

CHRYSALIS CHRONICLES

THE EYES OF THE DESERT SAND

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THE EYES OF THE DESERT SAND

BY

EDWIN WOLFE



Fox Hunt Publishing Group

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Summary: No recollection of anything prior to his eighth birthday, a young boy is
mysteriously drawn to a young girl, and together they are keys to solving the
story's biggest puzzle and unlock the door to the four portals.

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THIS BOOK IS DEDICATED TO MY
WIFE, LORI. WITHOUT HER
COAXING AND INSPIRATION IT
WOULD NEVER HAVE MADE IT
PAST A COUPLE OF WACKY
DREAMS AND AN OLD HIGH
SCHOOL POEM. SHE HAS BEEN MY
WIFE, CONFIDANT, AND
CHEERLEADER – SHE IS MY
TALETADDLER.

THANK YOU SWEETHEART.

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The Eyes of the Desert Sand

On an old abandoned airstrip in a desert far away, lands an unknown flying saucer in the revealing light of day. There are no creatures there to see it in this tortured barren land, no plant life there to feel it just The Eyes of the Desert Sand. As the saucer doors swing open in a misty fog they see, a man from within the saucer from where could he possibly be? Emerging from the saucer he steps down to the ground, pausing for a moment as he stops to look around. He carries a flag of colors with shades from black to white, as he plants the flag into the ground it becomes a beautiful sight. Returning to his saucer as quickly as he came, the doors swing shut behind him like a picture in a frame. The saucer leaves undetected by the entire world at hand, unknown to all existence but The Eyes of the Desert Sand.

Eric Moeszinger, *A Moment in Eternity*

CHRYSALIS CHRONICLES

THE EYES OF THE DESERT SAND

INTO THE RABBIT HOLE

The Foxes were an ordinary middle-class family thrust into a lavish existence by the overwhelming success of George's first video game, *Lords and Dragons of the Dark Realm*. Living in a penthouse on the Upper East Side of Manhattan was a little like being a fish out of water for the Fox men. City life didn't exactly suit George or his son, Ethan; but George's wife, Betsy loved it — after all, living in the fashion capital of the world did have its perks.

A loving mother and devoted wife; as far as her two men were concerned, Betsy was the yardstick by which all women should be measured. She was a petite, brown haired, brown eyed woman with classic girl next door features. Her bubbly demeanor and girly-girl attitude made her the perfect uptown girl — Betsy was built for city life.

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George Fox was a tall gentle giant of a man. His dark slicked-back hair gave him something of a nineteen fifties look. But what people noticed most was the mischievous smile permanently plastered on his face. He was either the world's happiest person or he'd just written the punch line to the world's funniest joke; very fitting given his sarcastic nature, he was always joking about something and was quite the prankster to boot.

Apart from his reddish brown hair, brown eyes, and freckled complexion, Ethan Fox was not your average thirteen year old boy — especially not by today's standards. While most kids his age liked nothing better than to be glued to the boob-tube playing video games, he'd much rather be outdoors; “the real adventure is out there in the real world” was his motto. He just didn't get how all his friends were so hooked on video games — an ironic point-of-view given his father's success.

The Fox men didn't take to city life like Betsy, their favorite times were those spent out in the boonies; the secret location of the Foxes country cabin as George would explain it. Out in the country, Ethan could explore, he loved playing at the creek the most; catching frogs and lizards was always challenging, they didn't exactly walk up and ask to be held. However, it was snakes that freaked Betsy out the most, “*Ethan — it could be poisonous!*” she'd shriek. But he knew which ones to avoid — he was an avid book reader and watched the Discovery channel regularly.

One particular snake incident, almost gave poor Betsy three heart attacks; the first, when he came running to the

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cabin holding a five-foot gopher snake dangling at his feet. It took a while, but he *finally* talked her into letting him keep it in the empty lizard cage George had built him, just until his dad got home to see his catch. That's when the second heart attack almost happened, when he *calmly* informed her that the snake had somehow escaped and was on the loose inside the cabin. Three days later, Betsy finally talked herself into believing that the snake had somehow made it outside. And that's when the third heart attack almost happened, when she got the *surprise* of her life while folding laundry. Needless to say, Ethan would never be allowed to bring a wild animal within a hundred feet of the cabin ever again.

City life wasn't all that bad though, Ethan loved spending time with his parents. Any chance to see his dad in public was sure to be good for a few laughs. It wasn't *if* George was going to do something to embarrass Betsy, it was *when* and *how*, it never failed.

Ethan would never forget what happened on one infamous night, a couple of weeks earlier, while dining at the family's favorite Chinese restaurant. It started with Betsy excusing herself to go to the ladies room. That's when George decided it was time to play a game, the "crack Ethan up game." He started with a few funny faces and squeaking noises, but Ethan hung tough holding in his laughter. George would have to think of something much better to win this one.

As George pondered his next move, the waiter arrived with three glasses of water, each with a slice of cucumber floating in it. A wide grin suddenly swept over his face as he plucked the cucumber slices from the glasses, grabbed his chopsticks,

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and ducked his head under the table. Moments later, a loud wallowing noise began to rumble out from beneath the table, and then in an even louder voice, “I am *Charlie — the Walrus man of Wiltor* — I am here to speak with Ethan Fox!” he growled as he emerged from beneath the table.

When Ethan saw George’s face, he could hold it no longer. George had chopsticks protruding from his nostrils like tusks and cucumber slices in his eye sockets like large disc-shaped eyes, George was *Charlie the Walrus man of Wiltor*. Ethan was exploding with laughter. George had won this round, but his victory dance would have to wait, because at that moment Betsy was returning from the ladies room.

Walking up behind her husband, Betsy could not see his face. She was completely unaware of his silly masquerade. “What’s all this laughing I hear, did I miss something?” she asked, looking at Ethan who was facing her. “Is your father being silly again?” she continued, turning to face her husband. Startled by his custom *Charlie* mask, she let out a loud high-pitched shriek. This got the attention of any patron not already watching the spectacle as the restaurant erupted with laughter. But not Betsy, she was so red from embarrassment, the natural color would not return to her face for several hours. Not surprisingly, it was a quiet drive home that night.

But that was two weeks ago, today the Foxes were on the first leg of a much needed family vacation. Given the strange events of the previous week, Ethan was more than happy to be anywhere but home. Lately, you could cut the tension with a knife at the Fox family home, but he had to take most of the

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blame. After all, how many parents would believe a boy who told them a sandman had sent two vampires and a hooded stranger to abduct him? Strange thing though, he was convinced that his parents *did* believe him. Sure they tried to sound convincing in their disdain for his story, but he knew they were hiding something. Was it somehow connected to his loss of memory five years earlier? Or was it the strange poem he had mysteriously written in his sleep? He wasn't sure, but one thing was certain, he would not rest until he got to the bottom of it.

Little did he know how soon his chance would come.

Getting away from it all was the order of the day for the Foxes. And today, that meant spending the day at the Santa Cruz Beach Boardwalk in sunny California.

“Nothing like junk food and roller coasters to cleanse the soul!” George announced as they arrived at the park.

Ethan loved rides of almost any kind, but roller coasters were his favorite; the faster the better as far as he was concerned. But for now, the rides would have to wait, Betsy had run off to browse the shops along the boardwalk; however, before she left, she made *darn sure* her husband was occupied. Anything to make sure he would not do something embarrassing. She could just imagine coming back to the scene of George teaching children along the boardwalk about the joys of a “whoopee cushion.” So for now, George was in line at the snack bar getting lunch; it was all part of her plan, she knew he'd never turn down junk food.

“Waiting in line is a mere bump in the road to caloric bliss,” George explained to Ethan as Betsy set out to shop.

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Ethan was standing by a railing at the edge of the boardwalk, staring at the horizon while he waited for his dad. It was a beautiful bright sunny morning, but what he liked most was the fresh smell of the ocean breeze. One thing about the ocean, it always put Ethan into a trance; he could watch it for hours gazing into the distance taking it all in. Mesmerized by the waves, his mind would race as he imagined what sort of giant ocean creature might be about to burst up from the murky depths. Sometimes he'd even spot the odd whale or dolphin jumping, but so far today, nothing out of the ordinary.

His trance was interrupted by the pitter-patter of little feet running down the boardwalk behind him. He turned around to watch as a small boy ran by, holding a giant hotdog oozing with mustard and ketchup and globs of green pickle relish. The boy's run quickly slowed to a crawl as he quietly snuck up behind another unsuspecting boy wearing white puffy shorts with giant pockets.

Ethan watched in amazement as the boy sprang into action. It was like a rattlesnake strike; he quickly crammed the hotdog into the other boy's front pocket. Then as if not yet satisfied by his mischievous accomplishment, the boy wasted no time, he quickly began smooshing the pocketed hotdog around from outside the boy's shorts. Ethan could not help but to laugh, it reminded him of something George might have done as a child.

"Ethan — *Ethan Fox!*" shouted George from the snack bar counter, "get over here and give me a hand!"

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As usual, George had bought more junk food than he could carry. When Ethan got to the snack bar, he could not believe his eyes: three jumbo hotdogs, four corn dogs, a large pepperoni pizza, two candied popcorn balls, three bags of cotton candy, and three bucket-sized sodas. Even for George, this was quite the bounty; an octopus would have a hard time carrying all that food.

By the time they carried all that grub to a nearby picnic table, Betsy was back from her little shopping detour. If one thing was for certain, it was that she loved to shop as much as George loved the snack bar. So for the next hour, as they sat to eat lunch, she proudly showed her men each and every item from her shopping bags — four bags full of stuff she just had to have.

After their lunch break, it was time for what was sure to be Ethan and George’s favorite part of the day, the rides. Ethan had done his homework, looking up the rides on the Internet and mapping out a plan of action. Their first stop would be the Haunted Castle, followed by the Pirate Ship, Double Shot, Wipeout, and last but not least, the world famous Giant Dipper.

Betsy didn’t like most rides, but she’d tag along just the same. She just loved watching her two men having the time of their lives on the “terror rides” as she called them. In her world, there was only one ride, the Carousel. Ever since she was a little girl, she had always been fascinated by the Carousel. There was nothing like the calm serenity she felt when she rode it. But for now, her turn would have to wait

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until her two men were tired out, and that might be sooner rather than later at the rate they were going.

“That should challenge our full tummies,” George said, pointing up at the Giant Dipper with a grin.

Ethan was amazed by its enormity as they approached the giant roller coaster; the closer they got, the bigger it got — it was huge!

“Ethan — you can skip this one if you want,” said Betsy, mistaking the look of excitement on his face for that of terror.

“Are you kidding?” he quickly corrected his mother. “Can we ride it twice?”

“I should have known better — you two are going to throw up for sure,” she smiled. “When you are done, it’s my turn on the Carousel.”

Two vomitless rides later, Ethan and George were ready for a break.

“That was *awesome!*” shouted Ethan to his mother as he stepped down off the platform. “When you get up there — to the top — you can see out over the ocean *for miles!*”

“Yeah, and that first dip is a real doosey, too — I almost lost my lunch the second time.”

“Have you two finally had enough?”

“Why, yes indeed — after you, my dear — to the Carousel,” George replied, motioning for Betsy to lead the way.

Along the way, Ethan began to get a strange feeling, like he was being watched. Stopping to turn around instinctively, he immediately noticed a young girl about his age. It was hard to

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tell because he was looking into the sun, but she looked sad, like she was lost and disoriented.

The sun's rays glistening off her yellowish-blond hair made it look as if a shimmering golden halo was resting upon her head. She was wearing a white sundress with yellow flowers almost perfectly matching the color of her hair. Although he could not see her well enough to know for sure, he got the distinct impression that she was looking back at him — as if she somehow recognized him.

Then — she began to smile.

Not exactly the ladies man, Ethan had never had a girlfriend; not even a passing fancy for any of the girls at school. But right now — for some reason — he was strangely drawn to this girl and that made him blush.

“Ethan! What are you looking at?” George called out from a distance. “Are you coming?”

“*Nothing* — be right there dad!” he shouted, turning for just a second to see where his parents were.

But when he turned back around to look at the girl, she was gone; and that gave him a strong sense of disappointment.

On the way to the Carousel, George insisted that they stop at the snack bar for ice cream, so he and Ethan would have something to munch on while Betsy had her fun.

“How in the world could you be hungry already after the lunch you ate?” Betsy asked rhetorically.

The line for the Carousel was not nearly as long as the one for the snack bar that George had waited in earlier. Once on the Carousel platform, Betsy walked from horse to horse,

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studying each one as if they were somehow talking to her. She finally decided on a beautiful white horse with a blue saddle, its head cocked in a majestic pose. She had such a bright smile on her face, she looked like she was a little girl again as she climbed up onto the saddle.

Slowly the Carousel began to spin, picking up speed as Betsy disappeared from George and Ethan's view to the right. Looking to the left to watch for her to reappear, Ethan was surprised at what he saw. Riding on a white horse, exactly like the one Betsy had picked, it was her! The sun drenched girl he had seen moments before! And this time, he could see her beautiful bluish-green eyes clearly, and they were looking right at him!

She no longer looked sad; in fact, Ethan noticed she was wearing the same smile that appeared on Betsy's face the instant she stepped onto the Carousel platform. The ride continued for what seemed like an eternity. Each time the girl passed within his view, smiles were exchanged. The flirtation became so obvious that even George noticed in between licks from his second ice cream cone.

"Hey Tiger — looks like you've got a live one there," George elbowed Ethan with a gentle jab to the ribs, causing him to blush an even deeper shade of red.

The Carousel began to slow just as the girl disappeared again from Ethan's view. It stopped in the same position as it had started, with the girl on the other side.

"Hey there buddy — go talk to her. I'll wait here for your mother."

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Ethan wasted no time jumping to his feet. His father's encouragement only seemed to enforce what he was already feeling — he should go talk to her. Not one to normally take chances, he wasn't sure *what* he was going to say or from *where* he was getting the nerve. He was about to walk up to a total stranger and start up a conversation. But something about this girl seemed to draw him in, and one thing was clear, he had to try.

His jog around the Carousel couldn't have taken more than a few seconds. Keeping his eyes on the platform as the riders stepped off; he scanned the crowd looking for her. Having had no luck finding the girl in the crowd, he scanned the Carousel. He finally spotted the white horse she had been riding just seconds before, but she was not there. Joy quickly turned to disappointment as he realized, the girl was gone.

Tired from a full afternoon of rides, games, and shopping, the Foxes were ready for some leisure time. And of course, cheeseburgers as George would insist. After their third trip to the snack bar — in less than four hours — the Foxes headed to the beach for a makeshift picnic. It was quite a long hike along the beach before Betsy finally found a flat patch of sand, devoid of any driftwood or annoying sea kelp.

“Perfect!” she announced, pulling a giant yellow beach blanket from one of her shopping bags.

As she finished spreading the blanket out over the sand, George wasted no time plopping down onto it with his bag full of cheeseburgers.

“Cheeseburgers anyone?” George muttered, reaching into his bag of goodies. “I got enough for everybody.”

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“I’m sure you did,” whispered Betsy as she sat down on the blanket next to her husband.

Still full from lunch, Betsy and Ethan decided to share a cheeseburger leaving the remaining four for George. The Foxes spent the next thirty minutes, on their private little stretch of beach, nibbling away on cheeseburgers and listening to the sound of the surf. So far, they had successfully accomplished their order of the day; it was a great family vacation.

But for Ethan, it was about to get a whole lot better.

“What’s next?” George asked, washing down the last bite of his fourth cheeseburger with a gulp of soda.

“How about we play in the water and get our feet wet . . . like we used to . . .” suggested Betsy with a girlish grin.

“No way!” Ethan warned. “I’m not going in there! Don’t you remember *Jaws*? According to the Discovery channel there are great whites all over the place in these waters. . . . I’ll just hang out here and rest.”

George already had both shoes and one sock off.

“Suit yourself, but you’re gonna miss out on all the fun . . . I bet you didn’t know your mother was a mermaid.”

George struggled to lift his huge frame up from the blanket. Minutes later, he and Betsy were skipping off towards the waves — hand-in-hand — like mischievous childhood sweethearts.

“There they go — the *Beauty and the Beast*!”

George’s sarcasm was really starting to rub off on Ethan.

Ethan watched as his parents splashed around in the surf like playful sea otters. But his attention was soon interrupted

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by thoughts of the mysterious girl on the Carousel. “Who was she? What was her name — ?”

“Hi, my name is Haley —” a soft feminine voice spoke up from behind him, “I saw you watching me on the Carousel.”

Startled, Ethan jumped to his feet flopping around in the process. When he finally regained his balance, he was pleasantly surprised by who he saw. It was her! The girl from the Carousel! And her name was Haley!

“I-I-I wasn’t watching you — you — you were watching me — weren’t you?”

“Yes, I guess I was.”

“Why?”

Ethan blushed at the realization that he wasn’t just imagining their attraction.

“I don’t know . . . I don’t remember much before I saw you,” she began to sob. “I was just suddenly here. I don’t remember where I came from . . . or how I got here. I-I was just here. . . .”

“Don’t worry, everything is going to be okay, you’ll see.”

“At first, I was terrified in the middle of that crowd of strangers, but then I saw you and somehow my fear just went away. I feel like we’ve met somewhere before, but I don’t know where. . . . I don’t even know your name . . .”

“My name is Ethan.”

“Are those funny people your parents?” she asked, pointing at George and Betsy as they continued to splash around in the waves.

“Yeah — but sometimes I feel like I’m the parent.”

“I see what you mean.”

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They both broke out in laughter. Her laugh was infectious, like a baby giggling and it made Ethan laugh even harder. They continued talking for several minutes exchanging more laughs than he could ever remember having.

“Strange — I don’t know where I came from or how I even got here, but somehow being with you makes me feel safe — like everything is going to be all right.”

Haley reached down to hold Ethan’s hand. Suddenly, he felt like a butterfly was about to fly up from his stomach and out of his mouth. He nervously swiped his feet through the sand as he stood talking with her.

He was drawing something with his foot.



“What does that symbol mean?”

“Nothing, really — just some dumb symbol I made up — it’s like a secret ID. I put it in the corner of all my school work.”

That’s when Ethan noticed the unique ring on Haley’s finger. It was unlike any ring he had ever seen. Made from polished black metal of some sort, the ring was shaped like an infinity sign — ∞ — bent so that her finger could pass through both loops.

“*Wow* — that’s some infinity ring you’ve got there! I’m sure they don’t just sell those anywhere. Maybe we can use it to help track down where you came from?”

“That’s so sweet that you want to help me, but I don’t want to think about any of that right now —”

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Haley reached down to grab hold of Ethan's other hand as she faced him.

“— come on, let's go for a walk on the beach and find some seashells,” she finished.

Haley was gently tugging at Ethan's arms as they started down the beach holding hands. He felt as if he was walking on clouds. He did not want this day to end. It was all happening so fast. But the strange connection they felt was not the result of some chance encounter — there was something much more powerful behind it.

The stretch of beach they were on had a slight bend to it and soon they were out of sight from George and Betsy. Ethan stopped abruptly.

“We shouldn't go much farther — I forgot to tell my parents where I was going.”

“We have walked pretty far,” she agreed. “I guess we should start heading back —”

“Oh look — a sand dollar!” he interrupted excitedly, running over to pick up the seashell he had just spotted.

Ethan handed the seashell over to Haley who was now blushing a little herself.

“Here — they're supposed to bring you luck,” he smiled.

“It's beautiful!” she gushed.

Haley dusted the sand off the small disc shaped shell, exposing the unique flower like pattern on the sand dollar.

Suddenly, Ethan had that strange feeling again, like they were being watched. Then, out of the corner of his eye, he saw a bright blue flash streak by. Turning away from Haley, looking inland to see what it was, he could not believe what

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he was looking at. Standing at the edge of the beach, was a three-foot tall blue bunny rabbit with yellow polka dots. It looked like somebody's crazy idea of an Easter bunny with pastel pink shorts and red suspenders. Wiping his eyes in disbelief, he did a double take, but this time the bunny was waving at them.

Haley tapped Ethan on the back to get his attention.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

"Don't you see that — ?"

Ethan pointed at the strange creature.

"See what?" she asked, looking around struggling to see what he was pointing at. "I don't see anything."

"You don't see a blue bunny rabbit waving at us?"

He blurted out his question before he could realize how crazy it sounded.

"No," Haley laughed, turning back towards him.

"*I'm serious!* It's right there in plain sight!" he scolded, stopping her in mid-laugh.

"Well — just because I don't see it, doesn't mean it's not there."

Haley's response put Ethan at ease.

"I'm going to take a closer look," he said as he began walking towards the creature.

"Wait for me! I've got to see this!"

Haley followed along.

As they neared the creature, Ethan not only could see it better, but he could hear it as well. Standing in front of them — still waving — it was laughing like a mischievous child.

"Where is it? Is it still there?"

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“It’s right in front of us!” he insisted.

Then — the bunny stopped waving.

“Happy day Ethan Fox!” the bunny spoke. “Are we having fun yet?”

It was giggling as if it had just told a joke.

“Who are you?” Ethan asked.

“I’m Jasper and it’s time for me to go — The Residence awaits!” he said, spinning around and scurrying towards a large cluster of rocks.

Ethan watched in disbelief. Then —

The creature stopped, turned back towards them and said, “Zo-Zo!” before waving a final goodbye and disappearing behind the rocks.

“*What did it say?*” Haley demanded.

“Its name is Jasper! And it said, ‘Zo-Zo!’” Ethan shouted, following in hot pursuit.

“Wait for me!” Haley cried, following Ethan as he approached the cluster of rocks.

“Shhhhhhhh — he went behind these rocks,” whispered Ethan.

As they rounded the cluster of rocks, quietly following Jasper’s trail, they were both surprised by what they saw.

“Do you see that — ?” Ethan asked.

“Yes — but what is it?”

“I don’t know . . . but I’m going to find out,” Ethan replied bravely.

Ethan and Haley were standing at the top of a perfectly carved staircase descending into the dark wet sand of the

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beach. It looked like someone had built a sandcastle staircase into the beach.

“I wonder where it leads . . .” Haley pondered as she struggled to look down the dark corridor tunneling down into the beach.

“I don’t know, but Jasper must — I’m going to go check it out, you wait here!” he ordered as he cautiously approached the mysterious staircase.

“Be careful!” she cautioned.

As Ethan slowly navigated down the first couple of stairs, it got darker with each step. Then in an instant, just before losing consciousness, his mind flashed with visions of tiny purple and green speckles of light — like sparks from a Fourth of July fireworks celebration. And then, everything suddenly went black.

**NOWHERE,
ANYWHERE, AND
EVERYWHERE**

Ethan's head was still fuzzy when he finally came to. He was sure he had heard muffled voices and rustling in the room as he was lying on the ground, but now it was completely silent. As he stood up, he could see he was now in a large room. It looked like the Study of an old rustic mansion with antique couches, chairs, and tables that decorated the interior — the basic layout for a Study of its size.

At one end of the room was a huge fireplace, so big, Ethan could walk into it standing upright. To the right of the fireplace was a pedestal upon which a large thick golden book sat encased in a glass enclosure. To the left, stood an odd looking candelabrum with four white candles attached to the inside of a standing circle. Each candle was pointing inwards towards the center of the circle where a spherical replica of Earth hovered as if held up by invisible strings.

CHAPTER TWO

Ethan felt a strange sense of déjà vu as he stared at the candles, each burning a flame of a different color: red, green, blue, and yellow. Yet unlike a normal candle, these seemed to defy the laws of physics. Each flame burned towards the center of the circle as if somehow holding the tiny Earth replica in place.

Turning around to explore his new surroundings, he slowly began to make his way towards the other side of the room. He was astonished by the tall floor to ceiling bookcases going all the way down both sides of the room; there were thousands of books on the shelves. On the far side of the room, there were two doors, one to each side of a tall full length painting that hung at the center of the wall. The painting was of a beautiful angelic woman wearing a white gown bathed in ice crystals that looked like diamonds. She was hovering in mid-air against the backdrop of a frosty ice wonderland.

“Wow — she’s *beautiful*,” a voice spoke up, startling Ethan.

“Haley! How did you get here?”

“Where — are — we?” she asked, looking around the room in amazement.

“I don’t know . . . but how did you end up here, too?”

The concern in Ethan’s voice was evident.

“Well — I was watching you go down those stairs in the beach and then you disappeared. So I went in for a closer look and somebody pushed me in from behind. Then everything just went black.”

“Everything just went black,” a high pitched voice mocked from somewhere in the room.

N O W H E R E , A N Y W H E R E ,
A N D E V E R Y W H E R E

“Wow — she’s *beautiful*,” a different voice shouted from another direction.

“Who said that?” Ethan quickly scanned the room looking for the source of the voices.

“Who said that?” yelled a third voice from yet a different direction.

“This isn’t funny!” Haley cried, spinning around on her feet.

“*You do the bokey-pokey and you turn yourself around, that’s what it’s all about*,” the voices sang out in unison.

“Stop it!” Haley pleaded. “PLEASE, STOP IT!”

“It’s okay,” Ethan reassured, putting his arms around her to comfort her. “They don’t sound dangerous to me — more like a band of *smart asses*!”

“*Smart asses!*” one of the voices cried out, causing the others to giggle loudly.

“I’m an idiotic dork,” Ethan bated the menacing voices.

“I’m an idiotic dork,” one of the voices mimicked, as the other two erupted in laughter.

“Newton is an idiotic dork — Newton is an idiotic dork,” two of the voices chanted, teasing the third.

“I AM NOT!” an angry voice shouted back.

A book suddenly flew off one of the bookcases, startling Ethan and Haley.

“They sound like young children,” Ethan whispered to Haley.

“Children?” one of the voices lectured in a suddenly serious tone. “Did you say *children*? My dear human child, your

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age is but a mere fleck of existence compared to the likes of us.”

“That sounded like a grumpy old man,” Haley winked.

She had caught on to Ethan’s game.

“Linus is a grumpy old man — Linus is a grumpy old man,” two of the voices sang out, mocking the third.

“So we know about Newton and Linus, but we don’t yet know the name of the third dummy,” Ethan said, winking back at Haley.

“Albert is a dummy — Albert is a dummy,” Newton and Linus teased.

“Albert, Linus, and Newton — they’re all scientists,” Ethan blurted out, remembering those names from a Discovery channel show he had watched.

Feeling confident, Ethan spoke in a stern voice, “We’re tired of these games, show yourselves now!”

But the room was silent.

“Albert! Come here this *minute!*” Haley commanded loudly.

Suddenly out of nowhere a small red ball appeared on the table in front of them, it was about the size of an apple.

“Where did that come from?” Ethan looked puzzled.

“Newton, come here *now!*” Haley demanded.

A blue ball appeared on the table next to the red one.

“Linus — it’s your turn!” Ethan shouted, catching on to Haley’s ploy.

But nothing happened.

“Linus — did you hear Ethan? Come here this *instant!*”

A green ball appeared next to the other two.

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A N D E V E R Y W H E R E

“Now what — ?” she asked as they stood staring at the three balls on the table.

“I don’t know . . .”

The room fell into a still silence.

“So — were we frightened by three colored talking balls?” she asked. “Hey dummies! Where did you all go?”

Haley’s taunting didn’t seem to work as the room remained silent.

“I know —” Ethan spoke up, “have I shown you the cool juggling tricks my dad taught me?”

A huge grin appeared on Ethan’s face as he picked up the three colored balls and began juggling. He could barely hear the three muffled little voices. They were laughing and screaming at the same time — like kids on a roller coaster. The voices grew louder as the balls began to grow; they were beginning to unravel.

Shocked by their sudden metamorphosis, Ethan quickly threw the balls up into the air jumping back in surprise. A loud popping noise echoed through the room, followed by colored flashes of light that blinded them at first. But neither Ethan nor Haley could imagine what would land on the table in front of them.

The three colored balls had been transformed, replaced by three small creatures, each the color of their respective ball. The creatures were no more than two feet tall, with tiny slits for noses, and large yellow catlike eyes. They had small devilish horns, punctuated by rows of spikes that flowed down to the end of their forked tails.

Ethan was amazed as he studied the creatures.

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They had long arms with folds of skin underneath that attached to their bodies like flying squirrels; the smooth skin on their bellies was surrounded by colorful gold speckled feathers that covered the rest of their bodies.

“I’m Linus,” the green one said, holding his hand out politely.

“I’m Newton,” the blue one followed, extending his hand.

“So I guess you are Albert,” Ethan said, shaking each of their tiny hands. “My name is Ethan and this is Haley.”

Ethan nodded towards Haley.

“*Ethan Fox* — are you Ethan Fox?” Linus sounded astonished.

“How did you know my name?”

“Well — it’s not every day a human shows up here,” Newton chimed in, “especially one named Ethan Fox. Ethan Fox is quite the celebrity around here. . . .”

“Celebrity? How could I be a celebrity? I don’t even know where here . . . is.”

“Yeah — where are we?” Haley asked.

“Well, you are nowhere really,” Linus answered.

“And anywhere,” Newton replied.

“And everywhere,” Albert added.

“That makes no sense at all,” Ethan complained.

“It makes perfect sense,” Linus corrected. “Yet more than a human child can understand.”

“So you’ve met RGB,” a strong deep voice spoke up from across the room.

Startled, Ethan and Haley both spun around to see where the new voice was coming from.

N O W H E R E , A N Y W H E R E ,
A N D E V E R Y W H E R E

A tall man was entering the room through the door on the left. He wore a long half-black half-white hooded robe split down the middle. On the black side was an emblem that vaguely resembled the candelabra near the fireplace. Four colored circles: red, green, blue, and yellow, surrounded a fifth, planet Earth. All five were loosely encircled by a web-like encasing as if enclosed in a Chrysalis.

Ethan got a creepy uneasy feeling as the stranger entered the room; it felt as if an invisible hand was lightly stroking the back of his neck.

The hooded stranger looked towards the floor as he made his way across the room. Raising his head as he neared, the stranger slowly lowered his hood revealing his face. And it nearly sent Ethan into *shock*! He knew this face! It was that face! It was him, the man who had tried to kidnap him that night — nearly a week ago!

“Ethan!” Haley yelled, rushing over to catch him as he fell back against the couch. “What’s wrong?”

“I-I feel a little faint . . .”

Ethan’s mind was racing back to the events that began two weeks earlier.

ENTER SANDMAN

It was a quiet night in the Fox household. They had just gotten home from a disastrous night at a downtown Chinese restaurant. And Betsy was not happy with her husband at all.

“I’m going to bed,” Betsy announced before walking upstairs to her bedroom.

“It’s okay . . . she’ll be fine tomorrow.” George winked. “Hey, how’d you like to check out my new game idea?”

“Sure dad,” Ethan fibbed, knowing his real response would break George’s heart.

“So here’s the idea —”

George pulled an oversized sketch book from his briefcase.

“— if a tree falls in the forest and there is nobody there to hear it, is there a sound? Of course there is!” George finished, quickly answering his own question before Ethan even had a chance to.

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“I’m thinking of calling it, The Ears on the Forest Trees!” George roared.

“The Ears on the Forest Trees —” Ethan repeated.

The Ears on the Forest Trees sounded strangely familiar to Ethan as his mind began to race.

“So how are you going to explain a bunch of funny looking trees with ears?” Ethan laughed.

He was looking at the drawings in George’s sketch book.

“Well —” George paused for a moment, “I was hoping you would help me out with that.”

“I don’t know dad, this one is way out there . . . maybe I don’t have your imagination. . . .” Ethan smirked.

“Oh, really — well I think you’ll do just fine.”

Later that night, as Ethan was lying in bed, his mind began to race again. It was as if there was something he desperately needed to remember; but what was it? It felt like a distant memory was hidden deep in his mind trying desperately to get out. He could not concentrate on anything else, but he could not remember either. He was finally able to fall asleep, only to wake up the next morning with strange visions flashing in his head. It was as if he’d had a dream he could only vaguely remember.

Over the next several nights, the same pattern persisted. Ethan would lay in bed unable to sleep; concentrating on something he could not quite remember. Each night it got harder and harder to fall asleep and it was taking its toll on him. Yet each morning, when he woke up, he had the distinct

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feeling that he was getting closer. Finally, on the fifth night, he was so tired he felt as if nothing could keep him awake. The exhaustion from getting almost no sleep the previous four nights had made him very irritable — and everybody in the Fox household felt it.

“I’ve got to get some sleep tonight,” Ethan said as he laid there counting sheep in his head.

But counting sheep never worked for him and tonight was no different.

“Why can’t I remember?” he wondered, picking up the notepad and pencil he had left on his nightstand, just in case.

Suddenly — all at once — he got the strange feeling that someone or something was in his room with him. And then, he was out like a light.

The next morning, he woke up with the notepad and pencil still in his hands. As he glanced down at the paper, he was surprised by what he saw. There was writing on the notepad. And he had definitely written it, as it bared his secret symbol, the one he always drew on the corner of a page.

“I don’t remember writing anything,” he whispered to the empty room as he began reading the words:

The Eyes of the Desert Sand

On an old abandoned airstrip in a desert far away, lands an unknown flying saucer in the revealing light of day.

ENTER SANDMAN

There are no creatures there to see it in this tortured barren land, no plant life there to feel it just The Eyes of the Desert Sand.

As the saucer doors swing open in a misty fog they see, a man from within the saucer from where could he possibly be?

Emerging from the saucer he steps down to the ground, pausing for a moment as he stops to look around.

He carries a flag of colors with shades from black to white, as he plants the flag into the ground it becomes a beautiful sight.

Returning to his saucer as quickly as he came, the doors swing shut behind him like a picture in a frame.

The saucer leaves undetected by the entire world at hand, unknown to all existence but The Eyes of the Desert Sand.



“Is this what I’ve been trying to remember?” Ethan wondered in disbelief. “How could I have written a poem I don’t know and not remember doing it? I know — I’ll show it to George! He always comes up with this kind of stuff.”

Feeling confident, he was sure his dad would have something to say about it.

* * *

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Later that afternoon, Ethan headed downstairs to George's office study with notebook in hand. He knew George would be there hard at work on some crazy idea. But not as crazy as what he was about to show him.

"Come in!" George hollered from within his study.

"Hey dad —" he said, entering just in time to see George sink a trash can basket with a wadded up piece of paper.

"Three pointer!" George proclaimed, grinning. "What can I do for you kiddo?"

Ethan took the seat across the desk from his dad.

"Well — you know how you've been asking me to help come up with weird stuff for your new video game?"

"Yeah, did you come up with something?" George chuckled.

"Kind of, but it's creepy how I did it," Ethan answered, handing the notepad to George.

As George sat reading, the smile slowly drained from his face. It was not the response Ethan was expecting.

"Where did you get this?" George asked in a concerned tone.

"I don't know . . . I think I wrote it in my sleep."

"Oh — okay — well um — this is good — but not exactly what I was looking for," George said in a dismissive tone.

Ethan left the room disappointed, but he was sure of one thing, his dad was hiding something.

Later that night, as Ethan was lying on the couch watching television, he could hear his parents upstairs arguing. But his parents never argued. Curiosity quickly got the best of him as

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he quietly began creeping up the stairs to eavesdrop. He finally got close enough to hear the end of their muffled conversation.

“I *knew* you would jog something in his memory!” Betsy yelled quietly, “always asking him to help with your fantasyland stories!”

“You’re probably right,” George agreed, “I just wanted him to live a normal childhood.”

It turned silent and Ethan quickly retreated down the stairs.

Needless to say, the next few days were quiet around the Fox household. Ethan’s parents were both on edge, and he knew it had something to do with his past.

“What are they keeping from me — ?” he wondered.

Ethan had no memory of anything before his eighth birthday. It was something that had always bothered him, but no matter how hard he tried, he couldn’t remember anything. His parents had always told him it was due to a trauma he suffered in a car crash. Now, he was beginning to have his doubts: first the crazy poem, followed by George’s strange reaction, and then the argument he had overheard — it just didn’t add up.

“They are definitely keeping something from me and I have to get to the bottom of it!” he decided.

“Ethan!” Betsy yelled from upstairs, “are you ready?”

“Yeah mom — ready and waiting!”

“Tell your father it’s almost time to go — he still needs to get ready.”

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“Sure mom —”

Ethan headed to his father’s study. When he got there, he noticed that the door was slightly ajar. Slowing to a tiptoe, he quietly crept up on the door and peeked through the crack.

He watched as George climbed his bookshelf ladder. He was holding something in his left hand but it was obstructed from Ethan’s view. When he reached the top, George pulled three books from a shelf revealing a small trapdoor behind the bookcase. As he slid open the trapdoor, Ethan could now see what his dad was holding, a withered old brown book with shiny golden writing on the cover. He continued watching as George put the book away in the cubby hole and closed the trapdoor. Then, he replaced the books hiding his secret stash and climbed down from the ladder.

Ethan quietly tiptoed back down the hallway before announcing his presence.

“Hey dad!” Ethan said loudly, re-approaching the study door, “mom wants you upstairs — time to get ready!”

Tonight’s Fox family event was the third annual *Gothic Comic Book Convention* or *GothCon* as the gothies had proudly dubbed it. Unlike other conventions of the genre, *GothCon* was the only one held at night. It was much creepier than the average run of the mill comic book event.

George’s *Dark Realm* video game series had been such a success that it spun off a comic book series; and those, too, had become hugely successful. As a result, George always felt obligated to make a special appearance for his loyal fans. But this year was different, George had been selected as the

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keynote speaker, and that meant this year it would be a family event!

“I’m ready!” George announced, slowly making his way down the staircase.

Upon seeing George’s costume, Ethan’s eyes met Betsy’s as she let out a quiet giggle.

“You didn’t tell us it was a costume party,” Betsy joked as she eyed the spectacle that was George’s attire.

“Don’t worry — you two are fine — you’ll be sitting on the sidelines, but I’m the keynote speaker; I’ve got a roll to play!” George explained as he reached the bottom of the staircase.

George’s getup was something only a diehard gothic would appreciate. A character from the *Dark Realm* series: *Rubio the Evil Minion of Krator*.

Rubio’s face was a tattered mass of flesh, pieced together like a jigsaw puzzle over his exposed skull. He had no nose, only a hole where one should be. Beneath his chin, a large spider emerged from a hole in his neck. His shredded black jacket oozed with blood dripping down to where rusty chains wrapped around his waist; holsters for his blood soaked hatchets. A spike was driven through his right hand while his left held a hook; an impaled rat squirmed at the end. His pants were tattered, eaten away by black insects clinging to them like creepy crawlers.

“Wow! You went all out!” Ethan complimented George’s costume as they were leaving.

“Fitting attire for a creep fest,” Betsy added as they emerged from their building into the light of a full moon.

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“Tonight — we ride in style,” George boasted, taking Betsy’s hand as the limo pulled to the curb.

The ride to the venue was uneventful as Ethan sat in silence wondering, “What are they hiding? Has it got something to do with that old book my dad is hiding behind his bookcase?”

One way or another, he was going to find out.

The limo pulled up in front of a dreary hotel. It was definitely off the beaten path from the normal Manhattan social scene. The dimly lit street made it easier to see the red carpet leading to the hotel entrance. It was lined with black lights making the red look black under the darkness of night. As they exited the limo, a huge applause erupted from the crowd now gathering outside the hotel.

“Look! He came as *Rubio!*” someone shouted as the crowd began cheering.

“This place sure fits the bill,” Ethan whispered, looking at the gothic building.

He looked up to see two stone gargoyles perched at each corner of the hotel’s rooftop. Glancing back and forth — from one to the other — he thought his eyes were playing tricks on him. He could have sworn he saw a piercing red glow coming from their eyes as he looked from one to the other. He had the eerie feeling that whichever one he was not looking at was looking at him.

“Ridiculous,” he thought to himself, “this place must be creeping me out.”

Ethan continued to reassure himself as he walked the black carpet with his parents. Once inside the hotel, things got even

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darker and creepier. The floor exhibits consisted of all sorts of sick and twisted themes.

“This makes *Rubio* look like a girl scout,” Ethan joked to his dad as they looked around the exhibit room.

“I don’t get it — ?” Betsy whispered to Ethan. “This is so creepy. How can they all be having so much fun?”

“There are some sick puppies here — that’s for sure,” Ethan quietly whispered back. “Like a roomful of demented children playing with dead things.”

The place was definitely having an effect on Ethan. Even he was thinking creepy things. As he scanned the crowd his gaze stopped at a particularly disturbing exhibit, a large burning sign read:

GATES OF HELL: THE TALES OF ICHARUS GATES

But it wasn’t *Icharus Gates* that caught his eye. It was the strange creature standing off to the side. A sandman, continuously reforming as sand spilled to the floor from its body only to merge back into the pile at its feet. It had vaguely defined facial features and two small pits where eyes should be.

“Quite a sandman costume — huh!” George hollered from several feet away.

“It looks so *real!*” Ethan hollered, walking back towards his parents.

Ethan glanced back, just in time to see two tall dark figures arrive. Two very *real* looking vampires were now talking with the sandman. He continued watching as the sandman looked

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over and pointed in his direction. Suddenly, his heart began to race as he realized, the sandman was not pointing towards him! The sandman was pointing at him! And the vampires looked interested!

“Time to head backstage so I can prepare for my speech,” George announced just in the nick of time.

“Ah — ah — all right — I’m with you,” Ethan muttered as if the words were frozen in his throat.

Ethan decided on the way backstage, he was officially freaked out.

“Get a grip,” he told himself in his head. “You’re letting your imagination get the best of you. It’s all fake . . .” he continued his pep talk.

After an hour backstage, Ethan had finally talked himself down from freak-out mode. It was time for the moment they had all been waiting for, George’s keynote address.

“LADIES AND GENTLEMEN!” a voice boomed over the intercom, “IT IS WITH GREAT PLEASURE THAT I INTRODUCE TO YOU! THE CREATOR OF THE DARK REALM! THE ONE! THE ONLY — GEORGE FOX!”

Applause erupted from every corner of the convention.

“Break a leg,” Betsy smiled, standing up on her tippy toes to give George a kiss.

“Knock ’em dead dad!” Ethan shouted as George took the stage in his ghoulish costume.

Like his mother, Ethan didn’t get all the hoopla or fanfare. But as he watched his dad take the podium, he was sure of one thing, he was proud of his dad.

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About a half hour into George's speech, Ethan began to feel nature's call, he had to pee.

"Mom — I've gotta go to the bathroom — I'll be right back," he said before trotting down a backstage corridor.

He remembered seeing a restroom sign down one of the backstage hallways. Then halfway down the long corridor, he noticed how quiet it had gotten. A sudden chill crept through his body as he began to realize, this was a bad idea.

He turned around and before he knew it, two dark figures descended upon him. The two vampires quickly wrestled him to the ground and put a bag over his head. Though he could see nothing, he felt a strange gliding sensation, as if he were floating down the hallway. Grabbing an arm of one of his attackers, he tried to pry himself free, but it was useless; he was helpless against their strength. He could feel the cold sandpaper texture of their skin against his own. Then, it dawned on him! These vampires were *real*! And they were taking him somewhere!

"Stay calm —" a soothing voice whispered inside his head.

"Now I'm hearing things," he thought as a strange calmness overcame the terror he was feeling just seconds ago.

Suddenly, he felt a thunderous jolt as he slipped from his kidnappers' grasp, thudding to the ground. Quickly removing the bag from his head, he looked down the corridor in front of him, it was empty. Spinning around on his hands and knees, he was surprised to see not two but three tall figures standing before him. As the two vampires made a hasty exit through a door at the end of the hall, the third figure was standing over him, looking down at him as if ready to attack.

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Ethan looked up at his attacker, he could see that this was not a vampire, this was a man. He wore a long half-black half-white robe. He had a bluish white complexion and long black stringy hair. His long pointy nose stretched from his narrow brows to below his thin upper lip. Ethan began to tremble as he stared into the stranger's devilish eyes, each one a different color; his left eye was deep-green, but his right one was bluish-grey with a crescent moon-shaped pupil.

"What do you want with me?" Ethan asked, trembling in silence as he and the stranger exchanged stares.

"Everything will be all right, Ethan Fox," the soothing voice spoke up from within his head.

Ethan did not know where the voice was coming from but it made him stop trembling.

"Ethan — where are you? Are you all right?" Betsy's voice called out from the end of the corridor behind him.

He turned towards his mother and yelled at the top of his lungs, "I'M RIGHT HERE MOM — BUT I'M NOT ALL RIGHT — GET HELP!"

But when he turned back to face his attacker, there was nobody there. He was all alone, near the end of the corridor, standing in front of a sign that read:

Men's Restroom

OUT THROUGH THE IN-DOOR

“Ethan! Ethan — wake up!” Haley’s voice cried out as everything slowly came into focus. “Are you okay? You fainted!”

“I-I thought I saw him,” Ethan mumbled, struggling to pick himself up off the floor.

“Saw *who?*” Haley asked, looking across the room at the stranger who was now obstructed from Ethan’s view.

“The man who tried to kidnap me. . . .”

“*Kidnap you?*” Haley cried, staring daggers at the robed stranger.

“I can assure you, Ethan Fox — it is not I who has been trying to abduct you,” the stranger spoke in a low gravelly voice. “We’ve been keeping an eye on you. Very unfortunate mistakes led to a lapse in your safety. But you can rest assured; we are not here to harm you —”

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“I saw *you* with the two others!” Ethan interrupted, turning to face the stranger.

“Did you get a good look at your attacker?” the stranger asked, approaching Ethan.

“*Yes* — I saw you as plain as day!”

“Then I would imagine you might see some differences,” the stranger said, bending down to give him a closer look.

“Your eyes — your eyes are blue — his were different and creepy.”

“It appears my dear brother has joined them,” the stranger said, talking to himself. “I had no evidence before . . . but this offers proof . . . mother will have to believe me now —”

“*Who are you?*” Haley interrupted in a demanding tone. “And *what* would your brother want with Ethan? And *where* are we? And *what* are these little creatures? And *why* are we here — ?”

“All of your questions will be answered in due time,” the stranger replied, walking towards the enormous fireplace. “First — let’s get comfortable — please, take a seat while I refresh the fire.”

Ethan and Haley hesitated before sitting down on a large couch in front of the fireplace.

They watched as the stranger reached into a bowl full of small red marbles with orange and yellow splotches. Plucking one from the bowl, he threw it down hard at the base of the fireplace.

The marble erupted into a small inferno, burning for a few seconds before the flames began to change shape; the flames

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slowly rose up from the floor morphing into the form of a small fire creature.

Ethan and Haley watched in stunned silence as the foot tall fire creature walked over to a neatly stacked pile of logs.

Carefully jumping onto the pile, the creature knelt down and began to listen to the logs as if somehow communicating with them. A few minutes went by before the creature unexpectedly jumped to its feet with a log in its arms. Making its way back to the fireplace, the creature stood hugging its log — like a mother cuddling her child.

Seconds later, a faint whistle could be heard coming from the fire creature. The whistle grew louder and louder until suddenly the creature leaped into the fireplace with the log in its arms. The whistling stopped with a loud popping noise followed by a red puff of smoke. The fire creature and log had landed perfectly into place on the newly burning fire.

Then — as if getting into bed — the creature eased itself down onto the log and slowly melted away into the burning fire.

“What was that?” Ethan and Haley asked in unison.

“That was a firelyte — much simpler than matches, don’t you think?” the stranger replied. “When the log is finished burning it will transform into a black firelyte diamond.”

As the stranger explained, Ethan noticed a small pile of shiny black diamonds beneath the burning log.

“I’ve never understood the human fascination with a natural fire . . . the aftermath is so messy —”

“Humans —” Haley interrupted, “you said, ‘humans?’”

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“I know . . . you must be brimming with questions, but first we’ll start with the introductions. I know who Ethan Fox is, but who might you be?”

“My name is Haley, Haley Hunt — I think. . . . I don’t remember much before I met Ethan, but how do you know Ethan?”

“Even your answers are veiled in questions,” the stranger smirked. “I am Daavic Ravenwood — my brother, Damien is the one who tried to abduct Ethan. I know this may sound farfetched — but please bear with me. I think you would both agree based on what you’ve already seen, there are many things not understood in the human world —”

“There —” Haley interrupted, “you said it again, the ‘human’ world. Are you an *alien* or something?”

“Roughly, one human week ago —” Daavic continued, ignoring Haley’s question, “a sandman answered the call of a very tired human child. The sandman went about his business sprinkling Z’s on the child to help him sleep. But instead of falling asleep, the child proceeded to write the words to an ancient poem not known to the human world —”

“— The Eyes of the Desert Sand!” Ethan interrupted, finishing Daavic’s sentence.

“Precisely,” Daavic continued. “Normally a sandman is a quiet nomadic creature, putting people to sleep is usually an uneventful task. However, when something out of the ordinary happens — as it did on this occasion — they are very excitable. After witnessing Ethan Fox write the words to the ancient poem, the sandman went mad. He worked himself into a gossiping frenzy. He nearly traveled the world, telling

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anyone who would listen, the story of the human child — the child who knew something that he should not. Word spread quickly as speculation ran rampant. Would this child be the one to finally bring meaning to one of the universe’s greatest mysteries — ?”

“Bring meaning to it?” Ethan interrupted, “I don’t even remember writing it!”

“That explains why everyone seems to know Ethan,” Haley continued stubbornly, “but you still haven’t told us — where we are or how we got here?”

“The answer to the first part of your question will have to wait,” Daavic replied, “but I am as curious as you as to how you got here. So let us delve into that, shall we? What happened to the two of you just before you arrived?”

“We were on the beach, looking for seashells,” Haley began. “Then Ethan saw a blue bunny creature waving at us. I couldn’t see it, but Ethan could, so we followed it. Then we found a creepy staircase in the sand, and when Ethan went down the staircase, he disappeared —”

“That explains how Ethan got here,” Daavic interrupted, “but how did you arrive?”

“As I moved in for a closer look, someone pushed me down the stairs, behind Ethan,” Haley finished as she gasped for breath.

“This creature that only Ethan could see, what did it look like?” Daavic inquired seriously.

“Well, Ethan said it was a blue bunny with —”

“Haley! I’m right here! I can answer for myself,” Ethan scolded, immediately feeling bad for doing so.

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“I’m sorry — I got excited — you should tell this part.”

“It looked like a blue Easter bunny — about this tall,” Ethan continued, holding his hand a few feet above the ground, “with yellow spots. It spoke to me, it said its name was ‘Jasper’ and then it said, ‘Zo-Zo’ and ran away.”

“*Jasper!* Jasper the blue taletaddler — !”

The sound of shock in Daavic’s voice was evident; he seemed to be talking to himself again.

“Ethan, was this the first time you’ve seen Jasper?” Daavic asked.

“Of course, I’m not in the habit of imagining things.”

“The creature you saw was a taletaddler and it said, ‘XO-XO’ not ‘Zo-Zo,’” Daavic explained, spelling out the letters. “That is how a taletaddler says goodbye, it means hugs and kisses.”

Ethan had to chuckle at Daavic’s explanation.

“What is a taletaddler?” Haley asked.

“Taletaddlers are harmless creatures known in the human world as a child’s imaginary friend. To adults they are invisible, but they are quite *real* I assure you. They normally choose a human child, age twelve or younger, befriending them and making themselves visible to only that child. Taletaddlers are the world’s greatest storytellers, often telling wonderful tales to the child they’ve chosen. Many of the human world’s greatest authors have gotten their material from the stories of taletaddlers —”

“That’s ridiculous,” Haley interrupted.

“Really —” Daavic challenged. “Could you possibly believe stories as inspiring as the *Harry Potter* novels were written

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solely by a human? No human could create such a masterpiece without the seeds of a taletaddler.”

“What would a taletaddler want with us?” Haley asked, changing the subject.

“And why would it choose me?” Ethan asked. “I’m thirteen.”

“You’re thirteen —” Daavic repeated, pulling a small device from his pocket. “Then you should not be able to see a taletaddler.”

“Is that an *iPhone*?” Ethan asked as Daavic tapped away at the colorful screen.

“Heavens no!” Daavic explained, “It is an Elemental Modulator. We call it an ELMO for short. A human — a *Mr. Jobs*, I believe the name was — did get a quick look at one once, and a short time later the *iPhone* was born.”

“What does it do?” Ethan asked.

“This will tell me how old you are.”

Daavic got up from the couch and walked over to Ethan. He gave the screen one final tap before holding the device up to Ethan’s eyes.

“Look at the dot in the center of the screen and tell me when your taletaddler appears.”

“There!” Ethan snapped as Jasper’s image appeared on the screen.

“This is very unexpected. . . .”

Daavic stared down at the device as if trying to conceal his surprise.

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“It appears you are thirteen — but that should not be possible, no human child past twelve has ever seen a taletaddler.”

Daavic returned the device to his pocket.

“Are you insinuating Ethan is not human?” Haley had a puzzled look on her face.

“No — not at all — his DNA is human,” Daavic replied. “I was merely pointing out that we seem to have more questions than answers at the moment.”

There was a silent pause in the room.

“They are *mine!* I saw the humans first!” Albert yelled from across the room, breaking the uncomfortable silence.

“No you didn’t — *I did!*” Newton countered.

“Irrelevant!” Linus shouted. “I was the first to introduce myself so I own the humans!”

“RGB! You will treat our guests with respect! They belong to no one!” Daavic commanded, breaking up the quarrel.

“Which brings me to my next question,” Haley announced, “what are they and why do you call them RGB?”

“Those three little troublemakers are pyrodevlins — Albert in Red, Linus in Green, and Newton in Blue — collectively we refer to them as RGB, for short, since they normally get into trouble as a unit. Sadly, there was a fourth one that kept them in line. But the yellow one, Kepler, was taken by the Grim . . . the same group trying to abduct Ethan Fox.”

“Where are the pyrodevlins from? And where are we? And why is an evil group trying to abduct Ethan?”

Haley questioned relentlessly.

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“I’m sorry — I’ve already said more than I should,” Daavic replied. “Your questions will have to wait until you meet my dear mother, headmistress Ravenwood. She will answer all of your questions.”

Daavic was motioning towards the doors at the far end of the room, “Come — I will have Irvin show you to your rooms —”

“Rooms —” Ethan interrupted, “but I can’t stay — I need to get back to my parents, they’re probably worried by now.”

“I’m sorry but that won’t be possible. There are too many questions, and until we get to the bottom of things, the headmistress has decided that you must stay with us. Don’t worry about your parents, they are safe. We will see to it that they are not worried in the meantime.”

Daavic motioned to the exit once again.

When they reached the other side of the room, Ethan instinctively headed for the door he had seen Daavic enter through, the one to the left of the painting; but as he reached for the door knob it vanished.

“You can’t go out through the in-door,” Daavic said as he opened the door on the right.

“The in-door — ?” Ethan wondered, following Daavic and Haley.

They were now standing in what appeared to be the Front Room of the house.

“Oh! Wait! I forgot something in the library,” Haley cried.

“We call it the Study,” Daavic corrected. “Go ahead, run along and fetch it.”

“What did you forget?” Ethan asked.

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“The sand dollar you gave me on the beach — I set it down on the table.”

“It’s just a stupid old seashell.”

“Ethan, that stupid old seashell is supposed to bring you luck. I think we could use a little luck right now — don’t you? I’m getting my seashell!”

“Okay — I’ll go with you.”

As they reentered the Study they were stunned to notice that they had entered through the door to the left of the picture.

“How is that possible — ?” Ethan wondered, turning back towards the door to reach for the knob, but again it vanished.

“Ethan, you can’t go out the in-door,” Haley teased. “I think I’m beginning to understand this place.”

While Haley skipped off to retrieve her seashell, Ethan was still studying the door when loud shouting suddenly erupted from the table. Startled, he spun around to see what was going on. Haley was frantically running around the table shouting as Albert, Newton, and Linus enjoyed a game of keep away.

“Ethan! They won’t give it back to me — please help!” Haley cried as Newton threw the seashell across the table to the waiting hands of Albert.

“I’ve got an idea!” Ethan shouted.

Running to the fireplace, Ethan quickly grabbed a handful of firelyte marbles from the bowl on the mantle. Rushing back to the table, he came to Haley’s rescue.

“Albert! Here — catch!” Ethan yelled, tossing one of the marbles at Albert who instinctively caught it.

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“Newton! Linus! Catch!” he shouted, throwing a marble to each of them.

Newton, who was now holding the seashell, suddenly panicked. He threw the seashell up in the air as he reached to catch the red marble.

“I’ve got it!” Haley cried victoriously.

“Great! Let’s get out of here,” Ethan said, motioning towards the out-door.

“*No! Not a firelyte capsule!*” RGB screamed in unison. “We’re *allergic* to firelytes!”

“Uh — oh . . .” Ethan said, spinning around just in time to see RGB throw the capsules to the ground.

The firelyte capsules erupted into three small infernos engulfing the floor.

Ethan stood watching — expressionless — as three firelytes began to emerge from the flames.

“It’s okay — they’ll just go pick out a log and jump into the fireplace,” Haley chuckled.

“I don’t think so . . .” Ethan said, pointing at the fire creatures.

Ethan and Haley watched in disbelief as the firelytes each grabbed a leg of a small wooden end table. Hoisting it up, they began whistling in unison as they marched towards the fireplace.

“Let’s get out of here!” Ethan hollered, turning to Haley.

“Good idea!” Haley agreed as they started for the out-door.

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After stepping back into the Front Room, Ethan and Haley began to look around. They were in a dimly lit room with a huge front door; it was large enough to accommodate a small giant. A narrow black carpet stretched from the front door to the opposite side of the room, where a huge black slab stood firmly against the wall. To each side of the carpet, assorted furniture decorated the beautiful hardwood floors that encompassed the room.

“There’s no ceiling —” Ethan announced, gazing up into the night’s sky.

“It was there earlier,” Daavic interrupted, as if it was no big deal that a large portion of the ceiling was missing.

As Ethan continued scanning the room, he noticed what looked like a large soap bubble, floating in the middle of the room above a coffee table.

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“What’s that — ?” he asked, pointing at the baseball-sized bubble.

“Its purpose has yet to be determined,” Daavic replied.

“A bubble only has one purpose —” Haley smiled as she approached the floating sphere, “to be popped!”

She poked at it with her finger but it did not pop. Her finger went through it as if it were not even there; then, she blew at it but the bubble still did not move.

“Must be a ghost bubble,” Ethan joked.

Having lost interest in the phantom bubble, Ethan continued exploring. At first glance, the rest of the room looked normal, until he walked to the other side and looked up the staircase. The stairs seemed to keep going up as far as the eye could see — into eternity — like a stairway to heaven.

“How many floors does this house have?” Ethan asked, turning to Daavic.

“As many as it needs —”

“Where does this lead?” Haley interrupted, pointing to a door under the staircase.

“Never go in that door! The basement is strictly off limits!” Daavic scolded, ignoring her question.

“Why would we go into a creepy basement anyway,” Haley countered, surprised at Daavic’s response.

Opposite the staircase, stood the wall with the Study door they had just entered through, it stretched the length of the room: to the left of the front door, another door stood on that wall, followed by a black chest of drawers standing at the wall’s center; above the chest, a colorful abstract painting hung on the wall — the strange artwork looked as if it were

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moving; to the right of the chest was a small bench; and to the left of it, sat a giant mirror with a black frame engraved around the edges with a string of cryptic symbols.

“Wow! I bet that weighs a ton,” Haley said to Ethan as he studied the giant mirror.

Farther down, past the Study door, a tall end table stood against the wall; a small lime green box sat on it. Beyond the table, the room ended with a small patch of ceiling overhead creating a cave like enclave. Inside the enclave was another door with a sign above it that read:

•THE HALL OF DOORWAYS•

“What is ‘The Hall of Doorways?’” Ethan asked, pointing up at the sign.

“It is what it is. . . . I’m going to find what’s keeping Irvin — you two stay here,” Daavic said, walking towards The Hall of Doorways and exiting the room.

“I wonder who this Irvin character is . . .” Haley pondered, looking at Ethan.

“Must be the butler or something —”

Suddenly, out of the corner of his eye, Ethan spotted something green streaking down the staircase. He turned, just in time to see what looked like a large green moth fluttering through the air. It came to a stop, landing on the wall at the base of the staircase.

Moving in for a closer look, he saw a green blob with eyes glaring back at him. About the size of a child’s fist, it was

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slowly blending into the wall it had landed on. By the time he got to where it had landed, it was gone.

“Did you see that?” Ethan asked excitedly.

“See what?”

“A big green moth or something — it just flew down from upstairs! It landed on this wall and then just disappeared!”

Ethan was pointing at the empty wall.

“Are you seeing things again?” Haley joked. “Wait a minute — look. . . .” she said, pointing at the phantom bubble that was now moving.

They both watched, as the bubble slowly drifted towards them as if attracted by an unseen force. It sped up ever so slightly as it moved closer; finally coming to rest, nestled against the wall where the moth had disappeared. Then, suddenly, the green blob reappeared, popping off the wall and fluttering over their heads.

“I saw it that time!” Haley yelled — chasing the moth-like creature as it fluttered towards the back of the room.

“It’s heading for The Hall of Doorways!” Ethan shouted, following behind.

“No! I think it wants inside that little green box on the table,” Haley said as the creature landed on the table.

“Then we’ll have it cornered!” Ethan yelled.

Next, the tiny creature tapped three times on the side of the box. Instantly, the lid swung open, and the creature hopped inside closing the lid tightly behind it.

“We have it cornered — but how do we open this box?” Ethan asked, prying at the lid with his fingernails.

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“I saw it tap on the box like this . . .” Haley said, tapping three times causing the lid to swing open. “It’s empty!”

“It disappeared on the wall — I think it can blend into things —”

“Ethan, look!” Haley interrupted, pointing at the bubble that was again drifting towards them.

“Blasted tag along!” a faint muffled voice grunted, as the fuzzy green blob suddenly reappeared, popping up out of the box, and unraveling in mid-air.

A tiny green creature landed on the table in front of them.

“Gruggins McGhee, grumpling of the house, at your service,” the creature said, bowing down before offering a handshake.

Gruggins was about four inches tall with a mouse-like body and stubby little arms and legs. His face was that of an old man with a fat bulbous nose — like *Mr. Magoo*. Aside from smooth skin on his face and belly, short fuzzy hair covered the rest of his head and body. He was brilliantly colored; bluish-green with a purple and yellow eye pattern prominently centered on each of his long moth-like wings — they resembled the eye on a peacock feather.

“Since the day it arrived that dreaded bubble has been following me around,” Gruggins complained, flopping back a tuft of his hair.

The hair at the top of his head formed a tall pointy peak that bent forward under its own weight — like the top of a soft serve ice cream. But the thing that really caught ones attention about Gruggins was the stunning gold jewelry he wore from head-to-toe: bracelets on his hands and feet,

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necklaces of varying sizes, and a long chain that wrapped around his waist several times.

Gruggins was blinged out!

“Hello Gruggins — my name is Haley and this is Ethan,” Haley said, shaking his tiny hand with her fingers.

“Quite a grip you’ve got there!”

Gruggins flirted with Haley.

“I heard that we had some unexpected guests,” he said, turning to Ethan who was staring down at him with a blank look on his face.

Gruggins spoke in a soft slowly measured tone, the slight rasp in his voice, fittingly sounded as if the words were coming from a wise but grumpy old man.

“So you’re Ethan Fox,” Gruggins said, looking up at Ethan. “You don’t look so special to me — and judging by that dumb look on your face, I’d bet you’ve never seen a grumpling before.”

“U-m-m — no — I haven’t,” Ethan managed.

“I suppose that shouldn’t surprise me, but I’ve never seen a human before either — and you don’t see a dumb look on my face, do you?”

It was obvious Gruggins did not like Ethan.

“It appears you’ve met our resident grumpling,” Daavic interrupted the unpleasant exchange.

“Are you being courteous to our guests?” Daavic asked, directing his gaze at Gruggins.

“Of course, master Daavic — always courteous,” Gruggins scowled.

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“Irvin will be along shortly to take you to the headmistress and then to your rooms,” Daavic said, looking at Ethan and Haley.

“*Please master Daavic*, not Irvin, not that mush mouthed morph-dork,” Gruggins complained. “I cannot be subjected to his constant drivel and showboating theatrics. May I be excused?”

“You may,” Daavic replied nodding.

“Thank you sir,” Gruggins said gratefully.

“And to you — I bid a fond farewell,” Gruggins added, bowing to Ethan and Haley before hopping back into his box and shutting the lid behind him.

“Grumplings have a very low tolerance for certain things,” Daavic explained, “and Irvin seems to push all the wrong buttons. But they are both valuable members of our staff and need to put an end to their little feud.”

“That was an odd little creature,” Haley muttered.

“Indeed, grumplings are the most curious species you will ever encounter,” Daavic added. “They have the unique ability to de-cloak a leprechaun’s gold —”

“Leprechauns — ?” Haley interrupted. “You expect us to believe in leprechauns?”

“As I stated earlier, given the things you have already seen, I would not think it quite the stretch. But I forget you are new to our world . . . so please, let me explain. Yes — leprechauns do exist and they are particularly nasty little creatures, I must say. But unlike the tales from human lore, real leprechauns do not keep their gold in a pot at the end of a rainbow. Quite the opposite in fact, they scatter it about everywhere, hidden in

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plain sight. Leprechauns have magical abilities, one of which is the ability to cloak their prized stash of gold.”

“You mean they can make it invisible?” Ethan asked.

“A leprechaun’s cloak is much stronger than mere invisibility; a leprechaun’s cloak renders the object invisible and untouchable, as if cloaked from existence — and that is where grumplings fit in. You see — when a grumpling comes within a giraffe’s neck of leprechaun gold, the cloaking magic is destroyed. Grumplings are the only known creature with such an ability; it makes them a mortal enemy in the leprechauns’ eyes. The situation was so bad that the leprechauns almost hunted grumplings to extinction.”

“That sounds *horrible!*” Haley protested.

“It started long ago at the Greenfield Massacre,” Daavic continued. “Until that point, leprechauns and grumplings led a peaceful and friendly co-existence. But then one day, for reasons unknown, an army of leprechauns descended upon the grumpling village at Greenfield. They massacred half of Earth’s small grumpling population that day. Many escaped and went into hiding; but after that day, leprechauns continued to hunt grumplings, using their favorite food as bait — four leaf clovers.”

“Why doesn’t somebody stop the leprechauns?” Haley asked.

“Nobody wants to go to war with the leprechauns — did I not mention that they are particularly nasty little creatures? But we did the next best thing, rounding up the remaining grumplings, and moving them to one of the only places on

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Earth a leprechaun will not venture. Except for Gruggins, the entire grumpling population is safely tucked away there.”

“Why is Gruggins here and not with his people?” Ethan asked.

“Gruggins has taken the grumpling oath — he has pledged his life to the Ravenwood family. My mother stumbled across his lifeless body — one morning — while out on patrol. He was nearly dead, but she spent months nursing him back to health. When he finally came to, he had no memories of his past other than a bitter hatred of leprechauns — his memory has never returned. He was grateful to my mother for all she had done, so he pledged his life to her and her family, and joined us as the grumpling of the house.”

“But if he couldn’t remember anything — where did the name Gruggins come from?” Ethan asked.

“It’s funny that you ask, it’s a cute story actually,” Daavic smiled. “When my baby sister first saw the grumpling, she was only just learning to speak. Trying to pronounce the word ‘grumpling’ was quite difficult for her — Gruggins was all she could manage. But the grumpling was drawn to her and soon began answering her calls for Gruggins, so he adopted the name. He later added McGhee as a bit of irony to annoy the leprechauns.”

“Why does Gruggins wear all that gold?” Haley asked. “Doesn’t that put him in danger with the leprechauns?”

“Unlike other grumplings, Gruggins is a very volatile character. He’s made it his life’s mission to wage a one grumpling war on the leprechauns. The jewelry he wears is a sign of defiance, it is meant to anger them — souvenirs from

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all the leprechaun gold he has de-cloaked over the years. We've tried to warn him of the dangers, but there's no getting through to a stubborn grumpling. At least we can keep him safe here."

Daavic turned towards the noise of footsteps, coming from The Hall of Doorways.

"Gruggins McGhee is a goon faced flobbyknocker and his father wears leprechaun slippers!" a goofy cackling voice cried out as the door burst open.

"*Irvin* — do not antagonize Gruggins!" Daavic scolded.

"So this is what humans look like — much uglier in person," Irvin added, ignoring Daavic's order.

"Irvin! They are not stupid — they can hear and understand you!"

"Duh — if you say so," he continued. "Well if you're not stupid, then I guess I'll introduce myself. Irvin McGillicutty at your service, here to see to your every need, answer to your every whim, and wait on you silly little creatures hand and foot, as my master has ordered."

Irvin was an odd looking being, nearly six feet tall, with pale white skin that looked as if he had been molded from white candle wax. His face was smooth with little definition — like that on a department store dummy. He wore a black tuxedo with a bow tie and a rose corsage that appeared to grow out from his body as if a part of it.

"But first, how about a little fun — I've been practicing this one to try out on a human," Irvin said, suddenly leaping into the air.

Ethan and Haley watched in disbelief.

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Irvin morphed into a large egg, with small arms and legs, and facial features that looked like *Mr. Potato Head*. Landing next to Gruggins' green box, he sat perched at the edge of the table, rocking back and forth slowly.

"*Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall — Humpty Dumpty was a big fat klutz!*" a goofy voice chanted, as the egg began to slide off of the table.

Landing splat on the hardwood floor, the egg cracked open, and transformed into a giant fully cooked egg sunny side up.

"How do you like your eggs?" Irvin asked as facial features suddenly appeared on the yolk.

"Scrambled!" Haley cried out, laughing hysterically.

"However the lady likes it," the voice answered, as the egg on the floor quickly transformed into scrambled.

"That was *awesome!* How did he do that?" Ethan asked, watching as the pile of eggs slowly morphed back into Irvin McGillicutty.

"Irvin is a mimic, a member of the shape-shifter family," Daavic explained. "But unlike other shape-shifters — a mimic can only morph for a short time."

"Did you know that shnickyrooners and shnackleboxes and things like that," Irvin began to ramble, "they really only happen to old ice cream cones when giant tree turtles eat watery diapers in a blue elevator of leaf monkeys making the leftover apple trees take the school bus!"

"Why is he talking like that?" Ethan asked. "He's not making any sense!"

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“No one knows for sure, maybe to amuse himself, maybe to irritate Gruggins, or maybe it actually means something to him,” Daavic speculated. “But it’s a fairly common occurrence so you should learn to ignore it if you can.”

“Well — I suppose it’s time for me to present you to headmistress Ravenwood,” Irvin said, snapping out of the unintelligible rant. “But before we go — I’ve brought you each a surprise, a gift from your humble servant.”

Irvin fumbled around in his pants pocket.

“Oh, there it is,” he announced, pulling a balled up fist from his pocket.

Holding his arm out in front of Ethan, Irvin opened up his hand to show Ethan his surprise.

“What is it?” Ethan asked, looking down at a tiny brown pouch resting at the center of Irvin’s palm.

“It’s a pocket tote! And this one is for Ethan Fox!” Irvin eagerly explained, turning the tiny pouch around to expose the letters, “E. F.” monogrammed on its side.

“What is a pocket tote?” Haley asked.

“Duh — only the must have item for any adventurer!” Irvin replied. “And Ethan Fox must be an adventurer — he ended up here, didn’t he?”

“What does it do?” Ethan asked.

“First lesson is free, check this out!” Irvin winked, tugging lightly at a draw string on the side of the pouch.

Ethan and Haley watched in silence.

Suddenly the pouch began to grow in Irvin’s hand. The more he tugged at the string, the larger it grew, until finally reaching the size of a small shopping bag.

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“Your gift is inside,” Irvin said, smiling at Haley as he reached into the bag.

After rummaging around for a second or two, he proceeded to pull a small metallic statuette from the bag. It was a cat.

“Oh! I just love kitty cats! Thank you!” Haley cried, smiling as she took the small trinket from Irvin.

“But that’s not just an ordinary kitty cat,” Irvin explained. “That is a copycat and when you hold it for the first time — as the new owner — you must name it so it knows who to mind.”

“Who to mind? It’s a statue!” Ethan sighed.

“Go ahead — you will see,” Irvin urged Haley.

“Tabby — her name is Tabby!”

“Tabby it is, now for your free lesson. Pick an object — any object in the room — and as you look at it, stroke the copycat and repeat this phrase: *Tabby cat, Tabby cat, make me a copy.*”

“Tabby cat, Tabby cat, make me a copy —” Haley repeated, “now what?”

“Now Tabby will do the rest, put her down on the floor.”

As Haley set the statuette on the floor, Tabby suddenly sprang to life, meowing a few times before walking over to Haley and gently rubbing up against her feet. After getting acquainted with her new owner, Tabby walked back to where Haley had set her down. She circled the spot three times and then proceeded to lie down on the floor where she slowly morphed into a small green box — a perfect copy of the one Gruggins was resting in.

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“That’s it! That’s what I was looking at when I said the phrase!” Haley explained. “But how do I get my kitty back?”

“That’s the best part — a copycat always returns to its owner, *watch this!*”

Irvin picked up the green box from the floor and ran up the stairs. “All you have to do is say her name!” he yelled down from the next floor.

“TABBY CAT!” Haley shouted.

Suddenly, Irvin appeared out of thin air. He was standing a few feet in front of Haley holding the box in his hands. The box morphed back into a small metallic cat. Tabby jumped down onto the floor, walked over to Haley’s feet, and froze in place — Tabby was a statuette again.

“Thank you Irvin! This is the coolest present ever!”

“Yeah — thank you Irvin, but what am I supposed to do with this bag?” Ethan asked.

“Oh, how careless of me, I got sidetracked — your lesson isn’t over yet! *Watch this!*”

Irvin returned to the pocket tote where he again began tugging on the draw string. It continued to grow. He stopped as it reached the size of a large trash bag.

“Okay — here’s the fun part! I need something rather large to demonstrate.”

Irvin picked up a big heavy lamp off of a table. After shoving the lamp into the now enormous pouch, he began tugging at a different draw string on its other side. But this time, instead of growing, the pouch began to shrink. Irvin continued pulling at the string until the pouch finally shrank back down to the size of a walnut.

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“There you go! Pocket sized for the on-the-go adventurer!” Irvin said, handing it to Ethan.

“Cool! But where did the lamp go?”

“It’s still in there, go ahead and see for yourself.”

“But it’s so small and way too light for that giant lamp to still be in there,” he argued.

Ethan pulled at the string to make it grow again.

“It’s getting heavier!” he announced, setting the pouch down while continuing to tug at the string.

Ethan proceeded to open the pouch, pulling the lamp from it, before shrinking it back down to pocket size.

“Just be careful when shrinking it back down,” Irvin cautioned. “If you pull too hard on that string it can shrink too fast and disappear. I shrunk one so small once, I never could find it —”

“Well — now that gift time is over,” Daavic interrupted, “you should take our guests to meet my dear mother. And when she is done with them, show them to their rooms.”

Daavic turned his gaze towards Ethan and Haley as he went on. “I will see you both, again, bright and early tomorrow morning. I’ve got something very special to show you.”

“Follow me — !” Irvin directed.

On their way, Irvin stopped at Gruggins’ table, picked up his box, shook it vigorously, and yelled, “The leprechauns are coming for you, you little green flying rat!”

“IRVIN! You two have got to put a stop to this idiotic feud! I will have no more of this!” Daavic commanded.

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“Come with me — !” Irvin said, motioning towards The Hall of Doorways, ignoring Daavic’s rant.

“I’ll show you a *flobbyknocker*, you rubber faced, mush mouthed, morph-dork!” Gruggins exploded, erupting from his box.

Gruggins was holding a long tube that he quickly raised to his lips as he drew in a deep breath. He blew hard into the end of the blowgun as a dart zipped out the other end. It found its intended target, hitting Irvin square in the butt!

“AHHHHHHOOOOOOOWWWW, *master Daavic*, the grumpy wart-moth shot me again!” Irvin screamed, grabbing his butt where he had been hit. “He did something to me! I am changing and I can’t control it!”

As the screaming got louder they could see that Irvin was beginning to morph again, but this time it was not under his control. When the transformation was complete, he looked like a purple goose, with a round bulldog face, and two long clumsy antennas — Irvin was a *flobbyknocker*!

“Gruggins! What have you done?” Haley cried.

“He’s okay — he’ll change back in a couple of minutes,” Gruggins chuckled with a satisfied grin.

“He does look funny,” Ethan said, watching as the two balls at the end of his antennas clanked together.

A few minutes later, it was over; Irvin had morphed back into himself.

“W-w-where was I? Oh, yes — taking you two to headmistress Ravenwood,” he said, motioning to them.

It was like nothing had ever happened.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Hall of Doorways was wider and taller than any normal hallway Ethan had ever seen; it was obviously built to accommodate something very large. On each wall, huge doors lined the hallway with no space in between; where one door ended another began. It was eerie, black wall to wall carpeting with a mirrored ceiling making it look black as well.

The lighting was even stranger; there were no lights in this hallway, only a giant beetle like creature that clung to the ceiling, emitting a bright purplish light from its belly. The beetle was somehow reacting with the mirrors on the ceiling; light rained down about twenty-five feet in each direction abruptly ending in pure darkness — like an invisible wall painted pitch black.

As they walked down the hallway, the creature followed along from above and the light did too. New doors emerged from the darkness in front of them as doors they passed disappeared into the blackness behind.

“Are we almost there?” Haley asked. “This place is creeping me out.”

“This is it! The thirteenth door on the right!” Irvin announced. “So why are you going to see the headmistress? What are you in trouble for?”

“We’re not in trouble,” Haley replied.

“Oh, s-s-sure — that’s what they all say! I sure would like to be a fly on the wall when she hands out your punishment,” Irvin added as he quickly morphed into a giant fly landing on the door.

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OF THE HOUSE

“It’s going to be curtains for the two of you!” Irvin continued as the fly transformed into a set of curtains covering the door.

“Give it up McGillicutty,” Ethan said, pushing the curtains aside to open the door behind.

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Upon entering the next room, it took several seconds for their eyes to adjust to the darkness they were now standing in. It was a huge round room, lit by dim floor lights that ran along the exterior edges of the room.

“A dome room . . .” Ethan whispered.

The walls of the room curved inwards, towards the ceiling, ending at a thick blanket of fog that hung in the air above. At the center of the room, a small circle of light brightly pointed out where they were apparently supposed to go. As they approached the lit area, the base of a black marble staircase came into view, disappearing up into the layer of fog above.

“Welcome Ethan Fox,” a soft feminine voice whispered from the darkness.

“Did you hear that?” Haley asked.

“Yeah — she said, ‘welcome Ethan Fox’ but who said it?”

“That’s funny . . . I heard my name,” Haley said.

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“I’ve been looking forward to meeting you Ethan, I’m sure you have many questions,” the calm motherly voice continued.

“There it was again! And she definitely said ‘Haley!’” Haley insisted.

“I am speaking to both of you,” the voice clarified, “please follow the stairs so we can get acquainted.”

As they neared the base of the stairs, Ethan turned his attention towards the lit floor, freezing in mid-stride.

“Strike that — a sphere room!” he said, looking down at his feet where he could see that the floor was missing.

The walls of this room, curved down as well, forming a perfect sphere. And they were walking in mid-air at its cross section.

“It’s like we are walking on invisible glass,” Haley said, suddenly noticing why Ethan stopped.

“This place keeps getting creepier and creepier,” Ethan said, continuing towards the mysterious stairway.

As they ascended the stairs, through the thick fog layer, the upper half of the room came into view. Upon reaching the top of the stairs, they found themselves at the outer edge of a circular platform — an observation perch. It was like a crow’s nest sitting dead center in the spherical room. The floor of the platform seemed to appear out of thin air as their feet touched the top step. Turning towards the center of the room, they were immediately greeted by their host.

“By the heart of Wormfreid!” the woman gasped, looking at Haley as she approached. “You look just like her. . . .”

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She was a middle-aged woman of medium build. Her beautiful facial features and calm smile immediately put them at ease. She had long black hair with small silver pinstripes that looked as if an artist had painted them on. She was wearing the same black and white robe that Daavic wore, but this one was decorated with a black and white butterfly with four colored spots: one red, one green, one blue, and one yellow. But *this* butterfly was alive, fluttering around like a cartoon on the surface of the fabric as if trying to escape.

“I see you’re interested in my little guest,” the woman said in a soothing tone. “A ‘flutterby’ as we call them, but they don’t always flutter-by, sometimes they get stuck. I bet you’ve never seen one before. . . . Well — have you ever heard the human saying about a butterfly flapping its wings?”

“The Butterfly Effect — I remember from science class,” Ethan replied. “When a butterfly flaps its wings in one part of the world, it can cause a hurricane in another part of the world.”

“Very good, and this little guy could almost do such a thing,” she continued. “It can literally exist in two places at once, and for now, it appears that this one has taken a liking to my robe —”

“That’s impossible,” Ethan interrupted. “Nothing can exist in two places at once.”

“Sure it can, it merely needs to exhibit sub-atomic behavior,” the woman explained. “Nothing is impossible my dear, you can just take my word for that. . . .”

“Oh — no — where are my manners? My name is Jordanna Ravenwood. I already know who you are, Ethan

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Fox — you’ve caused quite a stir in our world. Unfortunately, I believe that is why you are here —”

“You said I look just like her,” Haley interrupted, “who are you talking about?”

“And you must be Haley,” Jordanna said, gently shaking her hand. “My daughter — she was taken from us over a hundred years ago. You are far too young, but I do not believe that your resemblance to my daughter is a coincidence. Not to mention the fact that you’ve showed up here with Ethan — neither is a coincidence in my opinion.”

“Where exactly is here?” Ethan asked.

“We call it The Residence — it is our headquarters here on Earth. It doesn’t really exist anywhere in the human sense. Think of it as a doorway to everywhere and anywhere, if you will.”

“Headquarters on Earth — are you aliens or something?” Haley asked.

“We are the Caretakers,” Jordanna replied, “and no, we are not aliens — distant cousins would be a better way of putting it. I’ve always disliked the term ‘alien’. It has such a negative connotation, don’t you think?”

“Caretakers — Caretakers of what?” Ethan asked with a puzzled look on his face.

“Caretakers of Earth — we watch over all species native to Earth and police against outside influences on the human world. The Caretakers have been here as long as humans. We are made up of a coalition of intelligent species, relocated here, to nurture the evolution of the human race.”

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“That sounds like quite a task, how do you do all that?” Haley asked.

“You are quite right — it’s not easy — but we get by with a combination of technology and what you might call, special powers.”

“You have superpowers?” Ethan asked.

“We are not like *Superman* if that’s what you are asking, but we do have many special abilities that might be deemed as super to the human world.”

“What kinds of abilities?” Haley asked.

“Caretakers possess the ability to influence the evolution of any life forms on Earth. However, our rules prohibit us from using these abilities on humans. Our purpose is to ensure that the human species evolves strictly on its own.”

“You can influence evolution — so you could turn a goldfish into a shark?” Ethan asked.

“Well that is an extreme example,” Jordanna laughed. “But in a word, yes — a Caretaker could make a goldfish evolve into a shark. There is normally a good reason for changing the evolutionary direction of a species. A species that might be evolving down the wrong path might require our help. A better example, would be giving a duck a bill instead of a mouth with teeth. It requires us to keep a tight watch on all species native to Earth. Unfortunately, there have been the occasional abuses of these abilities, now only a very select group of Caretakers are tasked with evolutionary duties.”

“How were the powers abused?” Ethan asked.

“Well — it was quite harmless really,” Jordanna began to explain. “Many, many years ago, my sons, Damien and Daavic

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were going through evolutioner training. They were each assigned a handful of animals on the continent of Africa. Their task was simple; watch over and monitor these animals and give them an evolutionary nudge if necessary.”

Jordanna took a deep breath, waiting to see if the children had questions, but they didn't, so she went on. “One of the animals assigned to Damien was a white horse species he was very fond of. As brothers often do, the boys would sometimes get mad at each other and feud. One day after a particularly bad argument, Daavic decided to play a prank on his brother by rapidly evolving his prized horse species. When Damien checked on his species, he was *shocked* by the change in appearance of his favorite animal: it was smaller, its ears had been changed, and it now had black stripes. Daavic had evolved it into what is today known as a zebra.”

“For months Damien blamed himself for what had happened,” she continued, “but then one day he somehow found out his brother was responsible. Instead of getting mad and fighting about it, Damien kept it to himself — he was planning his revenge. A week later, when Daavic went to check on his species, he was *surprised* by what he saw. His favorite animal species, a small desert llama, had been dramatically changed: it had been enlarged, its legs had been lengthened, its neck stretched very long, and large dark brown splotches now covered its previously beautiful golden layer of hair. Damien had evolved it into a giraffe.”

“Wow! That's quite a story —” Haley said.

“Yeah —” Ethan interrupted, “but I'd rather find out more about why we are here in the first place.”

C H A P T E R S I X

“Yes, of course — please, come sit with me,” Jordanna said, motioning them towards a large captain’s chair in the middle of the room.

“But there’s nowhere for us to sit,” Haley said, looking at the lone chair.

“Sure there is,” Jordanna smiled, tapping the screen of the ELMO device she had produced from her robe.

Suddenly, two smaller versions of the chair appeared out of thin air, one to each side of the large chair.

“First — let me show you something,” she said, walking over and sitting down in the larger chair. “Come, sit —”

As they walked towards the center of the room, the outside edges of the crow’s nest began to disappear as if the floor was disintegrating. Sitting down in their chairs, Ethan and Haley were both surprised to see that the floor was almost completely gone, except for the small area below their feet and chairs.

“— now grip the arms of your chair and recline back like this . . .” Jordanna instructed as she did the same.

Following along, Ethan and Haley both reclined back, causing the rest of the floor to disappear along with their chairs. They were now seemingly floating in mid-air at the center of the spherical room.

“No need to be alarmed — this room has a very special purpose.”

“This is cool!” Ethan said, looking at Haley.

“Not many humans have seen what you are about to see,” Jordanna said, touching the screen of her ELMO device.

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Suddenly, the inside walls of the room transformed into a detailed map of the world — they were hovering inside of a gigantic globe.

“O-o-okay — so you have a very cool map of the world,” Haley said.

“What are all the colored dots?” Ethan asked.

“Living creatures — the green ones represent the human race, the blue ones are plants and animals native to Earth, and the yellow ones are species not native to Earth.”

“What are the red X’s?” he asked.

“They mark certain irregular events or trouble areas that may need or have needed Caretaker intervention —”

“Let me guess!” Ethan interrupted, “the white ones are Caretakers and the black ones are the bad guys!”

“Very good, but we call them Grimleavers —”

“Grimleavers,” Haley barked, “are they the ones trying to kidnap Ethan?”

“Yes — and they will continue to do so until we find out why, which is why you must stay here with us for the time being.”

“But they looked like vampires,” Ethan said.

“Yes, you did see vampires, but let me explain. Vampires are one of the Grimleavers deadliest creations — their loyalist of servants. You see, Grimleavers were once Caretakers, some of our most powerful and influential members, in fact. At first, they existed only in secret, spreading their evil from within the Caretaker organization. As members of stature, they could get away with virtually anything, they were beyond suspicion. For hundreds of years, we were at a loss, to explain

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the unusual events that seemed to occur out of nowhere. Some even believed that Earth was cursed beyond our control.”

“Then a terrible thing happened,” Jordanna continued. “Our leader, Odin Ravenwood was killed; betrayed by his best friend, Victor Querefeltdt, the leader of the Grimleavers. If any good came out of that day it was the fact that they were now exposed. No longer could they secretly wreak havoc and thwart the Caretakers efforts. The secret was out and the three of them went into hiding — Victor and his two accomplices, Drake Evans and Jason Crowley, the three Grimleaver founders.”

“Was Odin your husband?” Haley asked.

“No — my husband was Ryvias Ravenwood, Odin was his father,” Jordanna replied in a somber tone. “Not the luckiest name, Ravenwood. In our entire history on Earth, only two Caretakers have ever been killed, and both were members of the Ravenwood family. Odin was killed by his best friend and then Ryvias by his own son.”

Jordanna wept.

“Damien killed his father?” Ethan asked.

“Sadly — yes — and then he abducted his sister, Danielle, and went into hiding with the Grimleavers. We still have no idea what became of my dear Danielle. We searched the world over but found no trace of her.”

“If the Grimleavers were once Caretakers, then they must have the same powers,” Haley muttered.

“Unfortunately — they’ve evolved more powerful abilities, they no longer resemble the beings they once were. When

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they broke away from us, they began to use their powers in forbidden ways, abducting species and evolving them into horrendous monsters to use against us. Not only is such a thing forbidden, there are consequences for doing so. A physical transformation takes place as well as a mental one; the result is a hideous demonic appearance and the mentality to go along with it.”

“If you know where they are, why don’t you do something about it?” Ethan asked, pointing at the black dots on the globe.

“We don’t know where they all are. Most of those black dots represent small pockets of some of the weaker species they have managed to conjure up. In other cases, they represent monsters that we have captured or corralled in some manner. But even if we did know where they all were, we would not want them to know that.”

“But what do the Grimleavers want with Ethan?” Haley asked.

“The answer to that question, we do not know. But if I were to speculate — I would say that it has something to do with *The Eyes of the Desert Sand*; a special poem of unknown origin, it has been known to our world for thousands of years. But never has a human uttered the words — until now. When Ethan wrote down those words, it made him a target for some reason, and that is what we need to find out.”

“Anyway — I think you have heard enough for one day,” Jordanna said, tapping on the screen of her ELMO device.

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Leaning forward, to get up from her chair, the crow's nest floor instantly reappeared as her feet touched the ground.

"Irvin will show you to your rooms," she said as Irvin emerged from the staircase. "Tomorrow at breakfast, Daavic will introduce you to more Caretakers. Then he'll show you around The Residence a little. After that, we can discuss what to do next."

"Shnickyrooners and things like that," Irvin began to rant. "Did you know that blue lizard faced ice puppets are usually the only reason why light bulbs go out for lunch. And if it wasn't for the singing lips of frozen beetle arms then we never would know how the red trumpet bounces!"

"Well, I never thought of it like that Irvin, but now that you mention it, it makes perfect sense!" Ethan replied, winking and smiling at Haley.

"Shhh — don't tell anyone why the little blobs of stinky white sock bubbles are still in the hall pantry next to the elephant poop," he whispered, smiling at Ethan as if he had just found his new best friend.

"Come — I will show you to your rooms," he said, snapping out of his chant.

"Here we are!" Irvin announced as they arrived at doors "5L" and "6L" in The Hall of Doorways. "The sixth door on the left is for Ethan Fox, and the fifth door on the left is for Haley Hunt," he said in a professional tone.

"I will be back to gather you in the morning. And then I will do my best *Bobby Flay* and cook you a meal fit for a king!"

Irvin's face instantly morphed into *Bobby Flay* with a crown on top of his head.

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“I already know how the lady likes her eggs, but what would Ethan Fox like for breakfast, any special requests?”

“I’m sure whatever you are serving will be fine,” he replied.

“Okay, sleep tight — I’ve arranged for very special accommodations, I am sure you will feel right at home,” Irvin said waving.

When Ethan entered his room, he was surprised to see that it was an exact replica of his room at home.

“Wow! Irvin’s thought of everything . . .” he whispered to himself, looking around to see everything in its place. “I just wish I could speak with Haley.”

Suddenly, he saw one of the small ELMO devices on the dresser, next to the door. Picking up the device, he noticed a single button icon on the touch screen. It read: “Intercom App” at the top and “Speak with Haley” at the bottom. With a single tap of the button, he could hear her voice as if she were in his room; she was humming an eerie sounding tune.

“Haley is that you?”

“Yes — but where are you?”

“In my room — they left us a way to talk, I guess.”

“It sounds like you are standing right next to me,” she said. “Have you sat on your bed yet? It’s the most comfortable thing I’ve ever lied down on.”

As Ethan approached his bed, he was surprised to see it change form as he neared. It transformed into a soft pillowy cloud hovering a foot off the ground.

“Boy you weren’t kidding!” he said as he eased himself down onto the puffy cotton like material. “I bet these beds are sandman approved!”

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Haley laughed.

“Haley — what was that strange tune you were humming?”

“I’m not sure . . . I made it up, I think,” she replied. “I’ve had it in my head ever since I saw you on the boardwalk.”

“Huh, it sounds very familiar,” he said.

“Well — I don’t really know where I might have heard it. I don’t remember anything before seeing you, remember?”

“By the heart of Wormfreid . . .” Ethan said softly, thinking aloud.

“What? I couldn’t hear you.”

“By the heart of Wormfreid — don’t you remember, she said that right before saying you looked just like her daughter.”

“Yes, but what’s it mean?” Haley asked.

“I don’t know . . . but somehow it sounded familiar to me, too; like I’ve heard it before.”

“Now that you mention it I —”

“Haley!” he interrupted in a serious tone, “You remember when Jordanna said she does not believe it is a coincidence that you are here with me?”

“Yeah — ?”

“We have other things in common that I haven’t told you about. I have no memory of anything before my eighth birthday. My parents gave me some story about a car crash and having a head injury. And up until a week ago, I’d always believed them.”

“But you don’t anymore?” she asked.

“No — after I remembered that poem, I went to my dad and showed it to him. He was freaked out about it. And then I

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overheard him and my mom arguing. My mom seemed scared that I might be remembering things. After that, they acted very strange — I know they are hiding something.”

“Do you think the same thing happened to both of us?” Haley asked.

“I don’t know . . .” Ethan replied, “but I do agree with Mrs. Ravenwood about one thing, you being here with me is not a coincidence!”

A BREAKFAST TO REMEMBER

The next morning, Irvin arrived bright and early as promised.

“Shnickyrooners and things like that . . .”

Ethan could hear Irvin’s ranting outside his door as he gently knocked.

“Have you ever seen a chocolate pig play ping pong underneath the fat noodle legs of a purple water rat?”

“No Irvin — I haven’t, but I bet it’s not something I’d want to miss,” Ethan replied giggling as he opened his door.

“Indeed!” Irvin continued, smiling at Ethan’s friendly response. “It’s quite like the hair at the tip of a hockey puck’s peach whiskers — but not quite as lonely!”

“Why do you waste your time with that double talk?” Haley asked, emerging from her room.

“I almost think I’m beginning to understand it,” Ethan joked, making Haley laugh out loud.

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“They are in the Breakfast Room, awaiting your arrival — just a few doors down, the eighth door on the left,” Irvin said, motioning down the hallway.

Ethan and Haley followed along.

“A word of warning,” Irvin said in a hushed tone, “about The Hall of Doorways — you’ve already been through the zeroth door on the left, that was the Front Room — but never go through the zeroth door on the right, which is the Doorway to Nothingness, as we call it. Anything going through that door ceases to exist.”

“What are the doors past the zeroth doorways?” Haley asked.

“Those are the negative doors,” Irvin replied. “Stay away from those too, they lead to the past, and what’s done is done, I always say.”

As they arrived at the eighth door on the left, Irvin opened it, motioning them into the Breakfast Room.

They entered a large square room with dark hardwood floors like those in the Front Room; the room was part kitchen, part dining room. The kitchen side of the room had a fully loaded chef’s station — like something you’d see on a *Food Network* television show. The other side of the room looked like the dining area of a quaint bed and breakfast: to one side of the dining area, Daavic and the others were sitting at a large round table with ten chairs; on the other side, was an antique piano with a matching bench; and in the corner, sat a gigantic oversized chair, large enough for a giant — it was so big, the legs were almost as tall as Ethan.

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“Don’t be shy — pull up a seat and join everyone,” Irvin said, motioning towards the round table. “Chef Irvin will be just across the room, slaving away in the kitchen.”

Instantly, the top of his head morphed into a tall chef’s hat.

“Please — come sit with us,” Daavic called out from the table. “Let me introduce you to more valuable members of the Caretaker staff.”

As Ethan and Haley approached, everyone at the table politely stood to greet them.

“This is Brianna Tanglewood,” Daavic said, motioning to a woman with blue snakelike skin.

The brilliant blue color of her skin was punctuated by unique black swirling patterns scattered over her body. Her upper body was that of a very slim human woman, tapering off at the torso, and merging into the body of an enormous coiled snake at the floor.

“Hello —” Ethan said, reaching out to shake her leathery hand.

She had pleasant facial features and long green hair that moved around, shimmering in the light as if made from satin. In fact, her hair was alive; each strand was a small tube like worm — as thick as a piece of spaghetti — with tiny eyes and smiling faces peeking out at the ends.

“Pleased to meet you —” Haley politely held out her hand.

“Likewise, my dear, and what a pretty ring you’ve got there . . . I don’t think I’ve seen one quite like that. . . .”

Brianna was fixated on Haley’s black infinity ring.

“And this is Nicholas Knight,” Daavic continued, gesturing towards the tall man standing next to Brianna.

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Nicholas was a muscular man with a tanned golden complexion. He was wearing a long white robe with gold trim on the shoulders and collar. He had pale blue eyes with piercing black pupils. Long white hair fell well past his shoulders, behind his back where large angel like wings protruded from outside his robe.

“Hi —” Ethan began, stopping in mid-sentence.

Ethan was startled by the vampire teeth peeking out as Nicholas smiled.

“Hello Nicholas, it is a pleasure to meet you,” Haley interrupted.

Haley seemed to feel right at home among the odd cast of characters.

“And Bella Wentworth,” Daavic continued, gesturing past Nicholas at a middle-aged woman of medium build.

Except for her four arms, Bella almost looked human. She had red hair that stood up on top of her head in a beehive hairdo. Other than that, she had average looking human features.

“Hello —” Ethan said, apparently puzzled over which of her four hands to shake.

“Oh — this is so exciting — I’ve been so looking forward to meeting both of you — we have so much to discuss — so much to talk about —” Bella jabbered. “We don’t get many humans here, you know, so I —”

“Next to Bella is Alexander Sturgis,” Daavic interrupted her in mid-sentence.

Though a bit older than the others, Alexander was the first completely human looking Caretaker they had met, so far.

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Simply put, he was tall, dark, and handsome. His dark brown hair and eyes perfectly accented his tan complexion. He wore the same style white and black robe as Daavic and Jordanna.

“Nice to meet you,” Ethan said, shaking his hand.

Alexander’s stern handshake, immediately gave Ethan the impression that this was a man of confidence.

“Hello Ethan —” Alexander said with a comforting smile, “have you enjoyed your stay, so far?”

“Everyone has been more than kind,” he replied.

There was something strangely familiar about this man.

As they finished with the introductions, Ethan and Haley took their seats beside Daavic; Ethan to the left and Haley to the right.

“We are still awaiting the arrival of one additional guest—” Daavic explained. “— oh, there he comes now,” he finished, as the loud thundering sound of giant footsteps approached from The Hall of Doorways.

When the door opened, Ethan’s gaze immediately went up. Entering the room was a giant of a man, at least twelve feet tall. As if in a state of shock, he and Haley were quietly staring at the giant stranger.

“And last — but not least — I would like you to meet Azron,” Daavic interrupted the silence as he stood to introduce the giant.

“Now I understand why the doors are so big!” Haley announced, standing to greet the new arrival.

Azron was enormous; he had scraggly black hair and thick whisker stubble that looked like burnt rice covering most of his face. But what stood out the most about Azron’s

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appearance, was not his size, it was the single oversized eye bulging from the center of his forehead. Yet at the same time, it was obvious that he was a gentle giant, in the way he calmly greeted Ethan and Haley with a friendly smile.

“Hello, Ethan Fox —” Azron said in a deep soothing voice, “I hear you stumbled across The Residence following a mischievous taletaddler?”

Azron slid the giant chair from the corner of the room over to the table.

“From what we’ve been told,” Ethan replied.

“Yeah — but we still don’t know who pushed me down the stairs,” Haley added as she shook Azron’s pinky finger with both of her hands.

“Yes — and that’s only the beginning of the mystery —”

“Which brings me to why we are all here,” Daavic interrupted. “It appears the Grimleavers are obsessed with abducting young Ethan Fox as we expected they might. So the headmistress thought it necessary that he meet the heads of the Caretaker Anti-Grimleaver Enforcement — CAGE, as we normally call it.”

“Everyone at this table has had a loved one abducted by the Grimleavers,” Alexander spoke. “So when headmistress Jordanna decided to form this task force, to actively pursue the Grimleavers and fight against them, we were the most logical candidates — CAGE was born.”

“Why did the Grimleavers abduct your loved ones?” Ethan asked.

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“Maybe we should all share our stories,” Daavic suggested. “I know my mother has already told you of the Ravenwood family misfortune —”

“In order to defeat the Caretakers,” Nicholas interrupted, answering Ethan’s question. “The three original Grimleavers were not powerful enough to defeat us on their own. So they formed a plan to abduct species with unique abilities and use their Caretaker abilities to evolve them into dangerous and powerful monsters. Each species’ abilities are different, which makes for unique possibilities when crafting monsters. My wife, Nicole was taken by the Grimleavers; she was devolved into Earth’s first vampire. Since then, vampires have flourished — they are natural killing machines and multiply with ease. They have become a loyal army of Grimleaver soldiers —”

“I noticed your teeth, aren’t you a vampire? Haley blurted out with a puzzled look on her face.

“Not a vampire, but a blood sucker just the same,” Nicholas smirked. “I am a vampril, which is quite different. Early humans often mistook us for angels, on those rare occasions where one of us was spotted. We are a strong but peaceful species, much more evolved than vampires. We do drink blood, but not that of humans, these teeth are made for piercing the tough skin of a blood turnip.”

Nicholas smiled exposing his sharp fangs.

“A *blood turnip* — what’s that?” Haley asked with a yucky look on her face.

“It is a parasitic fruit that grows on the back of a burrowing stone grub,” Nicholas replied.

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“Vamprils used to be one of the most numerous species among Caretakers,” Daavic added, “but after Nicole’s abduction, the vampril men were worried that their spouses, too, might be abducted. They were losing faith in the Caretakers and did not believe in our ability to protect the well being of their loved ones — so they went into seclusion. Only Nicholas stayed, remaining behind to help the Caretakers continue their fight against the Grimleavers. To this day, not even Nicholas knows of the whereabouts of his vampril brethren.”

“So — you are telling us that vampires are *real* and they are after me?” Ethan sounded frightened.

“I am afraid so Ethan Fox — this is not just a bad dream you are having,” Brianna replied, “and it doesn’t end there. Many creatures that humans believe are *not real* actually do exist on Earth. The Caretakers have merely done a masterful job in hiding them from the human world: vampires, werewolves, zombies, cyclops, and even Medusa herself — they are all *real* — and some of them are even represented here at this table.”

“Azron and his twin brother, Gaball, are members of the soleyed dwarfgiant species,” Daavic began to explain. “Gaball was taken by the Grimleavers; he was devolved into a flesh eating giant — a monster — a cyclops. He is now twice Azron’s size and has a horn; he’s undergone a grotesque transformation.”

“He even became too much for the Grimleavers to handle,” Azron added with a hint of pride in his voice. “He escaped and began wreaking havoc on the human world; he

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devoured everything in his path. He even ate a few humans before discovering his favorite food, leprechauns —”

“We were finally able to lure him to a secluded valley where we trapped him,” Daavic interrupted. “The Valley of the Shadow of Death — the leprechauns call it. Brianna’s sister has a similar story as well —”

Brianna cut in, “My sister, Medusa, was turned into the creature described in human mythology —”

“I remember Medusa — from a movie I watched with my dad — *The Clash of the Titans!*” Ethan interrupted. “In the movie, she was scary looking with snakes for hair, and looking directly at her would turn a man to stone. They killed her to use her head as a weapon to kill the *kraken* —”

“They got the snakes part right and the turning people to stone,” Brianna interrupted, “but I can assure you — my dear sister — Medusa is alive and well. She is safely locked away in a temple in the lost city of Stonehenge. Her needs are tended to by three blind trolls that were captured with her. Only the blind can be in her presence without fear of being turned to stone.”

“The only thing keeping those dreaded trolls in line are Medusa’s threats,” Daavic added. “Threats that she will heal their eyes — you see, Brianna and her sister are serpenoze, a species known for their powerful healing abilities —”

“A-a-and then — there’s my p-p-poor — dear husband *Boris*,” Bella interrupted, weeping in dramatic fashion. “*He* was abducted very recently — we still don’t know what happened to *him* — it was shortly after we learned of the human boy

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who knew what *he should not* — so we naturally sent my *Boris* out to investigate and —”

“Yes Bella — we are all very saddened by your loss,” Daavic interrupted, “but we do not want to delve too far into the specifics.”

There was an uncomfortable tension in the room as Daavic cut Bella off.

“So what about you — what’s your story?” Ethan blurted out his question at Alexander, immediately feeling guilty for his lack of tact. “I’m sorry — that didn’t come out right.”

“It’s quite all right,” Alexander said, putting Ethan at ease. “In many ways, mine is the most tragic of stories — I lost more than one family member that day and a best friend. I was married to a human woman — Tiffany was the love of my life. We had a child together, the only human-Caretaker hybrid ever conceived. He was only an infant when he was abducted by someone I thought was a friend — Victor Querefeldt. In the process, Victor murdered our leader, Odin Ravenwood — it was the event that exposed the Grimleavers. Many years later, they abducted my wife, leaving her for dead in an icy land unknown to humans. Unfortunately — she could not be saved. There never was any rhyme or reason as to why they abducted her — after all, she was only human, she had no special abilities for them to exploit.”

“What would the Grimleavers want with an *infant*?” Haley asked. “There’s nothing to exploit there either.”

“That is a question I have been pondering for many years,” Alexander replied.

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Alexander had a strange look on his face, like there was more to say, but he was holding something back.

“The only thing we’ve learned from these events is that when it comes to the Grimleavers there are many things we simply do not know,” Daavic concluded.

“If I may interrupt, master Daavic — so I can take your orders for this morning’s breakfast?”

“Certainly, Irvin.”

“Most of you probably want the usual. Let me see if I remembered this right: Nicholas — one ripe blood turnip; master Daavic — two double-yolked eggs sunny-side up with waffled fish stick hash browns and a dash of pickle dust; Bella — one four-legged sausage chicken on pear skinned toast; Azron — three double-wide goat ham logs, a pile of applesauce potatoes, a barrel of dragon’s milk, and a basket of buttermilk toad muffins; Brianna — a rat ham soufflé with mouse bacon sprinkles; and Alexander — a short stack of pancake leaves drizzled with melted peacock butter. Great choice, I must say, Mrs. Moonflowers delivered a fresh *Bisquick* tree just this morning —”

“Please — let me explain,” Alexander interrupted. “Our menu must sound very strange to you.” (The confused look on Ethan and Haley’s faces must have been apparent.) “Our powers of evolution, allow us to create any sort of food your imagination might conjure up. I doubt you could come up with something that Irvin cannot whip up for you.”

“*How is that different* from the Grimleavers?” Haley protested. “You evolve four-legged chickens and other strange things just for the *sake of your food?*”

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“Oh, no dear — you’ve misunderstood,” Brianna interrupted. “We grow all of our food organically, as plants: steak, chicken, sausage, bacon — you name it — it’s all picked right off the plant it grows on. Everything we eat could be considered a vegetable, if you will. Now, if you want to get into a debate about plant rights, then that’s a different matter — but we do have to eat.”

“Our Mrs. Moongarden is quite the magician when it comes to growing things,” Daavic added. “*Green fingers* I believe the humans call it.”

“*Green thumb*,” Ethan corrected, giggling.

“Go ahead and try the sausage or bacon,” Daavic suggested. “I challenge you to tell the difference. Just feel safe in knowing that no animals were harmed for your breakfast.”

The table broke out in laughter.

“So what do our valued guests want for breakfast?” Irvin asked.

“I think I’d like —” Haley paused, trying to think of the strangest thing she could imagine, “— how about an egg with three heart-shaped yolks, on a piece of toast that tastes like applesauce, and a glass of blue peppermint milk.”

“The lady wants the Number Five,” Irvin joked, jotting down Haley’s order. “And what would Ethan Fox like to order?”

“I’ll have,” Ethan started smiling, “a piece of green chocolate toast, with two red caramel yolked eggs, on a bed of butterscotch lettuce leaves.”

“The Sturgis Special,” Irvin said, writing the order down.

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“You’ve stumbled upon a family favorite,” Alexander said with a surprised look. “Tiffany just loved the Sturgis Special. How on Earth did you dream that up?”

“I don’t know . . . it just popped into my head.”

“I will be right back with your orders,” Irvin said, wandering back to the kitchen.

“Can I help?” Ethan asked, getting up from his seat and walking to the kitchen area with Irvin.

“The great chef Irvin needs no assistance,” Irvin boasted as Ethan looked on. “I have flavors and spices that would even make *Emeril Lagasse* jealous — BAM!” he joked.

Ethan watched in amazement, as Irvin morphed new arms from his body as needed; they reached out to: stir, flip, sprinkle, and sort. He was cooking all of the dishes at once and needed no help doing so.

Irvin McGillicutty had mad cooking skills!

Out of the corner of Ethan’s eye, a bowl of bright colorful cereal grabbed his attention. It was within an arm’s length and it looked like his favorite cereal — *Fruit Loops*. He slyly reached over and snuck a few of the colorful frosty loops. He then turned away from Irvin to be sneaky as he popped the cereal into his mouth — but his delight quickly turned to disgust. This was not the sugary sweet flavor he’d expected, this cereal tasted more like rotten fish, and he quickly spat it out onto the floor.

“Ethan Fox ate grumpling food — Ethan Fox ate grumpling food!” Irvin began chanting.

The entire dining area was soon erupting with laughter.

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Even Haley was laughing, as Ethan gulped down the glass of water Irvin had handed him.

“I thought you said grumplings ate *four leaf clovers!*” Ethan defended, staring at Daavic.

“I said — four leaf clovers are their favorite food,” Daavic corrected, “but they like rainbow hoops too, especially Fish Gut & Snail.”

Again, the table roared with laughter at Ethan’s expense.

Moments later, breakfast was served.

“I can’t believe it!” Haley announced. “This egg *really* does have three heart-shaped yolks!”

“Yeah — and my dessert breakfast, the Sturgis Special, beats the heck out of grumpling food!” Ethan joked. He then shot a warm look at Irvin, “It’s the most delicious thing I’ve ever tasted Irvin.”

“I can think of no better way to round out a good breakfast, than Pepper on the piano,” Alexander said.

“Pepper on the piano —” Ethan repeated with a confused look on his face.

Suddenly, the piano at the edge of the dining area began to play. At first, it looked as if it was playing itself, but then a small almost invisible figure became visible sitting on the piano bench.

Ethan’s gaze quickly met Haley’s, as it became apparent that this song was familiar to both of them. It was the song Haley had been humming in her room the night before.

“Who’s playing that — ?” Haley asked loudly, jumping out of her chair and walking towards the piano.

Curiosity had gotten the best of her.

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“How do you know that song?” she asked.

The music abruptly stopped, as the small transparent creature jumped from the piano bench and bolted out the door to The Hall of Doorways.

Haley turned to Daavic with a sad look on her face, “Why did he stop? Where did he go?”

“Your sudden moves must have frightened him. Pepper is a very sensitive creature and for good reason — Pepper is — or I should say was — a taletaddler. He was abducted by the Grimleavers . . . they experimented on him for months before we finally found and rescued him.”

“But didn’t you say taletaddlers are invisible to all but the child they befriend?” Haley asked.

“Yes, I did,” Daavic replied. “It was a bold move by the Grimleavers. It is very difficult to abduct something you cannot see. So the Grimleavers used Pepper’s child friend as bait. They set a trap, forcing the child to tell them where Pepper was. The poor child was so frightened by their monster like appearance; he would have done anything they asked.”

“What happened to the child,” Ethan asked.

“In the end, the child’s parents were killed and the child was left for dead,” Daavic continued. “He was so traumatized by the ordeal that a Caretaker couple took him in. He lived among us for quite some time, until it was deemed safe to return him to the human world.”

“What did you mean when you said, ‘Pepper was a taletaddler?’” Ethan asked.

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“The Grimleavers used their powers to transform Pepper into something they could use against us,” Daavic continued, “an invisible monster we could not detect, but they were unsuccessful. No matter how hard they tried, they could not devolve the taletaddler into something evil. Taletaddlers are extremely resilient creatures. Yet in the end, when they were done — Pepper had been transformed — Pepper was no longer a taletaddler.”

“What would an evil taletaddler do anyway — go around telling children to write *Stephen King* novels?” Ethan joked.

“ETHAN! It’s not something to joke about!” Haley scolded.

“I’m sorry —” Ethan immediately apologized, his voice trailing off into silence.

“Anyway — enough storytelling — I think it’s time to get on with the day we have planned,” Daavic interrupted the uncomfortable moment of silence. “Irvin, please see our guests to the Front Room. Make yourselves at home — I will be along shortly to introduce you to Mrs. Moongarden.”

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“Shnickyrooners and things like that,” Irvin jabbered as they walked down The Hall of Doorways. “You ever notice that wherever you find winged skunk rats playing in the muddy popsicle drippings of fresh beetle dung there is always a piece of white pound cake dancing with a smelly old weasel troll?”

“I’ve never noticed that before Irvin, but that can’t be a coincidence,” Ethan replied, much to his delight.

“Here we are! The zeroth door on the left,” Irvin said, opening the door. “Master Daavic will be along shortly.”

“*They’re coming for you — they are going to eat poor Pepper alive!*” the chants rang out as Ethan and Haley entered the Front Room.

Looking across the room as the scene unfolded, it was immediately obvious that RGB were up to no good again. But this time they had help. A teen-aged boy and girl with a

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brutish four-legged pet were yelling at RGB, egging them on. They were encouraging RGB to attack Pepper — encouraging them to be bad.

“Oh! No! —” Albert yelled, “a burning *fire-jay!*”

His forked tail slowly rose into the air above his head; a red fireball began to form between the prongs. Then, in an instant, the fireball shot out from the end of his tail and quickly transformed into a flaming red bird. The fire-jay began zipping around the room, swooping down at Pepper, as it screeched a menacing screech.”

“And a swarm of horned *blugoats!*” Newton added, shooting a blue fireball from the end of his tail.

This one exploded into a swarm of tiny blue-winged goats.

“And don’t forget about the *greenie meanie!*” Linus joined in, shooting a green fireball from his tail.

It turned into a large flaming green head. The greenie meanie resembled something out of a *Ghostbusters* movie, but this one had a very mean face and immediately began floating around the room, directing obscenities at Pepper.

“STOP IT — STOP IT THIS INSTANT!” Haley shouted angrily, breaking up the onslaught.

Startled, RGB and the teen-aged troublemakers turned to face their confronters — the three flaming apparitions quickly vanished in a puff of smoke.

“WHAT’S GOING ON HERE?” an angry Gruggins erupted, emerging from his box. “Who is disturbing my glorious sleep?”

Gruggins turned and directed his anger at RGB.

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“What *mischief* are you up to now? *Teasing Pepper again!* I warned the three of you last time, *didn't I?* If you ever did this again, I would think up a very bad punishment!”

“Yes — master Gruggins, we remember — we are very sorry to have awakened your grumpness,” a frightened Linus replied.

Newton and Albert nodded in agreement.

“Well if it does,” Haley cut in, “I will personally make sure you all spend the night locked up with a box full of firelyte capsules!”

“No! Not firelyte capsules!” RGB cried out as they quickly joined hands and started up the staircase, “please — please — please, not firelyte capsules! We're allergic to firelytes . . .”

Their voices grew faint as they disappeared up the staircase.

“Well done,” Gruggins congratulated Haley with a wink.

Gruggins turned his attention to the instigators.

“Blair Trablemore,” he continued, “I should have guessed you were behind this. Trouble seems to follow you and your boyfriend around. Take your *pet monster* and leave this room *immediately!* And I don't want to see you bothering Pepper again!”

Blair Trablemore was of normal build for a girl her age, but that's where normal stopped. She wore a uniform of red and black fabric that wrapped around her body, arms, and legs like interwoven serpents. Her hair matched her wardrobe, crimson red strands braided with black. She had a pointed nose and chin, with eyebrows that curved upwards, over her dark brown eyes — she was a wicked looking young girl.

Blair Trablemore was the original mean girl!

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“NEVER YOU MIND — *grumpling!*” Blair exploded. “Caden and I were leaving anyway! But not because we’re afraid of you! Malik hates the stench of humans!”

Blair directed her stare at Ethan and Haley.

Blair’s boyfriend was Caden Stanley; a tall Nordic looking boy with blond hair, blue eyes, and high cheekbones. He towered over Ethan who was actually quite tall for his age. He was a good looking boy, but despite his good looks, there was something off about him — something sadistic — and that was what attracted Blair.

Caden’s pet monster was not really a monster at all. Malik was a brutehound, a thick muscular dog like reptilian with stubby legs. He strongly resembled a pre-historic bulldog with razor sharp teeth.

“Step aside —” Caden said, purposely bumping into Ethan as they passed on their way to The Hall of Doorways.

Seconds later, Blair, Caden, and Malik exited the room.

“Who were those charming people?” Ethan asked sarcastically.

“Blair is the daughter of Roman and Silvia Trablemore,” Gruggins replied. “The Trablemore family was once the headmasters of the Caretakers. But Roman’s father, Gaylord, disgraced the privilege of his position. That was when the Council removed the Trablemore’s and replaced them with the Ravenwood family. A much better choice, if I don’t say so myself.”

“What Council are you talking about?” Ethan asked.

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“There I go again, opening my big mouth,” Gruggins replied. “Never mind nose, I’ve said too much already. Are all humans as nose as this one?”

The moment of awkward silence was suddenly broken by a whimpering sound coming from beneath the bench.

“Looks like our work here is not done,” Gruggins said, pointing at the bench.

Ethan and Haley could barely make out the shape of a nearly transparent Pepper, curled up in a ball. He was cowering beneath the bench.

“It’s okay — nobody is going to hurt you,” Haley said softly as she approached the bench. “I’m sorry I frightened you in the Breakfast Room. It was beautiful music you were playing —”

“It’s not working,” Ethan interrupted.

Haley’s hand quickly shot out to silence him.

“The song you were playing, I know it from somewhere,” she began to hum the tune, “hmm-hmm hmm hmm-hmm . . .”

“It’s working,” Gruggins whispered.

A certain calm filled the air as Pepper began to unravel from the fetal position. He slowly emerged from beneath the bench and rose to his feet.

“Pepper, this is Haley,” Gruggins introduced, “and this is Ethan Fox — they are the human visitors I’m sure you’ve heard about.”

Closer up, they could see that Pepper wasn’t completely transparent. Tiny black specks swirled around within the form

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of his body — it looked like flakes of pepper floating inside a molded body of clear *Jell-O*.

“Pepper cannot speak,” Gruggins explained, “but he can communicate by manipulating the crystals within his body.”

“Is that what those black specs are?” Haley asked.

Some of the specs began to move, arranging themselves into a word on Pepper’s chest.

“Yes,” Pepper replied.

There was a pause. Then —

The word quickly dispersed as a sentence took its place, “The black diamond crystals within my body are my only means of communication. Thank you Haley, thank you for rescuing me.”

Standing this close, they could see that some of the black specs had arranged themselves into vague facial features on Pepper’s head — Pepper was smiling.

“Hello, Ethan Fox — I am delighted to meet you as well,” Pepper said, turning towards Ethan and politely extending his hand.

Pepper’s hand felt like firm *Jell-O* as Ethan gently shook his fragile hand. It was like he was shaking the hand of a large peppered *gummy bear*.

“Hello Pepper, I’m happy to be meeting you as well,” Ethan smiled.

“Humans might have some redeeming qualities after all,” Gruggins mumbled, turning to Haley. “Good day, my dear child, it’s off to quieter sleeping quarters for me. I have a nap to catch up on.”

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Gruggins bowed goodbye, then quickly popped up into the air, and fluttered towards The Hall of Doorways. The door mysteriously opened itself, allowing him to continue into the hallway undisturbed.

“I guess a backhanded compliment is as good as I can expect out of him,” Ethan chuckled.

“Grumplings are quite grumpy at times, but Gruggins has a kind heart,” Pepper explained. “He watches out for me and has been a very good friend.”

“You’ve made friends with Pepper, I can see,” Daavic said upon entering the room. “Time to say your goodbyes for now — I’ve spoken to Mrs. Moongarden, she will be more than happy to show you her life’s work.”

“Goodbye Pepper,” Haley said, giving her new friend a gentle hug.

“Bye Pepper, I hope to hear more of your piano playing,” Ethan added.

As they started towards the door, Ethan noticed that something in the Front Room had changed. The giant mirror was against a different wall, the one to the left of the door to The Hall of Doorways.

“Wasn’t this mirror over there before?” Ethan asked, pointing at the empty space next to the chest of drawers.

“Yes it was — and it’s been here — and over there — and over there,” Daavic replied as he pointed around the room. “It just can’t seem to make up its mind.”

“Make up its mind — ?” Haley looked puzzled.

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“Well — we’ve never moved it,” Daavic explained, “nor has anyone ever seen it move — yet it moves just the same. It just can’t decide where it wants to be.”

As they made their way down The Hall of Doorways, Ethan was pleasantly surprised when Haley gently held his hand as they walked. The Hall of Doorways crept her out as much as it did him.

“Just a little further to the Moongarden,” Daavic said as they continued down the creepy hallway, “doors twenty-one and twenty-two on the right.”

A moment later —

“Here we are!” Daavic announced, opening the huge double doors.

Looking inside, they could instantly see that this wasn’t a room at all. It was an outdoor area with scattered clouds in the otherwise blue sky above. It looked like an organized tropical forest with dirt walkways and white picket fences dividing the various species of plant life.

“Breathtaking!” Haley said excitedly. “I’ve never seen so many colors in my life!”

“Pleased you like it — simply tickled,” a silly sounding voice spoke up from behind a row of colorful shrubs. “Tending to troubled butterfly shrubs all day has certainly put a bee in my bonnet!”

Ethan and Haley walked into the Moongarden, following Daavic.

Ethan began carefully studying the colorful shrubs; they were covered with multi-toned green leaves of various shapes and sizes. But what really drew his eye, were the brilliantly

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colored butterfly shaped flowers that opened and closed — like a butterfly ready to take flight. The flowers were uniquely detailed; each one was colored differently than the next.

“There must be every color of the rainbow!” Ethan said in amazement.

“Indeed — but you’ll find no rainbows here,” the voice added. “The last time I allowed one in, it started a rainbow storm that lasted three days!”

“Rainbow storm —” Ethan repeated.

“Mrs. Moongarden, at your service,” a woman emerged from behind the shrubs.

Mrs. Moongarden was a short pudgy woman with grey hair. She wore a colorful flowered bonnet on her head. She had rosy cheeks and a kind smile with circular lensed glasses on her round face — she looked like someone’s grandmother.

“Hello, Mrs. Moongarden, I am Haley Hunt and this is Ethan Fox.”

“More fun than a basket of daisies,” she babbled as if talking to herself. “Human children are sure to cheer up the seedlings —”

Mrs. Moongarden sounded a bit loony.

“Now that the introductions are out of the way,” Daavic interrupted. “I will leave you in the capable hands of Mrs. Moongarden. I shall return after she has shown you around.”

Daavic disappeared down The Hall of Doorways.

“So — you adore my Lisa?” Mrs. Moongarden asked, looking at Ethan.

“Lisa?”

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“The butterfly shrub you silly child, she told you her name was Lisa, didn’t you listen?” Mrs. Moongarden chortled. “She is finicky that one, not always forthcoming. Any-who-de-do — if you like Lisa, you’ll be simply tickled with what I have planned. Follow my footsteps and ask away, questions are the seeds of learning. But before we begin, I must warn you, do not wander off on your own.”

A serious look suddenly crept over Mrs. Moongarden’s face.

“Deadly things lurk where children wander freely, stick with old Moon-shoes and you’ll be safe.”

Moon-shoes was obviously a nickname she had made for herself.

“Follow me —” she said, as she started down a dirt walkway behind the butterfly shrubs.

Ethan felt a strange sense of *déjà vu* as he followed — taking in the wondrous scenery — it was like he’d been there before.

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“First stop is Wendy — the withering frow,” Mrs. Moongarden said as she slowed to a crawl, pointing to a gigantic colorful flower to the right of the path ahead.

“The flower of the withering frow contains forty-nine petals. It sits on seven giant shleaves that protect it from predators. The vivid blue serpentine pattern on the red petals is always separated by a thin band of black. If you ever see one, and the red and blue are touching, don’t go near it! It’s a dangerous impostor!”

“It must be the size of a small car — what kind of predator can eat that much?” Ethan asked, gazing at the giant flower from a distance.

“Good question — sowing those seeds already are we,” Mrs. Moongarden smiled. “Do you see the yellow grape like fruit at the flower’s center? Well — that happens to be the

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favorite food of the flying taber monkey. The froo uses the fruit to attract the taber monkey so it will be pollinated — very much like Earth’s honeybees. Other creatures are attracted by the fruit as well, but unlike the taber monkey, they eat everything — flower and all. So the froo has come up with a defense.”

Mrs. Moongarden paused for questions but when there were none, she went on. “I bet you’re wondering why it’s called a withering froo!” the excitement was evident in her voice.

“Yes — I was wondering,” Haley replied.

“Ethan, would you be so kind as to pick one of those yellow fruits from the flower,” Mrs. Moongarden instructed. “Go ahead, it won’t bite.”

Ethan slowly approached the colorful giant, but as soon as he got within ten feet, he was startled by its sudden movement.

In the blink of an eye, the leaves beneath the flower snapped shut, encasing it safely within the balled up leaves, shielding leaves — shleaves; then, the ball began to wither away as if the life were draining out of it. When the transformation was complete, it looked like a shriveled up ball of tree bark.

“Now that doesn’t look very appetizing, does it?” Mrs. Moongarden chuckled.

“Is it dead?” Ethan asked, backing away from the ugly lump.

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But as soon as he backed away to a safe distance, he had his answer, the green slowly returned to the giant leaves as they retreated back beneath the flower.

“And that is why it is called a withering frool!” Mrs. Moongarden concluded. “Thank you, Wendy!”

As they continued down the path, Ethan’s eyes were drawn to a small burning bush ahead, to the left.

“What is that?” Ethan asked, pointing at the small bush that was in flames — yet did not appear to be burning.

“Rose is a firelyte shrub,” Mrs. Moongarden replied. “She stops burning every five years. When that happens, she will sprout twenty to thirty firelyte seeds, which will fall to the ground. Once the last seed has fallen, the flames return for another five years.”

“We saw some firelytes in the Study,” Haley said.

“You saw one example of how we use the infertile seeds of the firelyte shrub,” Mrs. Moongarden corrected. “If the seeds are removed before the flames return, they are rendered infertile. Only infertile seeds become capsules and only capsules can summon a firelyte. In its normal life cycle, the flames always return, fertilizing the seeds, which sprout into new firelyte shrubs —”

“What’s that smell — ?” Haley interrupted.

“Smells like bleach —” Ethan replied.

“Ozone —” Mrs. Moongarden corrected. “We’re in luck, you two are in for a dilly of a treat!”

She was barely able to conceal her excitement.

“Follow me!” she said, hurrying down the walkway and taking the first right.

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“The smell of ozone always precedes the dance, the dance of the trembling nomads!” Mrs. Moongarden explained, as she stopped at a fenced in group of small trees.

“Why are they fenced in like that?” Ethan asked.

“You’re about to see for yourself why we have them in a pen,” Mrs. Moongarden replied.

The trembling nomads were small penguin shaped trees that resembled mini-evergreens. Ranging from three to four feet tall, the trees had small arm like branches hanging at their sides. At their base, they had not one, but two small trunks which looked like little legs beneath the branches.

“How cute, they look like little people,” Haley observed, much to Mrs. Moongarden’s delight.

“Why were they planted so randomly?” Ethan asked. “If you lined them up in rows they’d look like little soldiers — that would be cool!”

“Keep watching,” Mrs. Moongarden whispered, smiling at Ethan’s question.

Suddenly, the tiny trees began to tremble violently, as if shivering due to extreme cold. Then — all at once — their little arm like branches, rose up into the air as if shaking their fists at the sky. In an instant, their tiny tree trunks popped up out of the ground and the trees began running around their pen in random directions.

Ethan and Haley laughed hysterically as they watched the small trees run about the pen, bumping into each other, only to bounce off and continue in a different direction.

“They’re like bumper cars!” Ethan cried out in laughter.

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Then — as suddenly as they began — the nomads stopped all at once and their tiny trunks dug back into the soft ground. Happy with their new locations, their tiny arm like branches returned to their sides, and the trees sat silent.

“That was too cute,” Haley said, still giggling at the dance of the trembling nomads.

“It is quite a hoot the first few times you see it,” Mrs. Moongarden admitted. “As you can see, trembling nomads do not like being arranged in neat little rows,” she winked.

“So what’s next?” Haley asked, barely able to contain her excitement.

“Yeah — what’s next? This place is awesome!” Ethan joined in Haley’s enthusiasm.

“Well — I do have a few more exciting things to show you,” Mrs. Moongarden answered.

She was pleased by the children’s approval.

“Follow me —” she added, motioning down to a dark tunnel of plant overgrowth.

Moments later —

“Have you ever heard the story of *Jack and the Beanstalk*?” Mrs. Moongarden asked.

“Yeah — my dad used to tell me that one all the time!” Ethan replied.

They were approaching the light at the end of the plant tunnel, when Ethan began quoting a verse from the story, “*Fee, fi, fo, fum — I smell the blood of an Englishman — Be he alive or be he dead — I’ll grind his bones to make my bread!*”

There was a pause. Then —

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“You’re not going to show us a giant with a taste for humans are you?” he joked.

“Not exactly,” Mrs. Moongarden replied, as they emerged from the tunnel of foliage, “but I will show you the beanstalk!”

Mrs. Moongarden motioned towards their next stop.

When their eyes finally adjusted from the darkness of the tunnel, they were astonished by its size. It was enormous; the base of the beanstalk was several car lengths in diameter. The frame was formed from thousands of individual strands of intertwined vines — like a column of spaghetti hanging from a giant fork in the sky.

Ethan and Haley looked up into the sky to try to see where it ended.

“It disappears into the clouds —” Haley muttered.

“— just like in the story,” Ethan finished.

“Well, I can assure you, no giants are going to climb down from the clouds to eat you,” Mrs. Moongarden smiled.

“This is Lois — she is a skyclimber vine, named for obvious reasons. Notice how the leaves on her vines all have the same pattern?”

“Yes,” Ethan and Haley replied nodding.

“Well that pattern is as unique as a fingerprint. No two skyclimber vines possess the same pattern, not that it matters for identification purposes — only a handful exist.”

“In the whole universe — ?” Haley asked.

“Yes dear — this is a very rare plant indeed, an evolutionary oddity. It drops seeds only once every two hundred years, giving it almost no chance of a new one

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sprouting. Seven seeds are dropped from the top of the vine; each floats to the ground attached to a parachute sprout. Only if two or more seeds land within close proximity of one another, can a new vine sprout. The chances of such a thing is almost zero in the natural world, but sometimes cheating occurs and the seeds are gathered and sold as magic beans — like in the story. Once planted, the seeds grow fast and a new vine will reach the clouds within a day or two.”

“Has anyone ever climbed it?” Ethan asked.

“The Ravenwood boys tried when they were young, but they were punished and told to never do it again.”

“So nobody has ever been to the top?” Ethan asked again.

“Nobody from down here, but there are occasional sightings of somebody crawling around up there — it’s a bit of a mystery,” Mrs. Moongarden sighed.

“And that doesn’t scare you?” Haley asked.

“No — my dear — fear of the unknown is a human trait,” she replied. “Why would I concern myself over something I have never seen and has never threatened me?”

“Enough with all this scary talk,” Mrs. Moongarden said in a lighthearted tone.

It was obvious Mrs. Moongarden was trying to change the subject, but Ethan was fine with that — something about the skyclimber gave him the creeps.

Farther down the dirt path, the walkway ended at what resembled a small circular courtyard. At its center, a beautiful white fountain stood in a grassy area with six unusual looking plants around it. The grassy fountain area was surrounded by a wide brick walkway.

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“Looks like a park up ahead!” Haley announced.

As they approached, the rest of the courtyard came into view. Beyond the fountain, to the right, was a larger grassy area with a white picket fence. Inside, a willow tree swayed in the breeze, partially obscuring a statue of a young woman that stood in its shade. Beyond the fountain, to the left, sat the remains of an old stone structure; part of a crumbling castle tower with a single entrance — it looked dark and creepy inside.

“I’ve saved the best till last — the dancing angel flowers are my personal favorite,” Mrs. Moongarden said, pointing at the fountain.

The plants around the fountain looked like an ordinary variety of flower species at first glance. They had large green leaves at the bottom with long thick stems protruding up several feet.

Ethan moved in closer to examine the flowers at the top of the stems.

Actually, they didn’t look like flowers at all. They looked more like dying lumps of tree bark.

“Are you sure these aren’t withering froo flowers?” Ethan joked.

“I’m happy to hear you’ve made the connection, Ethan Fox. In fact, the dancing angel flower is a relative of the withering froo. But unlike the withering froo, it is not predators that scare the dancing angels into hiding, dancing angels only emerge under specific environmental conditions.”

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Mrs. Moongarden pulled her ELMO device from her pocket. “Fortunately, I control the environmental conditions within the Moongarden.”

She paused, tapping at the screen.

“First — I’ll give them a little water to play in,” she said as a fine mist began to spray from the fountain.

“Next — we simulate their favored conditions,” she continued, tapping away at the screen.

“Midnight —” she said as day quickly turned to night before their eyes.

“By the light of a silvery moon,” she sang with a final tap of the screen.

Suddenly the soft silvery light of the moon lit the night’s sky.

“And now — we wait,” she whispered.

“Reminds me of camping trips with my dad,” Ethan whispered to Haley.

The sound of crickets chirping filled the night air.

The lumps at the ends of the flower stems suddenly began to move, changing shape as if standing at attention. Delicate wings began to take form, as the lumps slowly unraveled into the form of oddly shaped butterflies. Within moments, all of the stems were budding with activity; on each stood a delicate butterfly like creature exercising its wings — they were getting ready for takeoff.

Next, the brownish grey color of their wings began to disappear; a brilliant yellow glow quickly replaced the dull colors. As they completed their color transformation, the glow became more intense, as if they were being illuminated

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from an internal light source. Then — one by one — the dancing angels began to take off into the night's sky, their transformation complete, the dance had begun.

Ethan and Haley were almost hypnotized by the spectacle.

The dancing angels no longer resembled butterflies, they were much more graceful. There was fluidity to their motion, like jellyfish swimming in water, only different. It was as if their bodies were changing form as they swiftly danced above the mist from the fountain.

As the dance proceeded, Ethan noticed something; the light illuminating their bodies was casting a circular glow over them where their heads might be. "They have halos — that's why they're called dancing angels," Ethan whispered, proud of his discovery.

"Very good — a dozen candied foxtails for you, but keep watching — the best is yet to come!"

Slowly the angels moved into a circular formation above the mist of water, they were moving in synchronicity. They kept this going for a while until suddenly; one of the angels broke away from the circle, swooped down into the mist of water and illuminated it from within — like a bird in a cage.

Ethan quickly noticed, as the angel danced around in its watery cage, something spectacular was happening.

As the mist of water droplets came into contact with the angel's body, they began to sparkle, bouncing off and falling to the ground in a shimmering cascade of gold dust.

"Pixie dust," Haley said, holding her hand out to catch some beneath the fountain.

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“Gold dust,” Ethan corrected, looking at the shiny specks in her hand.

“Dancing angels do attract their share of leprechauns,” Mrs. Moongarden smiled.

Ethan continued watching as the caged angel swiftly left the watery mist to rejoin formation above the fountain.

The dance continued for some time. One by one, the angels took turns dancing in the water, each one showering a rain of gold dust into the fountain until it was overflowing onto the surrounding grass. By the time the dance was finished, the ground around the fountain looked like it was covered in golden snow. The dance ended as the last angel rejoined the circle formation, and then they swiftly returned to their stems and withered back into ugly lumps.

“That was awesome — don’t you think?” Ethan asked, turning towards Haley.

But Haley was not there.

“She couldn’t have lost interest in this — ?” he wondered.

“NO HALEY! NO!” Mrs. Moongarden screamed.

Ethan turned to see what was wrong.

Haley was near the white picket fence, kneeling down next to a vine that poked out from beneath the fence. She was holding a small colorful ball about the size of a golf ball.

Ethan watched as Mrs. Moongarden quickly ran at Haley as she began to rise. Haley had a wide sadistic grin on her face. He could tell something was wrong with her; it was like she was in a trance.

Mrs. Moongarden reached her just before she could put the ball into her mouth, and in one swift motion swatted the

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ball from Haley's hand. Another quick slap across her face seemed to break her from the trance.

"W-w-what happened — ?" Haley asked, confused as to what had just happened.

"You were in a trance or something," Ethan replied, rushing over to her side.

"You *almost* ate the fruit of the petrified wood berry vine!" Mrs. Moongarden snapped, panic-stricken.

Mrs. Moongarden was distraught.

"I-I-I'm sure I removed all the fruit yesterday . . . and pruned back the vines . . . I-I don't k-k-know how this could have happened. . . ." she rambled, blaming herself.

"What would have happened if she ate it?" Ethan asked.

"The same thing that happened to dear Pandora over there," she replied, pointing at the statue under the tree.

As Ethan studied the statue, he could see that it was much more than just a statue. It was a wooden carving of a young woman holding an open box; she had the same sadistic grin on her face that Haley had just minutes ago. Leafy vines protruded from the statue's base, in all directions, each ending in a nest in which the fruit would normally sit. But it was more than that he figured out, Pandora was the vine, she had been petrified and transformed into a plant. He shivered as he came to realize what had almost happened to Haley.

"So she was a real live person?" Ethan asked.

"Her name was Pandora," Mrs. Moongarden continued, still distressed, "she stumbled upon a petrified wood berry in a box . . . she was snooping where she should not have been."

There was a moment of silence. Then —

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Mrs. Moongarden snapped out of her hysterics as she went on. “A petrified wood berry is so uniquely colorful that most species cannot resist the urge to touch it. Once touched, it releases an enzyme that causes the urge to eat it. The urge is so overwhelming that the anticipation quickly causes a powerful euphoria, slipping the victim into a trance. It’s only a matter of time before the victim consumes the fruit, immobilizing them where they stand. The victim turns to wood, petrifies, and soon begins to sprout new vines. The whole process only takes a couple of hours — it really is quite miraculous.”

“So tell me, Ethan —” Mrs. Moongarden now sounded serious, “did you see where the fruit landed when I swatted it from Haley’s hand? I *must* track it down before someone else stumbles upon it.”

“Is this what you are looking for?” Daavic’s voice called out as he emerged from the dark tunnel of foliage.

As he walked towards them, it became apparent that he was holding the colorful fruit in a gloved hand.

“Mrs. Moongarden — I trust such a *careless* and *dangerous* oversight will not happen again!” Daavic scolded, tossing the deadly fruit into the fenced in area well out of reach.

“Master Daavic — I assure you — I have no idea how this happened, I took every precaution,” Mrs. Moongarden apologized profusely.

“Well — obviously not quite enough.”

“I’m so-so sorry sir, I can’t imagine —” Mrs. Moongarden continued, pausing for a moment. “It’s fortunate, you showed up to find it — with gloves no less. . . .” her voice trailed off.

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Mrs. Moongarden turned towards the children.

“I hope you enjoyed our little tour,” she changed the subject. “Too bad it ended with such sour apples — please drop by anytime. I will definitely get to the bottom of this,” she finished, glaring back at Daavic.

“I had a wonderful time,” Haley said, walking over to give Mrs. Moongarden a hug.

“Me too, I definitely want to come back and see more,” Ethan added. Following Haley’s lead, he too, walked over and gave Mrs. Moongarden a hug.

“You are excused Mrs. Moongarden — I have one more thing to show the children — your services are no longer required,” Daavic coldly dismissed her.

Mrs. Moongarden choked back tears, as she hurried down the dark path Daavic had emerged from just moments before.

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“Okay, now that we’re finally alone, can I let you two in on a little secret?” Daavic asked. “Actually, a very big secret — it’s something I’ve never told a soul — so you better be sure you’re up to keeping it.”

Ethan and Haley looked at each other in agreement. Their curiosity was getting the best of them. They both nodded an affirmative yes.

“Great — I had hoped to pique your interest — you are in for a treat of spirit and mind!” Daavic said excitedly. “Not even Mrs. Moongarden knows all of the secrets of the Moongarden.”

“Many, many years ago, when we were nearly your age, my brother and I would play in the Moongarden. There came a time, when we decided that we had explored everything — we had become bored. Until one day, my brother had an idea, let’s climb the skyclimber.”

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Ethan and Haley gasped as they both looked up into the sky at the mammoth vines. They were enthralled by his story.

“We didn’t get far — we were only a hundred feet up before Mrs. Moongarden caught us. She was livid, yelling up at us. She was going to fetch our parents; we would be punished to the fullest. We quickly climbed down before she could return with our parents. We hid out in the ruins of the old stone tower.”

Daavic paused pointing at the nearby ruins.

“It was the obvious place to hide, nobody ever ventured into the ruins because of the stories. . . .”

Ethan and Haley’s eyes followed Daavic’s hand. They were hanging on his every word.

“Stories — ?” Haley sounded frightened.

“Old tales that the ruins are haunted,” Daavic replied. “Many claim to have heard voices coming from the ruins, but that day my brother and I didn’t even consider the old tales. We must have hidden out for an hour before we started poking around inside, and that’s when we discovered it — a secret hidden wishing well. Very clever how it was hidden actually, it’s right here in plain sight.”

Daavic motioned around the fountain area.

Ethan and Haley scanned the area; they were perplexed by his story.

“Right here in plain sight —” Haley repeated, “that sounds like a riddle.”

“You sound skeptical — well I had hoped you would want to see for yourself,” he said.

“Yes we do,” Ethan quickly said.

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“Follow me —” he smiled, “I can assure you — there are no ghosts inside.”

Daavic started towards the stone ruins.

The circular structure was obviously part of a tall tower constructed a long time ago — it looked like the first few floors of a thirty story high rise. The top was uneven, as stones had crumbled away; yet it was flat enough to give the impression that there might be some sort of platform up there. As they entered the dark interior, it took a moment for their eyes to adjust; the room was very dimly lit, light from the entrance and a few missing stones barely penetrated into the interior.

“As you can see — it’s very dark in here,” Daavic continued. “So naturally, after an hour hiding away, my brother and I began to get a bit spooked. We began prying at the stones on the walls to see if any would come loose and let more light in — and that’s when I found this!”

Daavic pulled a stone from the back wall of the structure. A pink glow suddenly began to emanate from the small cubby hole he had exposed in the wall. He reached in and pried a small oddly shaped rock from within it. Embedded into each side of the rock were initials, carved from a glow-in-the-dark pearly pink material — a “D” on one side and a “V” on the other.

“We were quite surprised to find this,” Daavic said, holding the rock out so Ethan and Haley could see it clearly.

“So what would you imagine we did next?” he teased.

“I don’t know . . .” Ethan and Haley said at the same time.

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It was like they were in a trance together, staring at the mysterious rock.

“Look at the irregular shape — where would you imagine it goes?” Daavic hinted.

It suddenly dawned on Ethan; he had seen this shape before, when they entered the dark room. It was the same shape as one of the holes in the wall where a stone was missing.

“It goes there!” Ethan said excitedly, pointing at the hole in the wall where a small column of light peaked into the room.

“Very good,” Daavic congratulated, handing Ethan the rock. “Here — you do the honors.”

Ethan wasted no time making his way to the hole in the stone wall. It only took one try; the rock was a perfect fit as he slid it into place.

Then something strange happened — the rock and stones around it began to change: first merging together, flattening out into a smooth square panel embedded in the stone wall; then a pattern of five, evenly spaced concentric circles, etched themselves out exposing a pink glow beneath the black panel; and finally, more etching as glowing pink symbols began to appear evenly spaced within the circular bands. When the transformation was completed, it looked like a glow-in-the-dark pink dartboard with symbols instead of numbers.

“What is it?” Haley asked.

“Some sort of selection dial — or lock of some kind — we never were quite sure.”

“Do you know what those symbols mean?” Ethan asked.

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“No — they are part of an ancient language only understood by a select few. We only tried a few combinations before we hit pay dirt.”

Daavic walked to the panel and began spinning the dials, lining the symbols up in a specific combination. When he finished with the final dial, the pink symbols began to blink, and then something else strange happened. They could now see the entire room clearly and it seemed to have changed. But it was odd, the room had not gotten any brighter, it was more like they could suddenly see in the dark.

“I can see all of a sudden,” Haley said.

“Me too,” Ethan followed.

“Dark light — my brother, Damien, used to call it.”

Daavic smiled, he apparently had some fond memories of his brother.

The oddities did not stop with the new lighting scheme; however, the room had changed too. A staircase was now clearly visible, spiraling up the inner walls of the silo structure, and disappearing into the darkness.

“Those stairs weren’t there before,” Ethan pointed out. “Where do they lead — ?”

“Let’s find out — shall we?”

Daavic motioned towards the foot of the staircase.

There was no railing, so they ascended up the narrow stone steps slowly. The dark light seemed to follow, keeping things lit all the way up. When they reached the top of the stairs, they found themselves standing at the end of a long dark tunnel. The dark light did not work here, all that was visible was the bright light at the end of the tunnel, and it looked like

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daylight. The creepiness of the tunnel helped to speed their progress down its long dark walkway and soon they were emerging into daylight.

“What the —” Ethan rubbed his eyes as they adjusted.

“How did we end up here?” Haley cut him off.

They were back in the circular courtyard area; it was as if they had just stepped back out the entrance to the stone ruins. It was exactly the same, except for two things: the fountain was no longer at the center of the courtyard, it had been replaced by a magical wishing well; and the ruins were gone.

“I present to you — the secret wishing well,” he motioned.

Ethan and Haley quickly ran over for a closer look with Daavic following closely behind them.

The wishing well was marvelously crafted; it looked as if it had been carved from a single giant chunk of pink pearl. Solid gold trim and an exquisite assortment of inlaid black diamonds decorated the pearly pink shell adding detail to its brilliant craftsmanship. The pearly pink shine glimmered in the sun and from some angles even throwing out cold bluish hues.

“It’s so *beautiful!*” Haley gushed.

“Yes — so it is,” Daavic said, “but my brother and I found even more reasons to appreciate it — more than merely for its sheer beauty.”

Daavic had walked up to the edge of the well and slowly began turning the solid gold handle of the well’s crank. As the crank turned, the solid gold rope attached to it slowly began gathering on the spindle — he was pulling something up.

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“No surprises here!” Daavic laughed, as a golden bucket and ladle emerged from the well attached to the end of the rope.

Ethan and Haley looked disappointed; they must have been expecting something else.

“This is the reason I’ve brought you here — it is my treat to you!”

But Ethan and Haley were speechless.

Daavic tried to ease their disappointment and went on. “To drink from the well is spiritual — it will enlighten your soul and strengthen your spirit! You simply must try it!”

“I don’t know,” Haley hesitated, “we don’t really know anything about this well.”

Daavic had already scooped up a ladle full of water from the bucket and had handed it to Ethan, who was more than willing to gulp down a mouthful.

“That was *very good!*” Ethan smiled wide. “I mean — it was *great* — here Haley, you have to try it — I did!”

He had already refilled the ladle from the bucket and was holding it out to her; in fact, he was almost insisting.

Haley reluctantly took the ladle from him and slowly began sipping from it. Tiny sips quickly became larger sips and soon the ladle was empty.

“You were *right* — that was *fantastic* — unlike anything I’ve ever had before!” Haley’s smile widened like Ethan’s.

Ethan and Haley, both, suddenly felt light headed as a strange sense of *déjà vu* overtook them. It felt just like the moment they had first met. And then the feeling subsided, giving way to a calm feeling of euphoria.

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“I feel great!” Ethan announced.

“Me too — can I have another sip?” she asked.

“Oh — no — my dear,” Daavic smiled.

He was lowering the bucket back down into the well when he paused to explain, “Always remember, too much of a good thing is most often not a good thing, and so it is with the powers of this well. Besides, I think we’ve stayed in the Moongarden’s secret room long enough, we don’t want people to start hearing voices.”

Daavic laughed.

“Moongarden’s secret room —” Ethan repeated, pondering. . . . “So if someone is near the ruins when we are in here, they could hear our voices?”

“Muffled voices — my brother and I ran some experiments. It’s a perfect explanation for the stories of the haunted ruins.”

“If we’re in a secret room — then how do we get out?” Haley asked. “We came in over there,” she pointed to where the ruins used to be.

“Simple — my dear — step outside the circle.”

Daavic walked towards the dirt path at the edge of the circular courtyard. As he reached the edge of the brick walkway, he turned to Ethan and Haley, smiled, took a step backwards, and vanished into thin air.

“Where did he go?” Haley looked surprised.

“He stepped outside the circle! Let’s go!” Ethan motioned for Haley to follow him.

Following Daavic’s footsteps, Ethan and Haley made their way to the outer edge of the circular brick walkway.

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Haley was eager to exit the secret room and quickly hopped out of the circle, disappearing as Daavic had.

Ethan turned around for one last look and was startled by a sudden sound.

“Mmmmmmm grrrrrrrrrr sllllllllll,” the soft muted voice was unintelligible.

It sounded like it was coming from the direction of the wishing well.

“I must be hearing things,” he said to himself.

Officially crept out, he quickly jumped outside the circle, joining Daavic and Haley.