serene amid the cacophony of battle.

“It’s you!” Kendra exclaimed, entranced by her presence. “It’s really you! Why did you come out?” Worry filled her voice. The advance of the wave of reinforcements had already begun to slow.

“I am acting in accordance with our plan,” the Fairy Queen replied. Her eyes regarded the fight with Gorgrog. “But I may have to deviate. Brave and capable as my son may be, Gorgrog is too much for him. I will not stand aside and lose my son as I lost my husband.”

“Why is he fighting Gorgrog?” Kendra asked.

“We must at least injure the Demon King for our plan to have a chance,” she replied. “Kendra, when my people retreat, go with them. This shrine will shortly be overrun.”

“I will see her to safety,” Rostimus pledged.

The Fairy Queen gave a nod. She turned to a slender, beautiful fairy warrior. “Ilyana, oversee the retreat if I am unable.”

“Yes, your majesty,” the fairy replied firmly.

The Fairy Queen drew a shining sword and took to the sky, flying without wings. Gorgrog, noticing her approach, sent Bracken tumbling with a vicious kick. The Fairy Queen swooped at the Demon King, and her sword clashed with his. Her bright blade looked tiny against his monstrous weapon, but the great force of his blow did not overpower her. Their swords connected again and again, each clash resounding loudly. There came a lull across the rest of the battlefield as many of the participants turned to watch.

At that moment, Peredor landed beside Kendra with her brother in his arms. The astrid placed him gently on the ground.

“Seth,” Kendra gasped, kneeling beside him. Her brother was a mess, his face pale, his shirt tattered, his shoulder and sides drenched in blood. Vasilis glowed dimly in his grasp.

“I need a unicorn!” Peredor shouted.

“Hey, Kendra,” Seth murmured weakly through chapped lips. “I got Graulas. We got the artifacts.”

A handsome warrior came and knelt beside them, touching the tip of his sword to Seth’s forehead. Then he placed a palm against his chest. Some color returned to Seth’s face.



“The poison had almost taken him,” the unknown unicorn said. “I’ve purged the venom, but considerable internal damage remains. I have stalled the bleeding and tried to stabilize him. You need to get him to the Sands of Sanctity.”

“Thank you,” Kendra said as the man hastened to rejoin the battle. The forces that had rallied from the pond were now being pushed back. The

Fairy Queen had lost the initiative with Gorgrog and was struggling to survive his incessant blows. As Bracken sought to aid his mother, Gorgrog struck his sword from his hands. Kendra watched in horror as a follow-up swing whistled toward Bracken. The Fairy Queen partly deflected the huge sword, but the stroke still sent Bracken reeling to the ground with a gaping wound across his chest.

“No!” Kendra cried, feeling useless.

Warren and Vanessa frantically helped the astrids, fairies, dryads, and lammasu hold back the encroaching demons vying to come to the defense of their king. The Fairy Queen stood over her fallen son, desperately deflecting mighty blows from Gorgrog.

Kendra had no way to help! She was about to witness the demise of the Fairy Queen, Bracken, and the rest of her friends. If only there were something she could do!

Her eyes fell on Vasilis. The weapon held her gaze, and the sounds of battle receded. She had a peculiar feeling that the weapon was calling to her. She made up her mind in an instant. “Seth, can I borrow your sword?”

“Vasilis?” he asked.

“Bracken and the Fairy Queen are about to die,” she urged.

“It may not work the same for you as for me,” Seth warned, sweat beading on his forehead. “But sure, take it. I’m in no shape to use it.”

Kendra glanced at Peredor. “Get my brother to the Sands of Sanctity.”

Seth held out Vasilis, and Kendra accepted the weapon. The dim blade flashed to life, shedding a brilliant white radiance. Kendra immediately felt galvanized, her senses sharpened, as if her whole life had been spent half asleep, and only now had she truly awakened. As blinding light beamed from her sword, the demons nearest to the shrine faltered, turning their heads away and trying to shield their eyes. Astrids, dryads, unicorns, and fairies once again drove them back.

But Kendra was focused beyond the nearby demons at the contest between the Fairy Queen and the Demon King. All her most desperate hopes and desires—to see her parents again, to rescue her grandparents, to protect her friends, to save the world from this demonic invasion—converged on the antlered form of Gorgrog. He was trying to kill Bracken and the Fairy Queen. He was the leader of the demons. He embodied the threat they had to overcome.

Vasilis towed her forward with such violence that her feet hardly touched the ground. She skipped ahead in huge bounds, much faster than any mortal could possibly run. Demons parted before the intense fervor of her blade, and, as Gorgrog drew nearer, rather than fear, she felt elation. All of the energy others claimed to perceive inside of her seemed to have suddenly surfaced. She felt no hesitation, no worry, only an overwhelming euphoria at finally being able to help the people she loved.

Sensing her approach, Gorgrog backed away from the Fairy Queen and turned to confront the newcomer. Kendra rushed at him, demons blurring by at either side, Vasilis shining like a white sun. The demon stood many times taller than Kendra, but she jumped before reaching him, gliding up so that she was almost level with his head as their swords clashed explosively.

The impact sent Gorgrog staggering backwards amid a coruscating shower of sparks, a white-edged notch in his monstrous sword. Kendra landed lightly, Vasilis humming in her hand. Behind the Demon King, Kendra noticed the Fairy Queen chopping at one of the black chains dangling from his belt, attempting to free a dehydrated corpse from its tether.

The Demon King was entirely focused on Kendra, eyes squinted against the brightness of Vasilis. The surrounding demons cowered back. Kendra stood her ground, and the Demon King charged her. Guided by an impulse from Vasilis, rather than try to meet his blade with hers, Kendra stepped aside as he swung his sword in an enormous overhand sweep. The blade plunged deep into the ground beside her. Springing forward, Kendra hacked at his leg. Flashing brilliantly, her shining blade sliced through fur and flesh like light through shadow.

With pure white flames running wildly up his leg and side, Gorgrog collapsed heavily. Kendra leapt forward, and Vasilis glared like lightning as she slashed him with a fatal stroke.

As she backed away from the blazing form of Gorgrog, Kendra realized that the demon horde had grown tranquil. The astrids and fairies around her began to fly away. From the mass of stunned demons came a dark warrior who looked like a slightly smaller version of Gorgrog. His antlers branched more like those of a moose, and he wielded a great battle-ax.

“Orogoro,” the Fairy Queen said, now standing beside Kendra, a withered brown corpse cradled in her arms.

The huge demon rushed forward to claim the crown from the burning form of his father. While Orogoro reached for the crown, face contorted in pain from the searing white flames, the astrid captain Gilgarol landed behind him and, with a mighty stroke of his longsword, slashed off one of his huge feet. Orogoro wailed in anguish.

“Away,” the Fairy Queen cried, flying skyward, the corpse still in her arms.

Crelang and Rostimus alighted beside Kendra.

“Well done,” Crelang said.

“We have orders to take you away,” Rostimus added respectfully.

“Let’s go,” Kendra said. With the fall of the Demon King, and with Bracken out of danger, her euphoria had abated. She saw Bracken, Warren, and Vanessa being carried away by other astrids.

Rostimus picked her up and took to the skies. Crelang glided at their side. A flying demon belched fire at them, and Crelang pierced its neck with a javelin. No other enemies harassed them. The entire demon army seemed confused. Kendra began to hear voices crying, “Dragons! Dragons are coming! Dragons from the west!”

Rostimus brought Kendra to the top of a wide ridge behind and to one side of the shrine. Many of the other creatures of light already awaited them. From the high vantage point, Kendra looked out to sea, where at least twenty dragons were speeding toward Shoreless Isle. Kendra watched for a long moment, wondering if the dragons might make the difference. She had slain the Demon King, but a vast host of demons remained.

“Do you need healing?” Rostimus asked.

Kendra patted herself. “I don’t think so.” She studied the crowd around her, searching for familiar faces. “Have you noticed any of my friends?”

Rostimus and Crelang guided Kendra to Trask, Newel, and Doren. She asked if they had seen Seth, and Doren pointed her in the right direction.

Kendra found her brother seated beside Bracken. Both had already been revived by the Sands of Sanctity. Seth rose excitedly when she approached.

“I watched you with the binoculars,” he gushed. “I think Vasilis may like you even more than me! After you took the sword, I remembered that Morisant hinted the sword might take to you. I couldn’t believe you did it!”

Kendra hugged her brother tightly, relieved that he seemed all right. Then she turned to Bracken, and they embraced desperately.

“None have ever seen a blade shine so brightly,” Bracken said into her ear, making no attempt to hide his awe. “What you did was impossible. Not in our most farfetched fantasies did we hope to slay Gorgrog.”

Kendra released the embrace, feeling pleased and embarrassed. “What happens now?”

“Now we pray our plan works,” Bracken said, brow furrowed.

Behind Seth and Bracken, Kendra saw the Fairy Queen seated beside an older gentleman with a frail build. She held his hand and spoke softly to him, but he sat motionless, wearing a vacant expression.

“Who is that with the Fairy Queen?” Kendra asked.

“My father,” Bracken said softly.

“What?” Kendra exclaimed. “I thought he was dead!”

“None of us actually saw him die,” Bracken explained. “We assumed he had been destroyed. As we fought Gorgrog, Mother sensed his presence, but she hardly recognized him. When Mother and I recovered him, at first we thought he had been changed into one of the undead. But then we realized that he was cocooned in powerful demonic spells that kept him alive, conscious and feeling, but on the brink of death. Gorgrog had been wearing him as a trophy, dragging him around Zzyzx for centuries. I can’t imagine my father’s suffering. The Sands of Sanctity brought him back physically, though he has not aged well, and there is no sign of his horns. He’s catatonic.”

“How terrible,” Kendra said. “Is there hope he’ll recover?”

“There is always hope,” Bracken said. “Unicorns are among the most skilled healers, and Father had a resilient spirit. Time will tell. Mother swears he seemed to smile when Gorgrog fell.”

Kendra, Seth, and Bracken watched from the ridge as a multitude of flying demons rose up to engage the oncoming dragons. The dragons attacked without reservation, lightning flashing from their jaws, or glaring bursts of flame, or seething streams of acid. At their lead flew Celebrant,

scales gleaming like platinum. He looked to be everything Raxtus had described—enormous, agile, powerful. Whenever his teeth or claws struck, demons plunged from the sky.

A trio of dragons skimmed low across the mass of earthbound demons, drenching them with fire. From the midst of the demons, the gigantic Brogo threw his morning star, knocking one of the dragons from the sky.

Celebrant and three other dragons—the smallest of the foursome had to be Raxtus—swooped to the rescue. While the other three dragons defended their fallen comrade and helped him get back into the air, Celebrant opened his mouth and released a blinding blast of white energy at Brogo. The energy split open his mask and knocked the colossal brute to the ground. Tucking his wings, Celebrant rammed the titanic demon, raking and biting ferociously. When Celebrant returned to the sky, Brogo lay crisscrossed with deep lacerations and had lost an arm.

Elsewhere, the final team of astrids defending the shrine turned and fled, wings flashing. Orogoro hobbled near the front of the demonic host, using his battle-ax as a crutch. Following his lead, the demon horde began pouring into the pool and vanishing.

“Oh, no!” Kendra exclaimed.

“This is part of the plan,” Bracken said, watching in grim silence. “I ordered our forces to withdraw.”

The Fairy Queen came up beside them. “The demons have always dreamed of conquering my realm. It is a kingdom of light and purity. Nothing will please them more than to ravage it.”

“Wait,” Seth said. “You hoped this would happen?”

“Mother destroyed all of her other shrines,” Bracken said. “She has evacuated all of her people along with what talismans and energy she could bring. Her kingdom is now empty and has a single gateway.”

Kendra watched the demons flood into the shrine. “Out of one prison and into another,” she realized.

“If all goes as planned,” Bracken confirmed.

“We have good reason to hope,” the Fairy Queen said. “Their leaders are going. The others will follow. It will take some time for them to discover how completely I have sealed off my realm.”

The dragons stopped attacking, content to circle over the demonic exodus, casting menacing shadows. As she regarded the dragons, once again Kendra picked out the smaller form of Raxtus darting among the larger creatures. Even without further violence, the threat of the many dragons overhead seemed to hurry the demons along.

For more than three hours, Kendra and her friends anxiously observed the procession of demons exiting the rift in the dome and entering a new realm through the shrine. The sheer quantity of demons left Kendra astonished. The others had been right. There was no way they could have defeated these demons in combat. For every demon they killed, a thousand more would have emerged.

“Don’t they know it’s a trap?” Kendra finally asked Bracken.

“They must know something is wrong,” Bracken said. “They march into a realm they have dreamed of possessing since the dawn of time. But the realm is empty, undefended. It was handed to them with only token resistance. As we speak, they are tearing it apart. The smart ones know it’s too good to be true. But their king has fallen, and his heir is injured. The sun is high. They don’t want to face Vasilis. They don’t want to face the dragons, especially Celebrant. They don’t want to fight the unicorns, or the astrids, or the other fairy folk. And they probably are bewildered by the increased atmosphere of unbelief in the world. When many of these demons departed this world, they were universally feared. Now, most of humanity considers their existence a joke.”

“They could have overcome all of this,” the Fairy Queen said. “They could easily have destroyed this world. But providing access to my realm offered them a tempting, effortless option. They seem to have taken the bait.”

“So you will lose your realm,” Kendra said.

“It is no longer my realm,” the Fairy Queen asserted. “It will become the new demon prison.”

As the last demonic stragglers arrived at the shrine, a long gold and red dragon came gliding toward the ridge on two sets of wings. Seeing his lion’s head, complete with a crimson mane, Kendra recognized the dragon as Camarat from Wyrmoost. At his side flew Raxtus. Kendra took Seth’s hand as the dragons landed near them, and she saw that Agad sat astride

Camarat in an elaborate saddle. Camarat crouched low as the wizard dismounted.

“Raxtus!” Kendra shouted as the dragon came near. “You brought reinforcements!”

“I did!” the dragon replied. “I even helped in the combat!”

Seth nodded toward Agad, who was walking away from Camarat. “I thought dragons didn’t allow riders!” he said. Camarat spread his wings and returned to the sky.

“We make exceptions on occasion,” Raxtus said. “Camarat and Agad are brothers.”

“How did you convince the dragons to help?” Kendra asked.

“Agad promised to make Celebrant caretaker of Wyrmoost after all of this is over. The dragons of Wyrmoost have dreamed of governing themselves for centuries. Plus, I told my father how Navarog had vowed that the demon horde would slay him. I think that helped. He let me fly to battle with him for the first time!”

Agad came forward and knelt before the Fairy Queen. All eyes watched the wizard. “You have made an enormous sacrifice,” he uttered reverently.

“It was necessary,” the Fairy Queen replied. “My realm would have withered and died if the demons had claimed this world. Can you lock them inside?”

“If I may have use of the five artifacts, these noble dragons who accompany me have agreed to help me bind your last shrine much more securely than Zzyzx. I have had centuries to consider all that I wish I had done long ago. Now I can implement those improvements.”

“What say you?” the Fairy Queen asked, turning to Bracken.

“You mean my horn?” Bracken asked. “By all means, use it as you used it before. I’m accustomed to this mortal shape. Seal those fiends away for as long as you are able.”

Agad nodded pensively. “The former prison lasted for millennia. This new prison will endure far longer.”

“What will you do?” Kendra asked the Fairy Queen. “Where will you go?”

“We will inherit a new home,” the Fairy Queen said, regarding Agad.

“I will remove the bindings placed on Zzyzx,” Agad said. “There is actually three times the space inside of Zzyzx as you had in your former kingdom.”

“You’ll live in the demon prison!” Seth exclaimed.

The Fairy Queen smiled. “Creators have many advantages over destroyers. It takes much more talent to build something beautiful than it does to tear it down. Before long, the demons will render my former realm as ugly as Zzyzx. But they will never re-create what they have spoiled. Conversely, with time and effort, one day Zzyzx will become as lovely as my former realm.”

“More beautiful,” Bracken promised. “We’ll have more space to work with. And we’ll have an eager force of workers. Considering the peril, our casualties are minimal. Two dozen fairies, eight astrids, two unicorns, a few others. The Sands of Sanctity are quickly restoring the wounded.”

“You’ll join me?” the Fairy Queen asked her son hopefully, tears in her eyes.

“Of course,” Bracken said. “I love a challenge. I’ll help supervise the rebuilding.”

Kendra felt a heavy weight on her heart. Did that mean she would never see Bracken again? It sure sounded like it.

Agad bowed to the Fairy Queen. “You are most wise, your majesty. Some imagine the difference between heaven and hell to be a matter of geography. Not so. The difference is much more evident in the individuals who dwell there.”

“We have much yet to accomplish,” the Fairy Queen said. “Grant Agad his artifacts and let us be about our respective duties.”

“I have a problem,” Kendra said quietly.

“Speak, Kendra,” the Fairy Queen invited. “We are all forever in your debt. If our aid is desired, it will ever be yours.”

“My parents and grandparents and many of my friends remain imprisoned at the Living Mirage preserve. Can any of you help us rescue them?”

“It would be my honor,” Agad said. “Dragons can be very persuasive.”

“As can astrids,” Bracken promised.

“I expect the Sphinx himself would help convince his minions to stand down,” the Fairy Queen suggested.

“Fablehaven is kind of a mess too,” Seth reminded everyone.

“I will personally make sure all is set right at Fablehaven and Living Mirage,” Agad pledged.

“And I second the promise,” Bracken added.

Kendra felt relieved, mostly because her family would be safe and have Fablehaven restored to them, and partly because it sounded like she would get to see more of Bracken before he went away.

“There will be other odds and ends to tidy up,” Agad said. “For example, Bracken mentioned to me that you received advice from your ancestor Patton Burgess. I would like to travel back toward the end of his life and tell him how everything worked out, for his peace of mind. He was a good man.”

“Could that change the information he sends to us?” Seth asked.

“Could it change how all of this turns out?”

“You already know what he told you,” Agad said. “Your visits to Patton are already part of the past, even the visits you haven’t made yet. The information he left for you is a consequence of all those visits. I’m sure he made tough choices regarding what information to share and what to withhold. I will make sure he knows that the information he shared was exactly what you needed. Everyone involved walked a delicate path to reach this victory.”

“Could we have Patton let Coulter know we win?” Seth asked.

“Coulter visited him right before he died.”

The wizard winked. “I think we can help make sure that happened, although I can make no certain promises. Time travel is strange. When we try to alter the past, we inevitably find our involvement was already part of the past. The few wizards I have known who actively chased time paradoxes have all gone into the past without returning, so I strive to keep my interactions with history simple.”

“A wise policy,” the Fairy Queen said.

Seth cleared his throat uncomfortably. “While I have your attention, I have one more question.” He began to rummage in his emergency kit. “We had a wooden servant named Mendigo who helped us survive Wyrmoost,

but got destroyed in the process. I have the hooks that held him together.” He showed Agad his palm, which held several hooks.

Agad picked up a hook and held it up to one eye, squinting. “Yes, I recall Camarat telling me about your automaton. The hooks are a good start. You said he was wooden. Did any of the wood happen to survive?”

Seth frowned. “It all got dissolved by Siletta’s poison.”

Agad scowled thoughtfully. “Then I’m not sure I can—”

“Wait,” Kendra said. “Some wood did survive. At Wyrmoost, when Mendigo jumped into that canyon to escape the griffins, a long piece of him snapped off. I remember finding it when I went out to scout. It should still be in the knapsack.”

“And we can get to the knapsack room with the Translocator,” Seth added excitedly.

“In that case, I believe I can restore your automaton without much trouble,” Agad assured them.

“And I can perhaps add a spark of free will,” the Fairy Queen said. “It would help the servant learn and grow.”

“Thanks,” Seth beamed. “You guys are the best! Oh, Agad, Bracken, I almost forgot. Morisant sends his regards. He told me to thank you, and to convey that he bears you no grudges. He seemed sorry for what he became.”

“This is wonderful news, Seth,” Agad said, eyes shining. “It gladdens me to hear that my mentor has finally found rest. Morisant was once a great wizard, perhaps the greatest of our order. It was his wisdom that allowed for a shrine to the Fairy Queen so near to Zzyzx. It is truly miraculous that he entrusted Vasilis to your care.”

“Loaning it to Kendra worked out pretty good too,” Seth said.

The old wizard laughed, placing one hand on Kendra’s shoulder, the other on Seth’s. “You two have been through a grueling ordeal. Your names will go down in history. We are all so very proud of you. I wish there were a way to fully express our gratitude. For the present, this will have to suffice: You can finally rest.”



Prisoners

I bet you thought you'd never have to pay up," Newel said, munching on a piece of fruit.

"Let's just say I'm relieved you'll get your reward," Seth replied.

"You'll confirm with Stan about the new technology?" Newel verified, tossing a grape into the air and catching it in his mouth.

"You really think we should tell him?" Seth asked.

"We had a legitimate pact," Newel said. "I don't want to risk Stan taking away our generator or our flat screen. Our claim is just. We need him on board at the outset."

"What if Stan prohibits the deal?" Doren asked. "What if he tries to change the terms? What if he gives us a certificate?"

"We stand up for ourselves," Newel replied. "The terms were set. We followed Seth to the ends of the earth and confronted some incredibly ugly demons."

"They were unsightly," Doren agreed with a wince. "And tough. Without our astrids we would have been goners."

"Nonsense," Newel spat. "Those astrids barely survived thanks to our heroics. Don't you forget it."

“I’ll do my best with Grandpa,” Seth said. “I have to go. My parents are waiting. You should slow down on the grapes, you’ll spoil your appetite.”

“Spoil my appetite?” Newel exclaimed. “On fruit? Seth, I thought you knew us!”

“Newel’s right,” Doren conceded. “We could each down a meatloaf without wrecking our appetites.”

“I’ll talk to you later,” Seth said. “Kendra and Warren are waiting.”

Seth and Kendra had only recently arrived at Living Mirage. A few days ago, the Sphinx had used the Translocator to travel to his secret preserve with Trask and Warren to prepare his minions for surrender. Warren had promptly returned with news that their friends and family were safe. But he also brought news that Seth’s parents and grandparents had insisted Kendra and Seth wait until Agad was in control of Living Mirage before they journeyed there.

After the dragons obliterated the insufficient rear guard left behind by the demons on Shoreless Isle, it had not taken long for Agad to seal off the fairy shrine. Combining their efforts, the wizard and the dragons had employed an impressive spell to transport the enormous dome that had sheltered the gateway of Zzyzx over to cover the shrine. Once conditions on Shoreless Isle had been stabilized, Agad and most of his accompanying dragons had departed for the fifth secret preserve.

Now that Agad had been established as the new caretaker of Living Mirage, Kendra and Seth had finally been permitted to use the Translocator to visit. Hugo, the satyrs, Vanessa, and Bracken had come along. The Fairy Queen remained on Shoreless Isle with her people, preparing to inherit the former demon prison as their new home.

“What was that about?” Kendra asked.

“I made some promises to the satyrs,” Seth said. “They want to make sure I deliver.”

“What did you promise?” Warren asked.

“A real television of their own,” Seth said. “I think they’ve earned it.”

“Does your grandfather know?” Warren asked.

Seth shook his head.

“Good luck with that,” Warren said.

Warren led Kendra and Seth down a lavishly decorated hall to an ornamented door. The upper floors of the great ziggurat all featured luxurious furnishings. Warren knocked. Seth felt suddenly nervous. It had been a long time since he had seen his parents. He wondered how they were dealing with being forcibly inserted into the world of magical creatures he and Kendra had discovered two summers ago.

His dad answered the door. He looked good, maybe a little slimmer. “It’s the kids,” he called, face breaking into a huge smile. As he stared at Kendra, tears gathered in his eyes. He wrapped her up in a huge hug, rocking her from side to side.

“Hi, Daddy,” Kendra said, resting her head on his shoulder.

Seth put his hands on his hips. “Of course Kendra gets all the attention because you thought she was dead. I had a bunch of near misses, you know. Probably more than her!”

“We love you, too, son,” Dad said, still holding Kendra.

Mom came to the door in a rush and clung to Kendra, shedding hysterical tears. After she stole Kendra away, his dad finally put an arm around Seth. “I hear you were quite the hero,” his dad said.

“I’m sure things got exaggerated,” Seth said. “I did manage to kill two of the most powerful demons who ever lived. I pretty much got revenge for all humanity on the villains who opened Zzyzx. I wish you could have been there with the video camera.”

“I heard Kendra played a role as well,” Dad said.

“Yeah, she has this habit of trying to top me. I had a really good day, but guess what I didn’t do? I didn’t kill the Demon King. Kendra upstaged me again.”

“I heard she did it with the sword you found,” Dad said.

“That’s what I keep trying to tell everyone! Finally, somebody gets it! I think Mom is going to choke Kendra to death.”

The comment brought his mom over to him. She embraced him tightly.

“Hey, Mom,” Seth grunted. “I thought I was kidding about the strangulation.”

“Come inside,” Dad invited, shaking hands with Warren.

Seth could not believe the opulent room his parents were occupying. From the art on the walls to the rich drapes, from masterful tapestries to

bejeweled furnishings, the room seemed designed to flaunt limitless wealth.

“You guys know we’ve been staying in a tent?” Seth complained.

“We weren’t in quite so nice a room until a few days ago when the Sphinx returned,” Dad reminded him.

Grandma and Grandpa Larsen came out of an adjoining room. “I thought I heard voices,” Grandpa Larsen said.

Suddenly Seth understood why his parents had gotten so emotional when they saw Kendra. Intellectually, he had known that his Grandma and Grandpa Larsen were not actually dead. But on some level, that knowledge had not been real until now.

He raced to Grandma Larsen and hugged her.

“What happened to my little Seth?” she exclaimed. “I can’t believe how tall you are.”

“I can’t believe how alive you are,” he replied, nose stuffy with tears.

Kendra was hugging Grandpa Larsen.

“You were so brave to be here all that time,” Kendra said. “It must have been horrible.”

“All for nothing,” he chuckled. “I set you up for disaster. I may have blown it as a spy, but I hear you two are carrying on the Sorenson family tradition.”

“You risked your life for us,” Seth said, hugging his Grandpa Larsen. “I have the best family ever.”

“I’ll second that,” Grandpa Sorenson said, entering the room with his wife. “My grandkids will be happy to know that their parents were brave and stalwart throughout their captivity.”

“The Sphinx never mistreated us,” Mom said. “Our room wasn’t terrific, but it wasn’t in a dungeon like I’ve heard others describe.”

“The food was actually pretty good,” Dad said. “If this had been voluntary, it could almost have been a vacation.”

“What’s happening with the Sphinx?” Seth asked.

“Agad said he will report about that at dinner,” Grandpa Sorenson said. “Apparently they’ve organized quite a feast.”

“Shall we catch up over the meal?” Dad asked.

Mom poked him. “Can’t we finish saying hello?”

“I’m with Dad,” Seth said. “I’m starving.”

Warren led them all to a magnificent dining hall. Seth had never seen a table so burdened with food. As it was long enough to accommodate all of them, the Sorensons found seats with plenty of room for friends. Agad sat at the head of the table. Seth noticed that Warren sat by Vanessa, and Bracken by Kendra. Tanu joined them, and Maddox, and Berrigan, and Elise, and Mara, all fully healed by the Sands of Sanctity.

Newel and Doren rushed into the room after most of the others had claimed seats. Doren wore a dapper vest. They sat as close to Seth as they could—across from him and down a little, beside his mom.

“Mom, these guys are Newel and Doren, my best friends at Fablehaven,” Seth said.

“Very good to meet you,” his mom said politely, with a couple of uneasy glances at their legs. “I’m Marla.”

“You’ve had milk, right?” Seth asked.

“Yes, I can see them,” his mom assured him with a brittle smile.

“Don’t worry,” Newel said with a casual wave of his hand. “Babes always get shy around us.”

Doren swatted Newel. “Stop! That’s his mother!” He turned to Marla, spreading a napkin on his lap. “Seth is such an exemplary young man. He has been a terrific influence on me. He’s not a shirtless ruffian like others I know.”

“Ruffian?” Newel spluttered. “How about *hypocrite*? Know who you look like in that vest? Ver!”

“I told you,” Doren murmured out the side of his mouth, “I’m trying to make a good impression.”

“Well, I’m trying to make an honest impression,” Newel complained. “Who wants to have a gravy-drinking contest?”

Once the meal got rolling, Seth discovered that the food already on the table had only been appetizers. Course after course brought endless dishes both familiar and exotic. Miniature hamburgers and chicken wings sat alongside stuffed pheasant and bizarre shellfish. Seth tried to pace himself, sampling a wide variety, enjoying the unique sauces and seasonings.

Mom and Dad warmed up to the satyrs, who entertained everyone by telling loud jokes and consuming enormous quantities of food while Seth timed them. The atmosphere so closely mimicked a joyous holiday that

before long, Seth almost felt like nobody in his family had ever been abducted or presumed dead. By the time the dessert carts were wheeled in, he felt stuffed and relaxed and less worried than he had for as long as he could remember.

At the head of the table, Agad tapped a crystal goblet with the side of his fork. The diners grew quiet as the aging wizard prepared to speak.

“Thank you all for joining me for dinner. This is the most spirited feast I have enjoyed since before most of you were born. That includes Stan and Hank.”

Everyone laughed.

“Together, we have won a miraculous victory. Having narrowly avoided disaster, I suspect we can all look on the simplest of pleasures with renewed appreciation. We now have an opportunity to help define a new future, to safeguard it against some of the perils we have endured, and to recover from the losses we have sustained. Let us take a moment to remember those who made the ultimate sacrifice to help bring us this victory.”

Seth stared at his lap, trying not to think about Coulter, willing his eyes to stay dry. He pushed away mental images of brave astrids and fairies falling. Jaw clenched, he fought to ignore memories of Lena, Dougan, and Mendigo. He thought of them often, and would think of them again in a more private setting, but at the moment he wished Agad had not brought such strong emotions so close to the surface.

“We will all be dealing with change in the coming weeks, and months, and years,” Agad went on. “For most of us this will be welcome, even if it entails new challenges. Preserves will be restored and reorganized. Where appropriate, new leadership will be appointed. Much of what has been broken will be mended, in most cases, to be stronger than ever. We will rebuild, and a new era of peace and security will dawn.”

This earned spontaneous applause.

Agad stroked his beard. “I will bear many responsibilities as I seek to establish further protections for the new demon prison. In the end, once the artifacts are stowed away, along with a variety of new protocols and precautions, I believe the prison will be much closer to impregnable than ever. As the new caretaker of Living Mirage, I will base my activities from here, and some of you may be involved from time to time. I don’t want to

drown this merry occasion with tedious words, but there is one matter I feel we must resolve as a group before I can proceed with my duties. This matter involves the punishment of the Sphinx.”

The room was dead silent.

“After the battle on the Shoreless Isle, I pondered on how to deal with the Sphinx. He offered us pivotal assistance at the end, but it was aid for a catastrophe that he had worked tirelessly to manufacture through deceit, sabotage, and even murder. My inclination was to let nature take its course. The Sphinx had been prolonging his life using the Font of Immortality, and I decided an appropriate punishment would be to forbid him use of that artifact—in essence, a death sentence.

“When I delivered this verdict to the Sphinx, a long conversation ensued. The Sphinx accepted the justice of the proposed punishment, and then proposed another solution. Personally, I would be willing to accept the alternative he offered. He submitted to scrutiny from both Bracken and the Fairy Queen, who believe he is sincere.

“We all know the Sphinx is a master of persuasion. I decided to lay the matter before you, without the Sphinx here to exercise his powers of influence. I avow beforehand that, regardless of my own opinions, I will abide by whatever decision we make as a body right now.”

Seth was on the edge of his seat. He glanced at Newel, who was gnawing on his fabric napkin, eyes wide with interest.

“As I lock the new demon prison tighter than the old, I will need new Eternals,” Agad explained. “By now, all of you know the role the Eternals played in keeping Zzyzx closed. The Sphinx would like to be one of those Eternals.”

An uproar of muttered exclamations followed. Agad held up his hands, and the murmuring quieted.

“Allow me to set forth the details for your consideration. Essentially, the Sphinx is attempting to exchange an execution for life in prison. Consider these points. As an Eternal, the Sphinx would not be able to open the demon prison unless he was dead. He has never believed anyone but himself should open the demon prison, which he proved on Shoreless Isle, so he would almost certainly be loyal to our cause. He has a knack for longevity, and for protecting himself. He knows how to keep a secret, and how to hide. He is remarkably cunning and patient. He has successfully

coped with the challenges of a long life, and craves more. As a volunteer who would fulfill the requirements of an Eternal, I do not believe we could find a more ideal candidate.

“Keep in mind, being an Eternal is more punishment than prize. Ask Bracken or Kendra—most of our past Eternals had difficulty coping and considered their fate a weighty ordeal. An unnaturally long life, hunted, on the run, is no paradise.

“Considering the Sphinx’s history, I would take extra precautions, personally monitoring him and installing a multitude of magical and practical safeguards. I would give him some latitude to choose a hideout and to implement whatever defenses he deemed most effective, but he would be on a leash.

“By giving into this request, would we be rewarding his crimes? Under other circumstances, I do not believe the Sphinx would want to be an Eternal. But as an alternative to death, he seems willing. Let’s have Bracken testify to his motives.”

Agad extended a hand and Bracken stood up. “The Sphinx has a strong will. He has much practice in shielding his thoughts from external scrutiny. But as I extensively probed his mind, I came to believe he wants to become an Eternal for acceptable reasons. First, he wants to persist. He has a profound fear of death, coupled with a powerful enjoyment of existence. Second, he wants a shot at redemption. He knows he spawned a catastrophe, which was never his intention. He wants to do everything in his power to ensure that a similar crisis never happens again. And last, he feels guilty and sees this as a fitting punishment. I have no love for the Sphinx, and I studied him long and hard. This is all I found.”

Nodding at Agad, Bracken sat down.

“If you want my opinion,” Agad said, “letting the Sphinx die would be a punishment quickly served from which we would derive no benefit apart from the satisfaction of his demise. On the other hand, making him an Eternal would cause him to pay for his crimes by providing a lasting and difficult service to humankind. But perhaps I am not seeing this clearly. I would gladly hear any objections.”

Nobody spoke. People at the table eyed one another. Seth met eyes with Kendra. She gave a nod, he gave one back, and she stood.

“I hate the Sphinx,” Kendra said. “I despise him for his lies and for what he did to us. If what he most wants is a long life, I desperately want to take that from him, to hurt him like he hurt us. I dread the thought of him feeling like he wormed out of the consequences of his treachery. But I think this punishment makes sense.”

She sat down. Seth stood up. “Me too.”

Bracken stood. “My horn has kept him alive. The influence of my horn will continue to keep him alive. I can live with letting the Sphinx survive under these conditions. I agree that he will fill the role well.”

Vanessa rose. “I have known the Sphinx for a long time. I have worked for him. As Agad mentioned at the outset, he is a deceiver, a master manipulator. Making him an Eternal seems appropriate, but he’s an expert at making his interests make sense. He may not be here to speak, but Agad is delivering his rhetoric. The Sphinx has a sinister history of working mischief while wearing a friendly face. The only way to be safe from the Sphinx is if he ceases to exist.”

Doren leapt to his feet. “Vanessa is a beautiful woman, and should be taken very seriously. For her mind. And her charming personality. Thank you.”

Mara stood. “I understand Vanessa’s concerns. His agents killed my mother. I will never forgive him, but I think making him an Eternal is a better punishment than killing him. The long life of an Eternal will force him to provide much more payment for his crimes than a quick death could possibly offer. And those same qualities that made him so dangerous will hold the new Zzyzx shut.”

Others began adding their endorsements. A few others expressed hesitations. Grandpa had questions for Agad about how the Sphinx would be monitored, and the wizard provided satisfactory responses. In the end, the vote to make the Sphinx an Eternal was unanimous, except for Vanessa and the satyrs.

“I did not want to try to make this decision alone,” Agad said after the votes had been cast. “Nor did I feel it would be fair to the many he has wronged. I feel good about the decision we have reached. I think it will make the new demon prison more secure. And I believe time will demonstrate that, while having an element of mercy, the punishment we resolved on is exacting and severe. Now, how about some dessert?”



A New Shrine

On a hot summer day, Kendra strolled through the garden at Fablehaven. The humidity made her shirt feel sticky, but she loved the fragrances of the blooming flowers and the sight of blissful fairies bobbing from blossom to blossom. Perhaps later she would change into her bathing suit and go for a swim.

A new barn loomed over the yard, larger than the former structure, leaving Viola room to grow. The house had been rebuilt as well, with several elaborate touches added by the brownies. Agad had also engineered a direct road from the Fablehaven house to the old manor, which had been refurbished and enchanted with new protections.

Seth was currently off watching TV with Hugo, Mendigo, and the satyrs. Grandpa Sorenson had reluctantly caved after the agreement had been explained, and instead of a generator, the satyrs had electrical lines that ran to their nearest cottage. Grandpa hoped that endless television would help the technology cease to be such a novelty, but so far, the flat screen with surround sound was widely considered the greatest wonder at Fablehaven. Newel and Doren had never been more popular, or more jovial.

Seth still complained that he had not been present when Agad and the dragons had reclaimed Fablehaven from the centaurs, although he got to visit not long afterward in order to dismiss the wraiths. Bracken and several astrids lent some assistance, and Bracken had been surprised to discover that the unicorn horn the centaurs prized actually belonged to him. As punishment for their rebellion, he reclaimed his horn, and Agad reduced their roaming privileges and territorial holdings. The wizard left Grunhold protected by strong enchantments, but nothing quite so powerful as the shielding once provided by the forfeited horn.

Bracken had already gone by the time Kendra used the Translocator to return to Fablehaven. When they had said their good-byes at Living Mirage, he had promised to visit before too long. She understood that the Fairy Queen needed his help transforming Zzyzx into a paradise, but Kendra often wished he could have lingered longer. Before he left, he had used his powers to sever the narcoleptic hold Vanessa had on the Sorensons and their friends. After visiting Fablehaven, although he broke Vanessa's hold on some of the centaurs, he had left her connected to Cloudwing and Stormbrow.

"I'm making lunch," Mom called out the window. "Turkey sandwich okay?"

"Sure," Kendra replied.

"You want to try some avocado on it? Or cranberries?"

"No thanks, just cheese."

Her parents had moved the family to Fablehaven. They were still debating whether Kendra and Seth would return to public school or simply receive their schooling at home. While Grandpa and Grandma Sorenson continued to live in the main house, Grandpa and Grandma Larsen had taken up residence in the old manor. Dale had been found alive and well in the stables, and continued in his role maintaining the rebuilt preserve. Kendra enjoyed the new dynamics at Fablehaven. After so long, in ways she could never have imagined, her family was all around her, and their lives had become calm. Almost too calm.

Kendra looked to the woods. The fairy Shiara had visited Kendra this morning, bubbling with excitement. She had twittered about a surprise visit around noon, but refused to relate any hints or details. Her excitement had left Kendra curious—and quietly hopeful.

Kendra checked her watch. Noon had come and gone. Perhaps Shiara had it wrong. She wasn't the type of fairy to pull a prank.

As Kendra began to wander toward the house, a silver-white dragon came gliding over the treetops. Tucking and diving, he spiraled down to the yard, slowing at the last instant and landing with a flourish of his gleaming wings.

"Hi, Kendra," Raxtus said. "How was that for an entrance?"

Kendra was happy to see Raxtus, and his arrival made sense. Shiara was the fairy who had cared for him as a hatchling, so of course she would be excited for him to visit. But Kendra's heart sank a little at the same time. She had been hoping the surprise might be somebody else who tended to make fairies excited.

"Very impressive," Kendra said. "It feels like it has been a long time."

"I've been helping with the rebuilding," the dragon said. "You already wouldn't recognize Zzyzx. Those fairies can work when they set their minds to it. I think it has been good for everyone. I haven't seen most of them so lively in years. And it's great to have the astrids back."

"I'm glad," Kendra said. "Are you here to visit Shiara?"

"Yeah."

"She must be so proud of you."

Raxtus craned his head away shyly. "You know, my dad is finally treating me like a real dragon. He saw me take out a couple of demons when we attacked Orogoro's rear guard. I'm really small, and my breath weapon is a joke, but my scales are almost as hard as his, and my teeth and claws are unusually sharp. I had no idea. I'd never really tested myself. Now that he runs Wyrmoost, my dad has this whole training regimen planned when I get back from helping the Fairy Queen. He taught my larger brothers lots of tricks that I missed out on. He will help me become a more effective fighter. But I promise I won't let it turn me into an idiot!"

"I'm sure it will just make you more confident with your friendly side," Kendra said.

"And maybe a little scarier?" Raxtus hoped.

"Definitely."

"You know, I didn't come here alone."

Kendra held her breath. She tried to keep her expression composed.
“You didn’t?”

“He wanted me to bring you to meet him.”

“Are we talking about Bracken?” Kendra asked.

“No, Crelang. Remember him? The astrid? He was one of your bodyguards.”

Kendra stared at Raxtus blankly.

“I’m kidding. Of course, Bracken! But don’t mention I told you. It was supposed to be a surprise.”

“I promise to look surprised.” Her pulse raced. What if he sensed her excitement? She didn’t want to seem pathetic. But she had missed him! It had been weeks since she had last seen him.

“He’s been talking about you a lot,” Raxtus informed her in a confidential tone. “Go easy on him. I’m going to fly you to him, then get out of your way. You two deserve a little privacy.”

“I should tell my parents,” Kendra said.

“I’ll come back and tell them,” Raxtus assured her. “This should be quick. He has a surprise for you. I keep saying too much! Mind if I take you? Don’t tell him how much I blabbed!”

“Sure,” Kendra replied.

Raxtus snatched her and took flight. “Agad left me with free roam of all the preserves he restored,” Raxtus said. “I think he wants me to help be his eyes and ears among the dragons. He’s given me a lot of trust.”

“That’s great,” Kendra said, her thoughts on the upcoming reunion.

“This will be a short flight,” Raxtus said.

As the prospect of seeing Bracken became real, Kendra felt startlingly conflicted. It was one thing to daydream about romance, and another to confront it in the light of day. What could the surprise be? What if he proposed! She was so not ready for something like that! Sure, he was cute, and brave, and loyal. Best of all, he was someone she could really trust. But she was fifteen, and he was older than most countries, no matter how young he seemed.

Anxiety knotted her insides. She shouldn’t leap to conclusions. There was no way he was about to propose. But what if he wanted a romantic relationship? It was one thing to snuggle a little when the world seemed

about to end, and quite another to explain to her parents that she wanted to date an ancient magical horse.

As the dragon glided down toward the circle of gazebos around the former shrine to the Fairy Queen, Kendra struggled to calm herself. It would be good to see Bracken. She would try to wait and hear what he had to say before freaking out. They passed over a hedge wall and landed in the field near the whitewashed boardwalk that surrounded the pond.

Bracken stood on the steps up to the boardwalk, dressed in a loose white shirt and jeans. Devastatingly handsome, he jogged toward Kendra once she had landed.

“I’m going to go visit Shiara,” Raxtus said. “I’ll be back soon. Have fun.”

The dragon took flight.

“Hi, Kendra,” Bracken said, looking pleased, clearly expecting her to be surprised.

“It’s you!” Kendra said, trying to play the role. “What are you doing here? How are you? How’s your father?”

“My dad shows subtle signs of improvement. He still hasn’t spoken. Our best healers feel he will eventually recover, although perhaps not fully. I’m happy to see you!”

“I feel the same way.”

“Come here,” Bracken said, waving Kendra forward. “I want to show you something.”

He took her hand and led her up the steps to the boardwalk. He pulled her along the walkway, then down to the little pier beside the boathouse. Together they walked almost to the end of the pier.

“What did you want to show me?” Kendra asked, taking a step forward, gazing across the water at the little island that had once housed the shrine.

“Haven’t you wondered how I got here?” Bracken asked, stepping up a little behind Kendra.

“Raxtus?”

“Sort of. Try again.”

“The Translocator?”

He shook his head. “Agad has already gathered the artifacts to start hiding them. Guess again.”

Kendra gasped, whirling around to face Bracken. “Did you fix the shrine?”

“This is our first new shrine,” Bracken said with a smile. “The second entrance to our kingdom. In the coming years, we hope to create many new shrines. But Fablehaven got the honor of hosting the first. Agad helped us lay the groundwork. Now I can visit whenever I want!”

Kendra felt her face flush and turned back toward the water. “That would be really nice.”

“I hope to visit quite a bit,” Bracken said. “Get to know your parents and grandparents better. Hang out with Seth. He’s an interesting guy.”

“He’s pretty cool,” Kendra said, trying to manage her expectations.

“He still owes the Singing Sisters a favor,” Bracken said. “I want to help him make sure everything goes all right.”

“My family will be relieved to hear that.”

“He may yet find an opportunity to use his tower and his leviathan.”

“He was so mad he didn’t get to use them at Shoreless Isle,” Kendra laughed. “He’s thinking of planting the tower here at Fablehaven, to give Hugo an official home.”

“Never hurts to have such items in reserve,” Bracken said. Smiling knowingly, he stepped closer. “As much as I enjoy your family, I have other reasons why I want to visit Fablehaven.”

“How come?” Kendra asked, heart pounding. She was way too nervous to turn and look at him again.

“I haven’t been drawn to a girl in a long time,” Bracken said. “Against all odds, this time, my mother actually approves!”

He turned Kendra toward him, hands on her shoulders. “I mean, you know,” he added softly, smiling, “what kind of unicorn wouldn’t be drawn to a virtuous maiden?”

“What kind of a girl doesn’t like unicorns?” Kendra teased, looking up at him.

“Here’s the problem,” Bracken said, eyebrows scrunched. “I feel young. My mind doesn’t get beaten down by the passing years, and neither does my body. It’s part of my nature—time does little to sap my

youthfulness. But let's face it, however I may feel, I've existed for a long while. Chronologically, I make your grandparents look like infants. And you're not an adult yet."

"You don't seem old to me," Kendra said, unsure how much she believed her words. He looked young, but his manner sometimes betrayed glimpses of an older soul.

"I've been around long enough to recognize the importance of timing," Bracken said. "I care for you deeply, Kendra. A few years will give you time to mature, and offer me time to help my mother rebuild her kingdom." He took her hands in his. "This is the first shrine we restored. As I already made clear, I'll visit, and we'll see where the future leads."

Kendra felt like a weight had been lifted. It was clear that Bracken liked her, just as it was clear that she would have time to sort through her feelings without getting pressured into an official relationship.

Still, as she gazed up into his adoring eyes, she had a suspicion the crush might linger and grow into something more. After all, hadn't Patton married a naiad? Maybe in time she and Bracken could find a way to make a real relationship work. Maybe when the time was right, she could become an Eternal, and they could remain ageless together, protecting the world from evil.

"I understand," Kendra said. "It makes sense."

Bracken smiled, a candid blend of relief and joy. "Want to know the best part? Once we get things more how my mother wants them, I have permission to bring you to our kingdom from time to time. You'll be the first mortal to set foot there!"

"That sounds perfect," Kendra said. And she meant it.



Is This Really the End?

I sometimes get asked why I don't add an extra book or two to the *Fablehaven* series. From the start, this series was designed to contain five books. Based on my plan, I felt I could keep the story growing with each installment, so that the books would build on each other in fun ways and hopefully never get too boring. To write more would have meant stretching the narrative in a way that I felt would harm the overall story.

In other words, this really is the last book in the *Fablehaven* series. Will I ever revisit the *Fablehaven* characters or preserves in a future book? Possibly. I see opportunities for other stories using the characters and situations introduced in *Fablehaven*. But it would be organized as a fresh book or series, not a sixth book added to this one. I have no plans to write such a book in the near future. However, I will be writing other fantasy adventures that should appeal to the type of readers who have enjoyed *Fablehaven*.

I'm currently working on a three-book series called *The Beyonders*. The story deals with a couple of kids from our world who cross over to a strange, imperiled land where a corrupt emperor is systematically getting rid of all the heroes. All of my books up until now have dealt with fantasy elements in our real world. I'm excited to take readers someplace else! I

have been planning this new trilogy for over ten years, and feel confident that it will take readers on a terrific ride. I hope that readers who have enjoyed *Fablehaven* will check it out, starting in 2011.

I also have plans to create a sequel to my novel *The Candy Shop War*. A sizable chunk of my readers tell me that *The Candy Shop War* remains their favorite. Even though it was originally planned to be a single book, I have now developed what I feel will be an engaging sequel. Although still a couple of years away, it represents an important part of my short-term writing plans.

Speaking generally, over the next several years, I intend to write a book or two per year. I believe I am improving at what I do, and feel I have not yet explored my best ideas. I will focus on creating a variety of family-friendly fantasy novels. To keep an eye on my upcoming projects, sign up for the newsletter at BrandonMull.com and swing by my Facebook or Twitter pages. I'm pleased with how my *Fablehaven* books have unfolded, and I'm indescribably excited to tackle future projects. If you enjoyed the *Fablehaven* series, please spread the word, and watch for my future stuff!

Reading Guide

1. If you could visit any magical preserve described in the *Fablehaven* series, which would it be? Why?
2. If you could follow the story of any character in the series beyond Book 5, who would you most like to hear about? Explain.
3. Why do you think Seth helped Graulas? Was it a good decision? Why or why not?
4. Do you believe the Sphinx will be trustworthy as an Eternal? Why or why not?
5. How has Seth changed since Book 1? How was his decision to help Graulas different from his decision to open the attic window on Midsummer Eve?
6. How has Kendra changed since Book 1? How is she the same? What did she do in this book that she might not have done when we first met her? How did her rational, obedient nature help her in Book 5?
7. In the Beckoning Grove, Kendra, Warren, and Bracken had to resist the alluring scent of fruit that they knew would harm them. Is there anything like that around us in the world today? Explain.
8. The wizard Morisant used evil means to extend his life and failed to remain good. Seth tried to befriend a demon and was betrayed. Are there certain types of dangers or evils around us today that can never be trusted? Explain.
9. If the Sorensens had not interfered, do you think the Sphinx could have released the demons of Zzyzx on his terms and successfully controlled them? Why or why not?
10. Many magical creatures participated in the *Fablehaven* series. What were some of your favorites? Why? Were there any creatures not

included in the series that you would have liked to have seen? If so, which ones?

11. If you had the opportunity to become an Eternal, would you take it? Why or why not?

12. Agad suggested that the difference between heaven and hell was not a matter of location. He claimed the difference had more to do with the people around you. How was this true in the story? Can this sometimes be true in our lives? If so, how?

13. Who is the coolest author ever? Is it the guy who wrote *Fablehaven*? If not, what's the matter with you? Explain.

Also from Brandon Mull

The Candy Shop War Game Now Available for the iPad



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Acknowledgments

I'm so glad the Fablehaven series finally exists outside of my brain. So many people helped that happen, especially the folks mentioned in the dedication, all those who have enjoyed and shared the books. I've thanked most of the following people before. This time, the way the page count worked out, I have to keep it condensed.

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